Insights from Our Past

John L. Crompton and Peter A. Witt

It has been suggested that those who are unaware of their history forever remain children. Children have no context, no road map, and no parameters to guide their actions because they have no institutional memory. As a result, their actions typically are characterized by trial and error, inefficiency, and a relatively long learning curve. A primary reason for reviewing history is to draw lessons from how people of previous eras acted and thought, and to use those lessons to guide contemporary decisions and policies.

History is used to foster better understanding of national ideals and institutions, and to justify support for them. During the 1980s and early 1990s, many in the parks and recreation field disregarded or were unaware of some important lessons from the field's history. At the start of a new century, it is appropriate for our collective memory to recall that in many communities the initial raison d'être justifying the investment of public funds into recreation, was to alleviate problems of juvenile delinquency. And as Sessoms (1992) pointed out:

Many of the conditions which our forbears faced are not too dissimilar from those confronting us now. Concerns for the environment, the underclass, the displacement of workers, resulting from new technologies, waves of new immi-
grants, people living on the street or in overcrowded slums where both adult and juvenile gangs wreak havoc; these were the issues of the 1890s—the 1890s. They are also the problems of today (p. 47).

Sessoms (1992) suggested that the first lesson from the past was, “To get people to believe in you and to support you, you must do something worthwhile, something that meets their needs” (p. 47). The proliferation of municipal recreation programs and departments which occurred in the 1920s was primarily attributable to a conviction that recreation had substantial instrumental value in preventing juvenile delinquency and in positively intervening to reduce it.

The authors have collected scores of articles from the period 1900-1940 that were written on this theme. There was no equivocation in these articles about the “rightness” of providing recreation for this instrumental purpose! However, researchers will quickly point out that some of the data that are cited in the articles are suspect amounting to little more than testimonials. Other data may be incontrovertible, but the interpretations of them are frequently oversimplistic. Frequently, for example, their authors attribute a reduction in crime exclusively to the availability of recreation programs while ignoring all other factors that may have contributed to it, which clearly is inappropriate.

Despite these caveats, after reviewing this whole body of literature we were impressed and inspired by the conviction and passion which flowed from its authors. Extracts from them are reproduced in this paper. Extracts were selected primarily from 1920s, since this was the era when advocacy for the instrumental values of recreation appears to have been at its peak.

A pervasive characteristic of the advocacy in these extracts is a recognition that it is not the programs or facilities per se that have instrumental value, rather it is the interactions with leaders in these contexts which is the critical factor. As Reco Bembry in a later article in this volume poignantly reminds us, these leadership positions were major casualties of cut-backs in the last two decades. Data emerging from the current spate of research studies on at-risk youth confirm this early insight as they overwhelmingly confirm the central role of mentoring.

Selected Extracts

The most satisfactory result in establishing public playgrounds has been the decrease of juvenile crime, which, it is said, to be almost 50 percent. ... For son, more public playgrounds should be opened, especially in the congested districts of large cities ... It is on the play-
ground that character is formed which is afterward brought into “practical play” by our leaders in thought and action. Every variety of psychological study is open to the resourceful and tactful teacher in the advantages offered by the public playground. (Extracts from a letter by H. Roosevelt Ostrom published in the New York Times, June 14, 1902.)

Supervised playgrounds, parks, amusement, manual labor classes and boys’ clubs have in five years reduced juvenile crime and delinquency 96 per cent in the industrial center of Binghamton in New York State, according to figures recently compiled by the Broome County Humane Society and Relief Association. (William I. Engle, Supervised Amusement Cuts Juvenile Crime by 96 Per Cent. The American City 21(6): 515-17.)

PLEA FOR MORE PLAYGROUNDS TO PREVENT “ABOLISHING CHILDREN”

Crime Statistics Show Most Offenders Are Under 21 Years and the Figures Drop Whenever Recreation is Provided (New York Times, November 26, 1922.)

In his report to the Russell Sage Foundation, Allen T. Burns says, To provide a probation district with adequate play facilities is coincident with a reduction in delinquency of from 28 percent to 70 percent, or 44 percent as an average.

