Introduction

This book narrates the story of seven kids who had their experience with the juvenile system. These kids include; Elias Elizondo, George, Geri Vance, Ronald Duncan, Carla James and Andre. Carla, John and Andre make it through the system and end up joining college. The rest are not very successful as they get imprisoned. Judge Don is among the central characters in this book. Don is a judge in the juvenile court system and appeared to be in favor of keeping the juvenile system. He had big plans for reforming the system. He viewed that the purpose of this system was to reach out to kids who commit a crime before they get to point of no return. Peggy was a deputy district attorney. He had no faith in the juvenile system as she viewed it as a very lenient system that enabled individuals to get away with serious crimes.

Author’s Main Points

Humes brings out several themes through this book. One of these themes is the existence of dysfunctional juvenile system. The system is characterized by limited funding, poor infrastructure and understaffed offices. The system also lacks adequate detention facilities, group homes and monitoring officers. The system is also characterized by rigid laws resulting in too lenient punishment for serious offenders and tough punishment for petty offenders. The case of Duncan is a good example of how the juvenile system can be lax. Duncan killed two people and showed little remorse for his action. However, because the crimes were committed 9 days before he turned 16 years he could not be tried in the adults’ court. Duncan receives a lenient sentence and would be released before he is 25 years. This made the juvenile system appear ineffective.

It appears as systems that allow individuals to get away with a serious crime. The cases of Elias, George and Geri on the other hand, show how the system can be hard on petty
offenders. The three kids were all imprisoned because the judge could not act outside the mandatory imprisonment laws. The Juvenile system has been turned into a formal court that emphasizes on bureaucracies and technicalities instead of focusing on child welfare and protection of society. This system often detain children make them angry and turn them into more dangerous criminals. The outcome of the system become negative to all parties involved.

The second point found in Humes’ book is lack of consensus concerning the role of the juvenile system. There appeared to be two conflicting goals being perpetuated by different parties in the system. One group had the view that the goal of the institution should be to help the children before it is too late. Members of this faction were in favor of showing mercy and compassion to perpetrators of juvenile crime. Judge Don was among these members. The judge believed that getting children early, we help them to reform and stop them from becoming a menace to the society. The second faction held the view that the primary objective of the juvenile system was to promote justice by ensuring that perpetrators of crimes are severely punished. Deputy DA Peggy was among the members of this faction. She believed that some kids are beyond repair and what the system can do is give retribution to victims of crime.

Another theme that is visible from this book is that individual kids also have their role to play in determining the success of the system. Despite going through the same system, some kids like Carla were able to transform their lives. Other kids, such as Duncan, appear not to have been changed by the system. Despite him having received a lighter sentence for serious crime, he did not take responsibility for his life. This is an indication that despite the performance of the system, the decision to change will come down to the individuals themselves. For some, the system has given them and chance to reflect on their lives and change their way. Other appears to be irredeemable.

The book also reveals that there are underlying factors that result in juvenile delinquency. Most of the kids involved in the book had a disturbing story behind their decisions to enter into crime. One of the factors that was common among most delinquents in poverty. There is a close link between social economic status and juvenile delinquency. Most of the kids who gave interviews narrated how they led lives of poverty before joining the delinquent system. Some were forced to join criminal gangs after they were abandoned by the parents.
Ethnicity and racism were also risk factors. Some kids mentioned that they joined gangs in order to get protection. Other risks factors included drugs and alcohol abuse and unstable home environment. Arresting juvenile delinquent after they have committed crimes appears to be a reactive strategy for solving this problem. Addressing the root causes such as drug abuse and poverty could be a more efficient and proactive approach to solving the problem. However, this will require the contribution of other institutions besides the juvenile system.

**Dysfunctional Justice System**

Existence of dysfunctional justice system is one of the major themes that are brought out in the book. The system is greatly under funded thus inhibiting its ability to perform its function. Due to limited resources the system lacks adequate infrastructure and human resource to respond to the needs of the society. The DA office lacks adequate number of personnel to deal with the backlog of juvenile cases. In some occasion they let some cases slip.

The system also lack adequate detention facilities and homes to hold individuals who are handed sentences by the juvenile cases. This situation has been compounded by the need for the LA government to save on cost. This is not how the situation should. In order to serve its function, the juvenile system should be well equipped, Players in this system should be given adequate resources to manage all the activities involved.

A dysfunctional juvenile system is also depicted by break out of war between the various parties involved. There was a war between three parties within the system; the DA office, public defender’s office and the judge’s office. The DA office wanted to do away with the juvenile system as they viewed it as an inefficient system that helped criminal to get away with serious crimes. This office was represented in the book by Peggy, who was the deputy DA. When asked of what changes he would recommend to the system Peggy gave very tough suggestions. These included; lowering the fitness age, altering the burden of proof, treating of serious crimes such as murder differently. This suggests showed Peggy’s intention to make the juvenile system tougher.

The judge’s office wanted the juvenile system to remain but with significant reforms. The judge’s office was headed by Judge Don. Don announces the plan to reform the juvenile system. He believed that no kid is bad and that they can all be saved. The public defender’s
office wanted the status quo to remain. This office had no problem with how the system was functioning. This difference between the three essential components of the system created a dysfunctional system.

Every disagreeing party gave reasonable argument to support their stand. However, it is important to note that the DA, the juvenile court and the public defender’s office are three of the most important players in the juvenile systems. In order for the system to work effectively there must be cooperation and consistency between the three components. The difference in ideology between these three offices is altering efficiency of the system. While the three parties appear to be far apart, their goals appear to be intertwined with the goals of establishing the juvenile system.

There is also a lot of bureaucracy in the system. The officers have become more concerned with meeting technicalities such as fitness age, mandatory sentences and burden of proof. These bureaucracies are making it easy for perpetrators of serious crimes to escape justice and for perpetrators of petty crime to get tough punishments.

The system moves from being too lax in some circumstances to being too tough on other circumstances. A good example is the Duncan case, where Duncan committed murder but got a very lenient punishment because he was remaining with a few days before turning 16 years. He charged as minor in the juvenile court and is bound to be released at age 25. On the other hand, Elias, George and Geri received prison sentence because they qualified for mandatory sentences. This is despite the existence of evidence that the crimes they committed were as a result of prevailing circumstances.

The above procedures were introduced to make the system more effective, fair and reliable. The fitness, mandatory arrest and burden of proof policies are all procedures that were introduced with very good intentions. However, using the provisions of these procedures as technicalities in juvenile case undermines the overall objective of the system. This system was established with two main objectives. The first objective is to assist the children before they become deeply entrenched in crime, while the second objective is to protect the society from the crimes. The cases of Duncan, Elias, George and Geri are good indicators of how these technicalities can undermine the realization of the goals of the juvenile system.
Significance of the Book to the Field of Juvenile Justice

Humes' book has made a major addition to the field of juvenile justice. The author has achieved this by pointing out areas of weakness within the system. It has been noted in the book that insufficient funding, bureaucracy and conflict among players in the system are among some of the issues that are ailing the juvenile system. This book provides essential information that can be used to spearhead reforms in the juvenile system.

It is a reality that Americans have questions concerning the real benefit of having a juvenile system that is separate from the adult criminal system. There has been debate concerning whether the system should be retained or abandoned. In order to restore the faith of the majority of people in the system, reforms are needed in this system. There is a need to ensure that the system can overcome financial and bureaucracy problems and work toward realizing the objective of the institution. This objective is to give children time, opportunity and tools to take a different direction in life. This book points areas where reforms should start.

Reference