

NATIONAL

Violence in Violence out

Author Jerome Gold serves up an intimate portrait of youths behind bars in "Paranoia and Heartbreak"

BY ADAM HYLA
 STREET NEWS SERVICE

SEATTLE, Wash. —

A boy or girl brutally beats a friend, robs a store at gunpoint, violates someone smaller than himself, shoots a stranger for reasons that, months later, they still can't say. What are we to do with this person?

Locking up minors, of course, does not shut in the questions their actions present. How should we regard young offenders? How might we reconsider our ideas of youth, innocence, corruption, guilt and rehabilitation? Are child criminals easier to reform than adults? Do young offenders represent a kind of evil, or are their crimes a rational responses to the arbitrary violence of the world they're growing into?

Jerome Gold has engaged with these questions and more day to day, person to person, at a juvenile detention center 37 miles east of Seattle. For a good chunk of his adult life he was part counselor, part guard for juveniles serving out their sentences for a range of crimes. To process — to understand his engagement with the workplace's potent brew of neglect, despondency, fear and danger — he kept a journal.

The result is "Paranoia and Heartbreak: Fifteen Years in a Juvenile Facility" (Seven Stories Press), a devastatingly intimate portrait of a class of people who can inspire pity and contempt like no other. Gold tells their stories soberly, refusing to impose tidy endings where none exist. Cumulatively, the more than 200 youths presented here force us to consider how we lock people in the darkest cabinets of American society, and how our own freedom might be tied up with theirs.

Gold, who fictionalized his years in Vietnam with the U.S. Army Special Forces in his book "Sergeant Dickinson," is the publisher of Black Heron Press, which has published Seattle writers like Matt Briggs and Judith Roche. Of "Sergeant Dickinson," the New York Times wrote that "few novels in any genre are as lucid, or as memorably spooky.... (I)t belongs on the high, narrow shelf of first-rate fiction about battlefield experience." Vietnam, Gold writes in "Paranoia & Heartbreak," enriched his relationship to the kids he called his "little soldiers" at Ash Meadow.

Gold spoke recently with Real Change about the legacy of violence, the upside of post-traumatic stress disorder, and what it

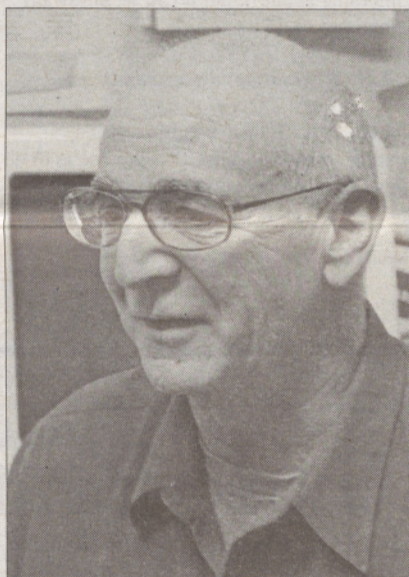


PHOTO BY ADAM HYLA

takes to spring young people from the prison of their own lives.

Adam Hyla: *I was surprised at how minutely you journaled at certain parts in this experience.*

Jerome Gold: I journal when I'm troubled, or under stress or trying to figure something out. Especially when I'm trying to figure something out, I force myself to be as purely descriptive as possible and as inclusive as possible. That's where the detail comes from. I do that in order to try to get some distance between myself and whatever I'm trying to deal with. And then afterward I can allow my emotions to play. Usually, just by describing something, that reduces whatever's troubling me, and it does help me figure something out — it abstracts it just a little bit so I can see a pattern. I'm always amazed when it works.

After a while (at Ash Meadow) it became more important to me to see what was going on with particular kids. I could start seeing what ways a kid was being self-destructive, for example. That was really common. A lot of those kids are really self-destructive, but didn't know that about themselves. Well, adults are like that too.

A.H.: *These young kids were victimized first in their lives, and you notice that they're acting out their own victimization on other people.*

