

The Washington Times

 Print  Close

Originally published 10:56 p.m., April 15, 2006, updated 12:00 a.m., April 16, 2006

Military-style camps get boot after teen's death in Florida

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) -- Putting juvenile delinquents into a military-style boot camp would seem to be a logical means of transforming rough-and-tumble kids into young ladies and gentlemen.

Many camps were opened in the early and mid-1990s when corrections officials were convinced it was the best method to help troubled teens mature and stay away from further problems. But that idea has fallen out of favor nationwide in the wake of research by criminologists that indicates the programs simply don't work any better than normal juvenile detention facilities.

The programs faced increased criticism after 14-year-old Martin Lee Anderson died in January after he was kicked and hit by guards at a Florida Panhandle camp -- an altercation that was videotaped by camp surveillance cameras and broadcast nationally.

That camp, run by the Bay County Sheriff's Office, was closed last month, but Florida still has four open, housing about 130 teens -- down from a peak of nine camps and 364 inmates about eight years ago. At the concept's peak in the mid-1990s, about 4,500 teens were housed nationally in juvenile boot camps.

Some expect that downward trend to continue.

"As we know boot camps today, they're not going to exist," said Florida state Rep. Gus Barreiro, chairman of the House Criminal Justice Appropriations Committee. "Intimidation-based programming ultimately has very short-term results, and what we want is long-term results."

But the boot camps still have powerful supporters who say the programs work, including Gov. Jeb Bush, who said he has no intention of closing any more camps or changing their methods.

"They're going to look like a boot camp, feel like a boot camp," Mr. Bush said.

Opponents of the programs say the camp guards are sometimes sadistic and racist, using Martin's death as an extreme example of how inmates are

treated. The tape showed guards as they kned and struck the teen, who had been sent to the camp after he was caught on a joyride in his grandmother's car and then violated his probation. After about 25 minutes, Martin's limp body was placed on a stretcher and taken to the hospital, where he died the next day.

The medical examiner for Bay County, Dr. Charles Siebert, ruled Martin died of hemorrhaging caused by a sickle cell trait, a usually benign condition common among blacks, and no guards were charged. That ruling caused Martin's family, Florida's black legislators and civil rights groups such as the NAACP to claim a cover-up and to say the teen was the victim of racism.

Mr. Bush appointed Hillsborough County State Attorney Mark Ober to investigate and a second autopsy was performed by Dr. Vernard Adams, that county's veteran medical examiner.

And while official results are pending, Dr. Michael Baden, a nationally known pathologist who observed the autopsy for the Anderson family, disagreed with Dr. Siebert's findings.

The U.S. Justice Department also is investigating the civil rights accusations.

"That investigation should be just the start," said Rep. George Miller, California Democrat. "Congress has an obligation to ensure that children are totally safe when they are sent to residential treatment programs."