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Boot Camps

Gaylene Styve Armstrong and Doris Layton MacKenzie

Boot camp programs are a juvenile correctional sanction modeled after military basic training. Developed as an alternative to traditional incarceration options, such as detention centers and prisons, boot camps are typically viewed by the criminal justice system as a punishment that is less severe than prison but more severe than probation. Boot camps, which were the same as shock incarceration programs in earlier decades, exist throughout the United States and in some foreign countries for males and females and for both youth and adult offenders.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF BOOT CAMP DEVELOPMENT

Boot camp programs garnered a large amount of media and political attention with the advent of the “get tough on crime” politics of the 1980s. This attention has continued into the 21st century, resulting in a proliferation of boot camp programs throughout the United States. Although it may seem that the programs are a recent trend, the roots of boot camp programs can be traced to the 1800s. This section describes the rationale for developing boot camp programs and follows their progression.

During the latter part of the 19th century, the public became concerned about the use of inmate labor for manufacturing retail goods. The results of this concern were antilabor laws, which made the inmate labor system illegal. Before the formation of antilabor laws, most of an inmate’s day was spent in some form of trade or labor that resulted in marketable products. The profits from these products were used to support the daily operation of prisons. Because inmate labor was relatively inexpensive, prison officials were able to market products produced by the inmates at a significantly lower cost to the consumer, thereby undercutting the prices of other manufacturers’ goods. Unions and manufacturers considered the competition from the inmate labor system unfair and rallied for legislation that restricted the use of inmate labor and inmate-produced goods. In 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt signed an executive order that prohibited the use of inmate labor on federal projects. Congress took further action

against the inmate labor system in 1929 by passing the Hawes-Cooper Act, which permitted individual states to ban the importation of inmate products from other states.

One of the indirect effects of the public concern and the subsequent legislation was that prison administrators were forced to find other activities to occupy inmates' time. The New York Reformatory was among the first prisons to suggest military-style training. In 1888, due to unions' and manufacturers' concerns, the administrators of the correctional facility in Elmira decided to eliminate inmate labor on commercial products. As an alternative, military organizational components were incorporated into almost every facet of the correctional facility in Elmira, including inmate schooling, supervision of inmates, physical training, and even parole practices. The militarization of the New York Reformatory was expected to have a number of benefits in addition to occupying inmates' time. The military-style training was viewed as a tool to assist inmates in reforming their behavior and in learning various marketable, honest skills during their time in the reformatory. Additionally, the military-style discipline was thought to provide a means for obtaining obedience, attention, and organization within the prison environment.

The militarization of correctional programs eventually stopped in most U.S. prisons due to a major shift in correctional thinking in the early part of the 20th century. Because of this shift, an increased emphasis was placed on assisting offenders to remedy the errors of their ways through therapeutic programming rather than physical training. Thus much of the inmates' time was spent in treatment activities, and there was no need for old-fashioned military-style activities.

Therapeutic programming and rehabilitation of offenders remained the focus of most correctional programs until the 1970s, when a second major shift in correctional thought occurred. This second shift led prison administrators to focus on the emerging get-tough perspective on crime and criminals, downplaying the need for treatment and emphasizing punishment and deterrence, thus resulting in a revitalization of military-style correctional programs in 1983. In this new era, Georgia and Oklahoma were the first states to develop boot camp programs modeled after a military-style boot camp. The programs were supported by some of the same rationales and philosophies that were evident nearly 100 years earlier.

One of the primary factors in revitalization and subsequent proliferation of boot camp programs throughout the United States was that the harsh, physical nature of discipline and activity in these types of programs was in tune with the emerging political climate. Consequently, journalists widely publicized boot camps as an exemplar of get-tough programming. Video footage and photographs of drill sergeants yelling in the faces of boot camp participants presented an evocative image absorbed by the general population and sought after by policymakers.

