After 15 years in American youth work, a five-month stay in the United Kingdom has given me the opportunity to learn about the British youth service and to contrast it to that of the U.S. Nowhere is this contrast more striking than youth work with early adolescents. Almost 40 percent of the young people served by youth workers are under 14! In the U.S.A. youth services focus on the 15- to 18-year-olds, whereas Britain's youth workers concentrate on the 12-to-16 age group.

In the United States, work with young people outside the established framework of institutions, such as schools and hospitals, is considered youth work. Much of the work done by salaried youth workers is focused on some "abnormal condition," its treatment and prevention.

In contrast to this targeted American approach, the aim of the British youth service system is to reach all young people. Theirs is not part of any articulated strategy to "prevent" anything, but to promote individual development. This positive rationale for youth work has given the United Kingdom's youth service a strong sense of purpose. Because the service is committed to working with every young person, a far greater degree of support exists from parents and policymakers than youth workers enjoy in the United States.

The basic unit of the British youth service is the Youth Club. After school, evenings, weekends, and in the summer, youth workers and volunteers run a variety of recreational, social, and educational activities for the young members, who join the club by paying a nominal fee. These 10,000-plus youth clubs—many of which are tied together through membership in the National Association of Youth Clubs (NAYC)—are sponsored by churches, schools, neighborhood organizations, and local unions. Gradually these clubs are increasing their work with young adolescents. Evelyn Lumley, an NAYC expert in training for youth under 14, says, "One-third of our members are under 14. By 1985 that number will grow to over half." In 1968 only 18 percent of the young people served by the youth service were under 14; by 1978, the number had grown to 33 percent.

Bill Treanor is the former director of the National Youth Work Alliance. He has been attached to the National Youth Bureau in London for the past year.
Unlike youth workers in the United States, prospective British youth workers enroll in two- and three-year courses in a number of colleges. Their curriculum is called "Community and Youth Work." Here students study adolescent development and the role of young people in society, British social history and policy, community work, and youth work practice. About half of the youth work students' time is spent in a variety of supervised placements in youth agencies. Upon completion of the course of study, students receive a "Certificate in Community and Youth Work" which entitles them to the wages of a "qualified" youth worker, guaranteed by the youth worker trade union, the Community and Youth-Service Association. The initial program is enhanced by strong inservice training.

Young people are given, for the most part, adult status at age 16. They are free to leave school and home, to marry, and to hold a full-time job. Over 12 percent of British 15-year-olds are frequent truants; of these, 72 percent leave school shortly after their sixteenth birthday. A common practice is to place troublesome young people in special classes — "sin bins" — where they mark time until they turn 16.

Since British young people are expected to function as adults by age 16, it is not surprising that the focus of youth work is with younger teenagers than in the U.S.A., where adolescent dependence is extended for at least two more years. Helping young people to grow up results in some interesting differences between the U.S.A. and the U.K. In Britain young people can leave home at 16 — and by 15 many have one foot out the door. Therefore, the incidence of running away from home is only a small fraction of that experienced in the United States.

Efforts to reduce "dropping-out" of high school have failed notably in the U.S.A. Those without a high school diploma carry the social and economic stigma of being "high school drop-outs." In Britain, however, that failure-laden label is unknown. Sixteen-year-old "school leavers" are able to move on to work without being shamed because they didn't stay in school until their eighteenth birthday. Perhaps coincidentally, American-style secondary school violence is rare, although vandalism is Britain's fastest growing crime.

Young people who are delinquent find themselves in the stern British penal system, which even has a special "Junior Detention Centre" for the young adolescent. Junior detention centres operate for the 12- to 16-year-olds who spend three months absorbing "short, sharp, shocks" from the military-style regime. Because the U.K.'s youth service strategies are antithetical to the treatment and prevention strategies of the U.S.A., it would be extraordinary for a British youth organization to adopt as its top priority—as the California Child, Youth, & Family Coalition recently did—the reduction of the number of juveniles held in secure detention.

In my view, one of the most important lessons for Americans to learn from the British experience is the vital importance, both politically and socially, of having a positive developmental approach to working with young adolescents. According to the NAYC:

"Working with under 14s is not about keeping youngsters out of trouble; it is concerned with development of a child as a unique human being. Junior clubs are just one way in which under 14s can be helped. They are not a panacea for juvenile delinquency or any other social ills. Junior clubs should be part of a caring community which wants to see its children grow in responsibility, self-respect and concern for the society in which they live."

I have always felt uneasy about the role and application of "prevention" in the American youth service. It is by its very nature a negative label that burdens the youth worker with some artificial and—if honestly reported—unobtainable goal: reducing drug abuse, crime, or whatever is required by the funding source. Surely the goal of prevention will never be met. Prevention should be dropped from the vocabulary of youth policymakers. What is needed in the 1980s is not negative prevention strategies but the kind of positive youth service development that Britain and other European nations have so successfully undertaken in the past 30 years.

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