

USA TODAY
October 26, 1992

'Clubhouse' Gets Kids, Teens off the Mean Streets of D.C.

By Sam Vincent Meddis

WASHINGTON - "Be strong!" karate instructor Clinton Johnson shouts, before jabbing a calloused foot into a young pupil's stomach.

Be strong. Not only to protect yourself - but strong enough to control anger, strong enough to have hope amid poverty and violence of the streets.

"We're trying to teach them to think," says Johnson, a volunteer at the Metropolitan Police Boys and Girls Club in one of the toughest sections of a city that many call the nation's murder capital.

Programs for children and teen-agers sponsored by a variety of organizations - not the threat of prison - are being touted by criminologists, law enforcement and neighborhood groups as the best chance society has to help lower a spiraling crime rate.

Basketball, football and weightlifting, along with dance and music classes, help young people off the streets.

But many other programs are offered as well - from counseling and after-school tutoring, to dental hygiene and drug education - often filling in for guidance that's missing in broken homes.

The "Clubhouse" here also is a sanctuary.

"You don't have to worry about looking over your shoulder," says Keisha Trice, 16, who participates in dance and computer classes.

"It's real bad out there," she says. "A lot of drive-bys, people just shooting people for no good reasons."

Sterling Savoy, a public school custodian who volunteers as a football coach in the 75-pounder league, says young people find a "great big family" here.

"Peer pressure gets a whole lot of kids in trouble," Savoy says. "If you can get a majority of these kids one-on-one, they show a good side. . . . You see the joy and the light in these kids' faces."

Nearly two years after the red-brick facility opened, no graffiti mars its walls. Built to handle 1,500 members, there are now more than 4,000.

By next year, a computer tracking system will show how much success the club has had in helping young people avoid trouble with the law.

Lynn Curtis of the Eisenhower Foundation, which is evaluating the Washington program, says "early intervention" efforts by other organizations show positive results: less involvement in drugs and crime, lower school dropout rates and less welfare dependency.

Building up such programs to an adequate level will be costly - about \$30 billion a year for the next decade, according to some estimates.

But as Curtis says: "It's cheaper to send a youngster to Yale than to jail."