L.H. Weir, Chief Probation Officer of Cincinnati says: In 1906 there were 1,748 children legally before the Juvenile Court and 410 were handled unofficially making a total of 2,158 children. Of these, 1,450 were delinquents. In the Fall of that year a beginning was made in opening playgrounds in the down-town portions of the city. In the year just closed there were 993 delinquent children before the court. Each year has noted a marked decrease. While some of the decrease may be due to other causes, the work of the courts for instance, we are perfectly sure that one of the main factors has been the opportunity afforded the thousands of children in the most congested district of the city to play in a natural and spontaneous manner.

Edward C. Hill, President of the Trenton Playground Commission says: Playgrounds were established in Trenton, N.J., as a municipal undertaking about the middle of 1906. The police records show a decrease of 28 percent in the number of arrests of boys, while the arrest of men 20 years of age and upward shows an increase of 10 percent. It is fair to assume that if there had been no playground supervision, the arrests of boys would have shown an increase corresponding to the increase in the arrest of the men.

Mr. Loman, the Special Superintendent of Delinquents in Dallas, Texas, says that the result of establishing Trinity Play Park there has been that the number of juvenile offenders in the cotton mill district has been reduced more than 80 percent during the last year, although the number of children has increased 9 percent.

Edward J. Ward of the Board of Education of Rochester, N.Y., writes: There was a gang of Polish boys in East Buffalo, N.Y. For months they had made of themselves a public nuisance by finding their recreation and amusement in throwing stones at the windows of passing railway coaches. Several of the boys were arrested, but the mischief did not abate. Special watchmen were posted along the railroad tracks, but still the stones were thrown. Then the Broadway playground was opened in East Buffalo, and the members of the gang came to the playground. They did not stop throwing: they only changed their missiles from stones to basketballs and their targets from passenger car windows to goals; but by this transition they themselves were changed from anarchists into law-abiding citizens.

We find New Orleans today with 13 playgrounds, showing less juvenile delinquency than in 1909, although the city has increased in population over 60,000 in this period. (Playgrounds Cause Child Crime Wane, New Orleans Item, New Orleans, LA, February 4, 1923.)

From Bluefield, West Virginia, which used to send, on an average, approximately 50 boys a year to the state reformatory, came a report that during the last three years, when the city has had under competent direction playgrounds and a boys’ club, only two cases have been given over to the reformatory. (Supervised Play Cuts Delinquency, Christian Science Monitor, April 17, 1924.)

Chief of Police Conlon of Leominster, Mass., says that delinquency cases in Leominster averaged ninety-one a year prior to the organization of Community Service, the local recreation agency. Since its coming, the number decreased to fifty-three in 1923. (Money is Sent for Kiddies’ Play, Des Moines, Iowa, Capital, April 17, 1924.)

In the communities where there are playgrounds, where healthful sports are encouraged, the morality of boys is high. Not a boy was taken into the juvenile court this year from the neighborhood where there is a playground. (Finds Investment in Youth Pays the Community Well, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Daily Herald, February 6, 1925.)

Since playgrounds were started in Knoxville, Tenn., City Manager Brownlow of that city claims that juvenile delinquency has decreased 50%. In Toronto in a district of 50,000 people which sent 30% of the total of child
delinquents to the juvenile court, delinquency was reduced to practically nil within one year of the organization of a boys' group by the Toronto Rotary Club.

... The probation officer in Visalia, Cal., claims a reduction of 80% in juvenile delinquency since the organization of the community recreation system ... The annual report of the Division of Parks and Recreation of the Department of Public Welfare of St. Louis, Mo., contains the following statement: AA comparison of the number of juvenile delinquents in the effective areas of every playground in St. Louis in 1917, with the number of delinquents in 1921 in the same respective area, showed a decrease of fifty per cent. In the four playgrounds established in 1916, the number of juvenile delinquents in 1917 in their respective undeveloped playground area, as compared with the same area in 1921 (three years after the establishment of the playgrounds), shows a decrease in every instance of 75%. (Playground and Recreation Association of America, Recreation Reduces Crime, Bulletin 1294, New York, December 18, 1925.)