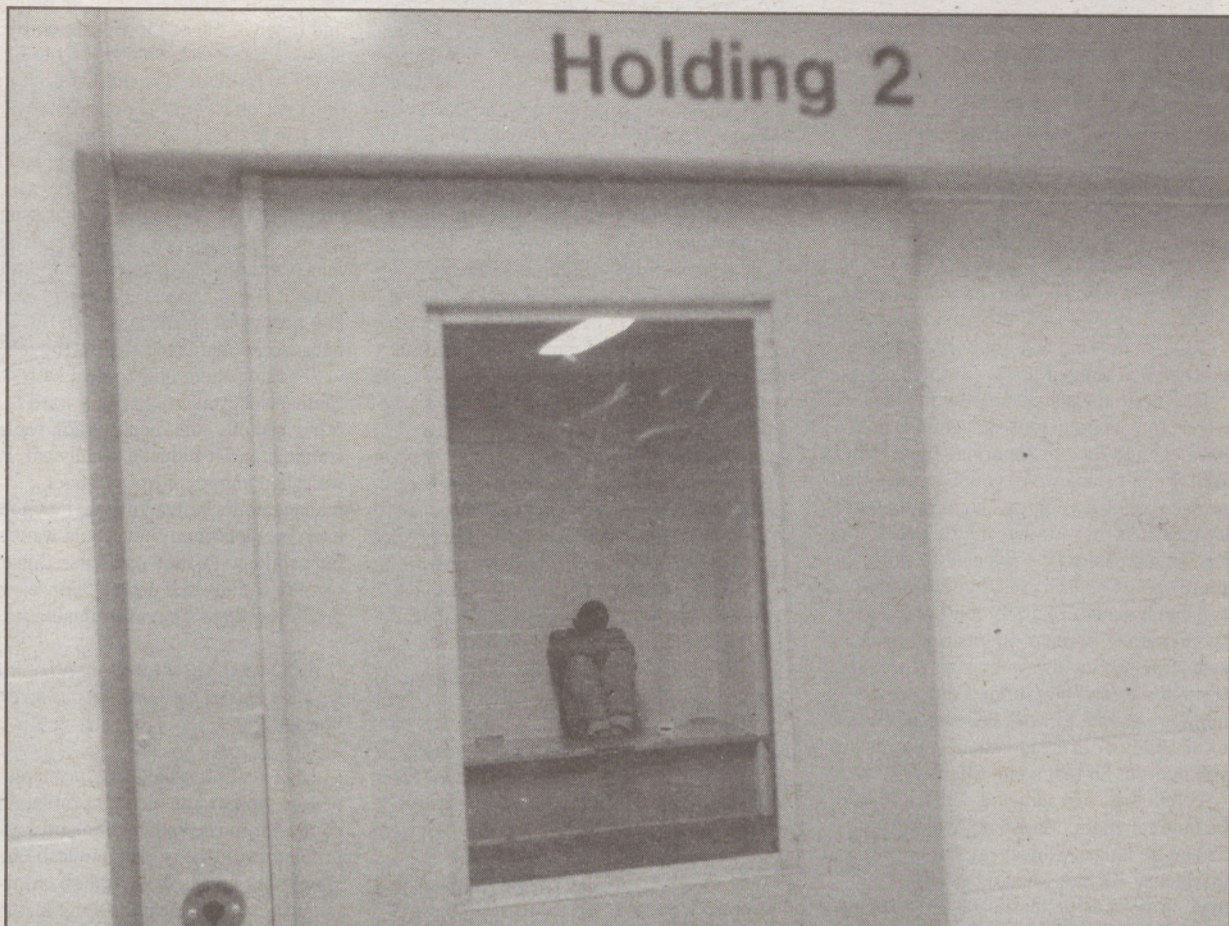


PHOTO BY RUETERS/JESSICA RINALDI

Above, a suspected gang member waits to be booked on possession of marijuana charges in Edinburg, Texas. Author Jerome Gold, left, says American needs to reconsider why — and how — we lock up our next generation.

J.G.: It's actually a rule of trauma: If somebody has been traumatized you expect them to do that, and also not to know that they're doing it, no matter how smart they are or how insightful they are.

A.H.: *And the administrators do that themselves, is what you also suggest. That they were victimized at one point and it affects their decisions.*

J.G.: I had a kid when I worked in a boys' unit that was around a treatment group called Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse, and this boy was not in it. And yet I knew, just by watching him, that something had happened. Don't ask me how. I couldn't describe it in words so that you could take those words and apply it to somebody else. It's just I knew it of him. For one thing he was amazingly pretty, and I knew it'd be really hard for a pedophile to keep his hands off him.

I asked his case manager whether he should be in my group or not, and she said no. She said something had happened to him but he didn't want to talk about it. So I let some time go by. And yet there was something about it. And so I asked her again, and she said no, he doesn't want to deal with it. So finally I just asked him, and told him what the group was about, and he just jumped at it. I think his case manager said no because she didn't want to deal with it: If she's dealing with his problems and they're similar to her problems, she has to deal with herself.

That could be an advantage, if you're willing to deal with yourself. We had one cottage there for a drug and alcohol rehab treatment three-month program, and the staff there had had their own problems. And the kids respected them for that, too.

A.H.: *What kind of people should be in the role that you were in?*

J.G.: It's a matter of personality rather than education. Now the administrators would disagree with me — they think everybody should be a psychologist. I don't think having everybody be a psychologist or trained in the same way is good; I think that's bad.

The problem with the type of

psychology in maximum security was that they wanted the kid to adapt to what they called his milieu, his environment. But his environment was prison! I didn't want the kid adapt to prison. I wanted the kid to get out and not reoffend. They weren't interested in whether he reoffended or not.

What we want to do is train them so that they don't want to do that anymore and can resist the temptation to do it. That's the hard thing. Because when they get out, they're going to go back where they came from, and the same kids that they associated with before, they're going to associate with again.

Or maybe it's their families. A chaplain would invite volunteers from outside in from the various churches, and they would talk about doing what your mother and father tell you to do, but geez, I had a case whose mother forced her to kill somebody.

A.H.: *Were all these kids from troubled environments?*

J.G.: Almost all. I had one boy — his mom, a single mom, had a good job, but her job took her outside the house when he was in the house. The big thing was that he was smoking marijuana in the morning and not going to school. She didn't know that.

But also, smoking marijuana put him in bad company. He was a really unusual kid in a lot of other ways. Other kids like sweets; he liked vegetables. Every evening he'd ask if he could have more salad. And he loved his mom. He wasn't a gang kid, but he hung out with gang kids. So it was easy to turn him around.

Another occasion we'd get someone who had both parents. I was always amazed: "How'd you get both parents?" That's good. If a kid has both parents in the household, if they're working together, there's a good chance that he can break loose from whatever.

A.H.: *If you had to design a way to prevent gang violence, what would you suggest?*

J.G.: I'd restructure society. () I think most of the staff I've talked to at Ash