Early boot camp programs, such as those developed in Oklahoma and Georgia, emphasized a military atmosphere with drill and ceremony, stern structure, physical training, and hard labor. Following the early program examples, boot camps proliferated across the country increasing both in size and number. By 1999, 31 states, 10 local jurisdictions, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons had developed boot camp programs to serve adult populations. At this time, there were over 8,000 beds dedicated to adult offenders. With the average offender in a boot camp prison spending 107 days, more than 27,000 offenders could complete the program in a one-year period.

Boot camps for juveniles also developed in an explosive trend. A survey by MacKenzie, Brame, McDowell, and Souryal (1995) of state and local correctional officials found 37 boot camp programs, the majority of which opened after 1993. Many of these early juvenile boot camps were developed in response to the passage of the 1994 Crime Act, which permitted the Department of Justice to specifically allocate funding for juvenile boot camps. The number of juvenile boot camps, with programming similar to that of adult boot camps, continues to rise.

Although the militaristic components developed over a century ago remain central to today's boot camps, rehabilitative, educational, and drug treatment services are beginning to occupy an increasingly large share of the participants' time. Individual boot camp programs vary in their focus and in the amount of emphasis placed on the military aspects of programming as opposed to therapeutic programming. Because of the numerous types of programs, it is difficult to define a typical program in current use. Generally, researchers consider a program a boot camp if it requires military-style inmate and staff uniforms, the use of military titles (e.g., captain or sergeant) when addressing staff, military drill and ceremony, or other major aspects of military protocol.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND CONTROVERSIES

Most shock incarceration programs operate under a constructive punishment philosophy. This philosophy assumes that if a person experiences or is placed within an environment of radical change, the environment will create a reasonable amount of stress. Under this stress, the person becomes particularly susceptible to external influences. In the case of boot camps, offenders forced to engage in a very regimented lifestyle requiring extensive physical exertion and mental discipline will become stressed and thus amenable to behavioral change. Thus when treatment programs are introduced, offenders have an increased likelihood of long-term positive change.

Despite their goals of positive change in offenders, boot camps do not have universal support. Boot camps are controversial for a variety of reasons, most often related to a negative reaction to the military atmosphere (Morash and Rucker, 1990). Critics of boot camps suggest that the confrontational nature of boot camp programs is antithetical to treatment. In fact, they argue some aspects of the boot camps are diametrically opposed to a constructive, interpersonally supportive treatment environment necessary for positive change to occur. Some critics argue that boot camps hold inconsistent philosophies and procedures, set the stage for abusive punishments, and perpetuate a “we versus they” attitude suggesting newer inmates are deserving of degrading treatment. Critics anticipate that inmates may fear staff and that the boot camps will have less individualized programming than traditional correctional facilities. Thus in the long term, offenders will be less prepared for their return to the community.

An alternative viewpoint has been described as a “Machiavellian” point of view (MacKenzie and Souryal, 1995). This perspective suggests that correctional experts expect little direct benefit from the military atmosphere of the boot camp programs but are willing to support this type of programming to achieve two primary goals: early release for nonviolent offenders and additional funding for treatment programs. In their opinion, public and political support for boot camps allows for funding that would otherwise be unavailable to these offenders.

Additional unique issues have arisen in developing boot camps for juveniles. Contrary to the punitive aspects of boot camps often publicized by the media, the primary mission of the juvenile justice system has been treatment and rehabilitation, not retribution and punishment. To align themselves with the mission of the juvenile justice system, juvenile boot camps must be designed to address the needs of juvenile offenders through increased treatment and programming. More recently developed models of juvenile boot camps strive to achieve this congruency, devoting a significant amount of time to academic education and rehabilitative counseling and less time to physical training and drill. In contrast to the time adult boot camp inmates spend during the day in work activities, juvenile boot camp participants spend most of their day in academic classes.

A TYPICAL DAY IN A BOOT CAMP

The underlying focus of boot camp programs is apparent in the name used for earlier versions of this type of program—shock incarceration. The program is intended to “shock” offenders into changing their behavior. This philosophy is put into practice upon an inmate’s arrival at the facility: Males are required to have their heads shaved (females may be permitted short haircuts instead), and all inmates are informed of the strict program rules. At all times, inmates are required to address staff as “Sir” or “Ma’am,” to request permission to speak, and to refer to themselves in the third person as “this inmate” or “this cadet.” Punishments for minor rule violations are summary and certain, frequently involving physical exercise such as push-ups or running. Major rule violations may result in dismissal from the program and full-term institutionalization. The incoming group of inmates is called a platoon. Platoons are kept together in all aspects of the program including housing, meals, physical training, and other activities. Additionally, the platoon is expected to complete the program at the same time.