Boys Clubs Are Advocated to Prevent Juvenile Crime

Briefly, we have found we can prevent crime among boys in any district of the city where we establish a boys' club and playground under sympathetic leadership, said Mr. C. Loving Brace, Secretary of the Children's Aid Society. Eighty-five per cent of crime is committed after school hours. Give the boys something to do that interests them more than the adventure of crime and they will desert the latter. Not a single boy belonging to our clubs, and there are over 5,000 members now, has ever been arrested for serious delinquency, and yet before they joined the clubs many of them helped other members of their own families steal.
If given enough boys' clubs and playgrounds under proper sympathetic management we can solve the juvenile crime problem for the City of New York. They solve it for every neighborhood where they are established. It is only a question of having a sufficient number of them under proper direction. (New York Times, February 21, 1926.)

There are numberless instances showing the efficacy of provision for parks and recreation in reducing the problem of delinquency and crime. A few statements and opinions follow from L.H. Weir (1928). Parks: A Manual of Municipal and County Parks, New York: A.S. Barnes:

There were fifty-nine thousand murders in the United States in a recent seven-year period. $3,000,000,000 represents our annual loss from stealing alone. It is said that $500,000,000 are invested in our prisons and that their annual cost of maintenance is $200,000,000; also that our total annual bill for dealing with crime is close to $200,000,000. It costs a state around $600 per year to care for one in a reformatory; on the other hand, one city recreation department reports that it can and does provide recreation for seven and one-third cents per person per year.

It has been shown in dozens of cities of fifty thousand population that for the cost of the care of one person at a reformatory sixty-seven children could participate daily at play centers during the full season.

"Is it possible," writes the Chief of Police of San Francisco in the December 11, 1920, issue of the Chronicle and the Examiner, "for you to extend the work of the Community Service Recreation League? I realize so fully the relation of the present outbreak of crime to the wrong use of leisure that I consider it my duty not only to strain every energy to suppress it by the means at my command, but to see if something more cannot be done in a constructive way to prevent it. The work of your organization has been effective in certain districts. Can't it be extended?"

The following resolution was passed in 1925 by the American Prison Congress: Be it resolved that we express our conviction that the value of constructive, supervised play and recreation, needs to be more largely understood by those who are dealing with problems of delinquency, and that if in every community really adequate facilities for the recreational needs of young people were provided, many of their wayward tendencies could be effectively averted and at the same time health, morality, joy, and good citizenship be promoted, and we further believe that recreational activities, properly conducted, may be made a powerful instrument for the restoration to normal living of delinquents who may be upon probation or in the custody of correctional institutions.

It is stated that eighty per cent of the crimes committed in New York City are the acts of youths under twenty-two years of age. In commenting on this Warden Lewis Lawes of Sing Sing has said: I can see as the only effective way for the prevention of delinquency the wider extension of community system activities such as establishment of more playgrounds, especially where congestion is greatest, and the establishment of community centers to provide opportunities for playing and wholesome recreation.

When St. Paul, Minnesota, checked up on its delinquency, it found that in areas where playgrounds were operating the definite programs the cases of delinquency had decreased materially, but in sections where there were no playgrounds, there were large numbers of delinquents. For the opening of supervised playgrounds in the public park area of Anaheim, California, in the summer of 1924, according to Judge E.J. Marks of the Juvenile Department, Orange County Court, juvenile delinquency decreased. During the first six months of 1925 it was 70 percent less than for the same period in 1924.

Analysis of a Philadelphia neighborhood by District Attorney Fox, who covered the district for five years before and a like period after the establishment of playgrounds, led him to state, "I discovered the remarkable fact in five years of playground recreation, the neighborhood showed a 50 percent decrease in juvenile delinquency as compared with previous years."

In providing such material facilities as parks and playgrounds, it should always be kept in mind by community leaders and governmental officials that these facilities constitute only a part of the necessary body-building, mind-developing and characterizing environment. A vital part is leadership. Just as parents are the most important factor in the home, the teacher in the school, the trained executive in the business organization, so on the playground, at the swimming center in the park, the leader is the most important and fundamental of all environmental factors.

