

Repression 'not way' to youth reform

HARSH discipline was not the way to reform young offenders, the manager of the John Oxley Detention Centre at Warool, Mr Peter Coyne, said yesterday.

He said he and his staff supported the centre's philosophy, despite the allegations that the centre had become a holiday camp for young criminals.

The Family Services Minister, Mr Sherrin, said the allegations were "a case of sour grapes".

They had been made by a former centre employee who had been transferred because he had been unable to perform.

Mr Sherrin said: "His feelings are certainly not representative of the majority of the centre's staff."

"There may be a few staff members here who don't agree with my principles," he said.

"But the majority are most supportive."

"We are aiming to create a family-type situation where there is appropriate discipline but where the kids have to make their own choices."

The John Oxley Centre has been operational for two years. It allows inmates privileges such as television, their own rooms and piped music. It also has bars and locked doors.

"It is a State Government project aimed at changing the

youth detention system for the better."

Mr Coyne said: "The facilities are extremely secure. In its two years there has been only one inmate who has broken out."

"We have a system here which encourages the inmates to lead non-offending lives. By teaching them arts and crafts, educating them and allowing them to work as a family group we are preparing them to cope in the world outside."

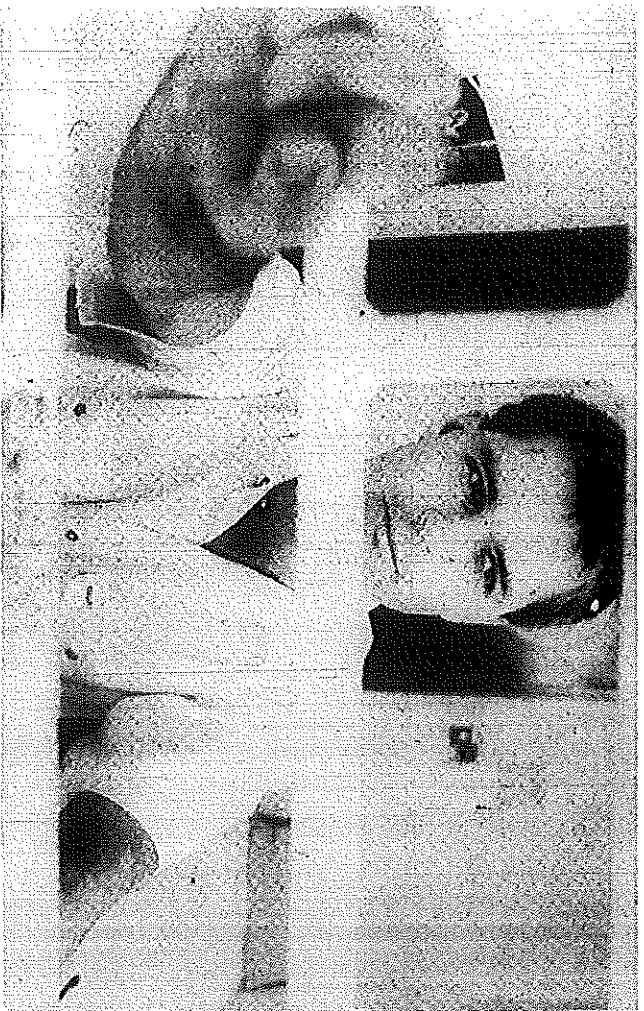
"We are building up their confidence and their respect for themselves and for others."

Mr Coyne, who has a seven-year background in dealing with victims of child abuse, has been with the centre for 16 months.

He said the centre, which took boys between 10 and 15 who had been committed and girls between 10 and 17, prided itself on its rehabilitation services.

Mr Sherrin said he was more than impressed with what was being achieved by the centre and shared Mr Coyne's belief that it should be a model for rehabilitation, not punishment.

"We do not want the John Oxley Centre to become penalised," Mr Sherrin said.



JOHN Oxley Centre manager, Mr Peter Coyne ... bars, but rehabilitation is aim

"It is an institution which aims to get young people's lives back on the rails. The idea is to keep these kids — some of whom are as young as 10 — out of places like Boggo Road."

Mr Sherrin described the three incidents, referred to in the Courier-Mail yesterday as misleading.

"First, the young female murderer who allegedly was taken to dinner by staff at taxpayers' expense was being taken by staff in their own time and with their own money," he said.

"The girl involved had been

potentially suicidal and her family and the centre staff decided a dinner would buck her up."

"Since then the girl's attitude has been much more positive and she feels she has a life ahead of her. That is the type of thing John Oxley wants to achieve."

Mr Sherrin said the sister of the 16-year-old boy who was allegedly thrown from Cairns for a birthday party at taxpayers' expense actually lived at Cairns. She had been offered a bus fare to visit her brother at the centre but refused.