In a typical boot camp, the 10- to 16-hour day begins with a predawn reveille. Inmates dress quickly and march to an exercise area where they participate in an hour or two of physical training followed by drill and ceremony. They then march to breakfast where they are ordered to stand at parade rest while waiting in line and to exercise military movements when the line moves. Inmates are required to stand in front of the

table until commanded to sit and are not permitted to converse during the 10-minute eating period. After breakfast, juveniles usually spend the first few hours in school classrooms followed by an afternoon of hard physical labor, which frequently involves community service, such as cleaning state parks or highways. When the 6- to 8-hour workday is over, inmates return to the compound where they participate in additional exercise and drill. A quick dinner is followed by evening programs, which may consist of counseling, life-skills training, or drug education and treatment. The extent of therapeutic programming varies among facilities.

Boot camp inmates gradually earn more privileges and responsibilities as their performance and time in the program warrant. In some programs, a different colored hat or uniform may be the outward display of prestige. Depending on the facility, between 8 percent and 50 percent of the entrants fail to complete the program. For those who go through boot camp successfully, an elaborate graduation ceremony occurs, with visitors and family invited to attend. Frequently, awards are given for achievements made during the program. In addition, the inmates perform the drill and ceremony they have practiced throughout their time in the boot camp.

CHARACTERISTICS OF BOOT CAMP PROGRAMS

Types of Programs

A program typically holds an offender for three to four months in lieu of their regular sentence, or it may be a front-end or back-end program. In front-end programs, inmates are incarcerated for a short time before starting a longer traditional prison sentence. Back-end programs act as an early release mechanism whereby offenders can volunteer to spend the remainder of their sentences in boot camp programs rather than prisons in return for serving a shorter period. Additionally, boot camps may be used in conjunction with probation.

Programs vary in size and length. Some boot camp programs house as few as 30 offenders at once while others, such as the program in New York State, house as many as 1,600. The average program houses between 100 and 250 offenders at one time. Boot camps typically hold offenders between 90 and 120 days. Even if an offender

received a lengthier sentence, they can, in some instances, fulfill that sentence by serving time in a boot camp program.

Usually a boot camp takes in a new group of inmates, or a platoon, every 30 days and houses three or four platoons at one time. The senior platoons that are near completion of the program are expected to serve as positive role models for incoming platoons. With multiple platoons in a program, graduation ceremonies occur frequently. As noted earlier, the graduation ceremonies are an elaborate display in which military drill and ceremony exercises, among other activities, are performed for family and friends. The graduation ceremonies may also be viewed as an incentive for platoon members who are progressing through the program.

Military-Style Uniforms

In addition to the military style of the daily routine, another characteristic common to boot camp programs is military dress. Military-style fatigues are provided to inmates, who must maintain a neat appearance, including polished boots. Correctional staff are also dressed in uniforms indicative of rank and are required to pay close attention to professional military-style appearance. As part of some programs, inmates are gradually able to earn more privileges and responsibilities as their performance and time in the program warrant. The attainment of these privileges is often displayed as a different colored hat or a badge as an outward display of prestige.

Selection Process

One of the most important differences among boot camp programs is the selection of inmates. Generally, there are two approaches to selection procedures. Using the first selection method, sentencing judges place offenders in the boot camp program and retain their decision-making authority over the offenders until they exit the program. Failure to complete the sentence would result in resentencing of the offender, possibly to prison.

In the second type of decision-making model, officials in the Department of Corrections or Youth Authority decide who will enter boot camp. Offenders are sentenced to a term in prison by the judge. The department evaluates them for eligibility

and suitability for a boot camp program. The offenders who are admitted can reduce their term in prison by successfully completing the boot camp. If they are dismissed from boot camp, they are automatically sent to prison to complete their sentence.