Play Seen as Cure for Child Criminal

Need for Healthy Recreations is Stressed in Baunes Report on Juvenile Delinquency

The commission found that fewer than 40 percent of the children had adequate opportunity for wholesome play. The use of school facilities for supervised recreation and the setting up of well-equipped boys' clubs constitute important items on the program outlined to check juvenile delinquency. (Headlines and note from an article in the New York Times, April 20 1929.)
Owing to the congested condition of their homes, underprivileged boys must find recreation in their hours of leisure upon the streets of the community or where they live. The hours of leisure which are nearly one-half of the hours of early adolescence, are declared the dangerous period in the boy’s life. The boy in the street is detached and unless some other motive such as a boys’ club prevails, the gang gets him and he is exposed to the evil influence of gang leaders. (New York Times, April 22, 1929.)

Playgrounds and Prisons

There seems to be an overhelming mass of competent testimony that playgrounds have had an appreciable effect in reducing or preventing juvenile delinquency. Recreation as was increasingly provided by municipalities, touches the lives of boys and girls in the most vital areas of their experience...The cost of maintaining a juvenile delinquent upon whom the prison shades of a reformatory have closed is $439, whereas that amount provides a year’s municipal recreation — play under leadership — for scores of children...

Public recreation contributes to crime prevention in providing sympathetic and dynamic leadership by trained men and women to boys and girls during hours and under conditions when they are most susceptible to influence...The athletic director and the playground leader have an unequaled opportunity to create situations which will vitally influence the children when they are most sensitive to the influence for bad or good...

Through athletics, water sports, Winter sports, camping, musical, dramatic and other art activities, and above all through social recreation, leaders are providing which young people eager for life may have experiences that satisfy and do not degrade.

Playgrounds are places where the moral victories of maturity are won, and they drive back effectually the shades of the prison house. (New York Times, March 9, 1930.)

Within a month the Children's Aid Society will have embarked upon a new and definite program of preventing juvenile delinquency by building playgrounds and boys' and girls' clubs in congested districts...

We are planning, in a large and very definite way, what we call the "spare time" approach. Hundreds of our minors, boys and girls both, are "playing" their way into trouble. Every boy is gregarious. He does not want to play alone. In him the gang spirit is strong. If left to himself — and home influences are every day growing weaker — he is liable to find expression of this instinct in the street corner and back alley gang, where delinquency breeds.

It is our purpose to provide, for boy and girl alike, clubs and playgrounds where they may exercise their gregarious play instinct under wholesome conditions. The clubs will not be open one day or night a week, or several. They will be open all the time, not to teach or to lecture, but to guide the children by giving them playgrounds, gymnasiums and swimming pools, club and reading rooms, where they can play heartily. Each centre will have health facilities.

This is a $6,500,000 program which the society is undertaking. Each center will cost about $10 per child per year. The cost of maintaining a boy in a penal institution is about $450 a year. The former is preventive. The latter rarely cures. (New York Times, June 1, 1930.)

forced to assume for the care of social misfits...Dr. Palmer argued, supervised, and organized recreation is a preventive measure. (New York Times, October 9, 1930.)

The Board of Estimates, chaired by Police Commissioner Mulrooney, noted in its annual report: It is quite apparent that the lack of proper supervision and recreational facilities, in recent years, has caused the increase in the number of youthful criminals. The public at large are apathetic unless staggered by the increase in youthful murderers. Instead of advocating increased appropriations for the cure of crime it has been the endeavor of the committee to urge increased appropriations which not only have reduced the death rate, but unquestionably, according to police figures, have reduced the tendency toward crime.

By constantly directing our attention toward the coming generation in so far as providing safe and wholesome recreation, we will be doing justice to the underprivileged as well as to those who can well afford supervised recreation. (New York Times, May 10, 1932.)

The police department has reported there is a need for more supervised playrooms and play streets in the district...The absence of recreational centers and lack of parks, the police assert, is responsible for a good deal of the juvenile delinquency. (New York Times, August 3, 1947.)

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...

Dr. Leo J. Palmer, superintendent of the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills declared that every dollar spent for organized recreation will reduce by 50 percent the financial burden communities would otherwise be