As for the 15-year-old female inmate who was

claimed to have been raped, Mr Sherrin said the female had been 17 and that no charges had been laid.

"I have been informed that the girl's mother was consulted and that the girl was encouraged to buy charges," he said.

Both the mother and the girl said they preferred not to. Mr Coyne said when inmates did something wrong they were sent to their rooms for 24 hours and, if the matter was serious, the police were contacted and the normal proceedings took place.

"If, for example, a kid assaults a staff member and that staff member wants to lay

charges it will be done," he said.

"And if the staff assault the inmates the same applies."

Mr Coyne said that he had asked Mr Sherrin not to over-react to Wednesday night's riot by allowing one incident to tarnish the centre's reputation, and that Mr Sherrin agreed.

The 14-year-old boy responsible has since been sent to Westbrook, on the Darling Downs, which handles more difficult cases.

Mr Sherrin said he was annoyed that a couple of people's grievances could tarnish the positive work the staff at John Oxley put into its inmates.

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Wacol centre 'paradise' for young crims

THE State Government's John Oxley Youth Detention Centre at Wacol was a holiday camp for young criminals, staff said last night.

"They have their own rooms, fully carpeted ensembles, piped music, video recorders, TVs, tennis courts, basketball courts," a worker said.

Another cited a \$16,000 motocross track, fully equipped with trail bikes, as one of many abuses of public funds at John Oxley.

Staff said they were scared to go to work at the centre where, if they did not have a rapport with the children, they were "dead meat".

The staff members asked not to be named, for fear of reprisals.

Three teenagers went on a rampage of destruction at the centre on Wednesday night. See story below.

A serving officer with more than seven years' experience said staff had called repeatedly for extra workers to police the centre's three main wings.

By PAUL WHITTAKER

There were only two officers on each shift. "If one goes to the toilet, the other is placed in a potentially volatile situation," the worker said.

"The public would be surprised to learn that most of these children, some as young as 13, behave like hardened criminals. We have rapists, murderers, arsonists — you name it, they are all here.

"The whole philosophy of John Oxley is wrong. These kids are living in a paradise here, not a secure disciplined environment that is needed.

"The place has not been designed to cope with these children — it was designed for welfare cases, not the hard cases we have now."

A former youth worker, who resigned from the centre six months ago after serving there for two years, said the children were free to do as they liked without fear of retribution.

One worker said the children lived in an environment similar to motel accommodation.

"They are coming into a situation they can't comprehend, a world where anything goes," the worker said.

"We can't even touch these children, other than the use of basic restraint. We are forced to explain every single action or decision while these delinquents are being treated with kid gloves."

One worker said: "This is a jail full of criminals who should be treated accordingly.

"But the kids are allowed to do as they please. Workers are spat at, kicked and punched.

"These children know now that if they are picked up on the street and go to court, there is a better life waiting for them at Oxley with pocket money, cigarettes and all of life's little pleasures, which explains why we have so many re-offenders."

Workers cited many examples of lax security at John Oxley including:

• A young female murderer, serving life, who was taken for dinner on her birthday in the company of five other staff at taxpayers' expense.

• An Ipswich arsonist whose sister was flown from Cairns for a birthday party, also at taxpayers' expense.

• A 15-year-old female inmate who was raped during an art excursion by three 14-year-old fellow inmates.

"Any perceived need these kids have, they get it. If they ask for a pinball machine, they will probably get that too," a worker said.

"They can all smash their rooms up as an expression of the frustration and injustice of being in a detention centre.

"The department believes it is better to replace damaged equipment than have children physically restrained by staff.

"The punishment meted out to these offenders can range from a \$1 fine, or the loss of privileges, such as the daily ration of cigarettes."

Wednesday night's rampage was "the tip of the iceberg", a worker said.

An entire wing of the centre was closed down recently because of destruction.

Police late as youths run riot at detention centre

POLICE took more than an hour to attend a disturbance at a Wacol youth detention centre where at least one female staff member was threatened with pack rape.

A boy, 14, who allegedly led the riot, was in solitary confinement late yesterday.

Criminal charges will be laid against the youth, another teenage boy and a teenage girl allegedly involved in Wednesday night's fracas.

The Family Services Minister, Mr Sherrin, told State Parliament about the incident yesterday.

Staff at the centre fled and locked themselves in a control room while waiting for police and dog squads.

Eight of the centre's inmates

By LINDY ROWETT and DAVID ROSS

were on the loose at one stage. Five of these refused to join in, despite being bashed and threatened.

The drama ended suddenly when the centre's manager arrived and confronted two youths, armed with metal pipes, as they were trying to escape.

The manager, Mr Peter Coyne, disarmed the two agitated youths and took them to a "secure room".

"One of the youths — the 14-year-old — has been placed in what we call a seclusion room to keep him under observation," Mr Coyne said yesterday afternoon.