Eligibility Requirements

Most boot camp programs for adult offenders restrict participation to offenders between the ages of 17 and 30 (MacKenzie and Souryal, 1995). Some programs permit offenders up to age 40, while other programs have no upper age limit. Regardless of age, offenders are often required to meet minimum physical requirements that exclude offenders who have physical disabilities, severe asthma, or other conditions precluding physical exertion. Participation is also frequently restricted to nonviolent, first-time felony offenders. Although 10 states report that violent and nonviolent offenders are eligible for their boot camp programs, most of their participants are, in fact, nonviolent offenders (General Accounting Office, 1993).

Eligibility requirements can undermine the success of a boot camp program. Restrictive eligibility requirements may mean that many of the boot camp beds are unoccupied, a serious problem in this era of prison crowding. For example, when Louisiana opened its first boot camp program, officials were forced to widen their original narrow eligibility criteria to identify a sufficient number of offenders to fill available beds (MacKenzie and Piquero, 1994).

Another issue related to eligibility requirements in juvenile boot camps is with the definition of the type of juvenile who should be placed in the program. The target groups for juvenile boot camps are most often nonviolent offenders with limited criminal histories. In the last 15 years, there has been a concerted effort to use incarceration less frequently for juveniles who are not a danger to themselves or others. The dilemma for boot camps is whether to admit juveniles convicted of more serious crimes or to widen the net of control to include juveniles convicted of nonviolent crimes.

Staffing

An interesting component of boot camp programs is the militaristic nature of the correctional staff. Frequently, staff employed by boot camp programs have a military

background and experience, including former Marine Corps officers or officers who have served in special U.S. Army units. The primary reason for attracting staff with military experience is that the program atmosphere is a different and more difficult work environment, thus requiring major adaptation by correctional officers without military experience.

The philosophy of boot camp staff is to lead by example and to act as role models who display physical and mental fortitude as a means to gain the respect of the inmates or wards. The staff often perform the same exercises in the daily physical regime that inmates or wards are expected to perform. Additionally, correctional staff follow military codes of discipline including standing at attention, saluting superior officers, and addressing superiors as "Sir," "Ma'am," or other appropriate titles. The staff are also frequently required to use military jargon, such as referring to floors as decks and windows as portholes.

Special Populations

The diversity of boot camps not only exists within their operation but also in the populations that they serve. Although initially designed for adult male offenders, boot camps have more recently included programs for female and juvenile offenders. By 1993, 13 states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons had developed boot camp programs for adult female offenders. These programs comprise only 6 percent of the total number of incarcerated boot camp offenders. In 10 state-level boot camps, males and females are combined in one program, where they live in separate quarters but are brought together for other activities. Other jurisdictions have completely separate programs for male and female offenders (MacKenzie, 1990).

In 1992, a focus-group meeting comprising correctional experts, feminist scholars, and criminologists was held at the University of Maryland to discuss special concerns regarding females in boot camps. Members of the focus group expressed concern about the effect of male correctional officers yelling at female offenders who may have been in abusive relationships before entering the boot camp. A confrontational environment could have a negative psychological impact on these female participants. Furthermore, questions were raised about the way in which these

programs address female-specific needs, such as parenting classes and vocational training.

In response to these concerns, MacKenzie and Donaldson (1996) studied six boot camps that housed female participants. Through interviews, researchers ascertained that females in boot camps experienced difficulties keeping up with the physical demands of the program. Furthermore, female participants reported extensive emotional stress because most boot camp staff and inmates were male. Thus some researchers and practitioners have argued that gender-integrated boot camps are not appropriate. MacKenzie and Donaldson concluded their study by suggesting that the boot camps they studied were designed specifically with the male offender in mind and only accepted female offenders as an afterthought. They suggested that programs be designed for female offenders and include training in parenting skills and responsibilities as well as education about domestic violence.

OUTCOMES

Participants' Perceptions of Boot Camps

Researchers who have surveyed participants' perceptions of their programs have found support for a punitive emphasis. Wood and Grasmick (1999) surveyed male and female inmates who were serving time for nonviolent offenses. They found inmates viewed boot camps as significantly more punitive than traditional imprisonment and various forms of alternative sanctions. Thus participants and potential participants reaffirm the belief held by the public and correctional officials that boot camps are "tough" and punitive. This fact, however, does not mean that boot camps are more effective.

Recidivism

Researchers who examined the effectiveness of early boot camp programs such as those in Georgia, Florida, New York, and Louisiana compared the recidivism rates of offenders who completed boot camp with the rates of offenders who were released from prison and placed on parole. No differences were found between the groups in either rearrests or reincarcerations. Some of the difficulties with these early studies were that

the groups may not have been similar and were not randomly assigned to the treatment condition. Thus prisoners who have served longer sentences may have actually received more treatment than did boot camp inmates.

A second generation of boot camp research compared probationers, boot camp graduates, boot camp dropouts, and parolees in eight states on recidivism measures (MacKenzie, Brame, McDowell, and Souryal, 1995). Results demonstrated that offenders who completed boot camp programs did not necessarily perform better or worse than comparison groups. Specifically, their results indicated boot camp dropouts had a higher recidivism rate than did boot camp graduates and were more likely to recidivate than were offenders on parole. Further, boot camp graduates were more likely to commit new crimes than were offenders who received a sentence to probation. MacKenzie et al. concluded that program effectiveness had to be judged on a state-by-state basis because effects were not consistent across all programs. The second generation of research suffered from one of the same drawbacks as the first: Offenders were not randomly assigned to boot camp programs. Nonetheless, this generation of research did include offenders in the comparison groups who were more similar to the boot camp offenders.

Some tentative results of studies that have implemented a randomized design with juvenile boot camps have recently become available. Peters (1996a, 1996b, 1996c), with follow-up studies completed by Clawson, Coolbaugh, and Zamberlan (1998) examined three juvenile boot camp programs that were willing to permit researchers to randomly assign juvenile offenders to either boot camp or an alternative. The preliminary results from these sites indicated no significant recidivism differences between boot camp youth and the control groups. The collection of data at these sites is continuing.

One of the recommendations from second-generation research was to examine specific program characteristics of boot camps. MacKenzie et al. (1995) further analyzed their data and discovered some commonalities among programs where the boot camp releasees had lower recidivism rates than comparison groups on some, but not all, measures of recidivism. These programs devoted more than three hours per day to therapeutic activities, engaged in some form of follow-up with the offenders in the

community, and required offenders to volunteer for the program. From this study, researchers concluded that the military atmosphere, structure and discipline of boot camp does not significantly reduce recidivism rate; instead, it is the incorporation of therapeutic programming that leads to successful reductions in recidivism.

Following up on the examination of specific components of boot camp environments that might enhance rehabilitation efforts, Styve, MacKenzie, and Gover (2000) compared the environments of 24 juvenile boot camps with 24 traditional correctional facilities. They found that compared with juveniles in traditional correctional facilities, boot camp residents consistently perceived the environment as significantly more controlled, active, and structured, with less danger from other residents. Boot camp juveniles also perceived the environment as providing more therapeutic and transitional programming. Overall, from the perspective of the juveniles, boot camps appear to provide a more positive environment conducive to effective rehabilitation, considering almost all the conditions measured.

CONCLUSION

Boot camp programs are an alternative to traditional prison incarceration that has become increasingly popular since its rebirth in 1983. The militarization of correctional programs provides a structured environment that requires a strict physical regime to be followed by both inmates and correctional staff. Early programs that traditionally focused on the military style of training and punishment, called “shock incarceration” programs, more recently have been subsumed by boot camps, which retain the military components but also incorporate therapeutic elements into the programming. On the whole, shock incarceration programs have not been very successful in reducing recidivism levels of offenders who have graduated. It is expected, however, that with the more recent incorporation of treatment elements into boot camp programs, these programs may become more effective in reducing recidivism and thus lead to positive long-term change in offenders.

See also Reformatories and Reform Schools; Scared Straight; Wilderness Programs

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