

# Hidden Addiction

## Using System Analysis to Understand Our Growing Dependence on Correctional Placement

By John Franz

*A very old Vaudeville routine goes something like this:*

*Frick: Hey, Frack, why do you drink so much?*

*Frack: Well Frick, I'll tell you - I drink to forget.*

*Frick: What are you trying to forget?*

*Frack: I'm trying to forget that I can't stop myself from drinking!*

### **Trapped by our own solutions**

Sometimes we find ourselves trapped in situations that we don't like, but can't seem to change no matter what we try. As individuals, this might play out as an addiction to alcohol, drugs or gambling. On a community level, a current problem that everyone seems to be concerned about, yet which no one seems to be able to stop, is the rapid increase in the use of correctional placement for youth in our juvenile justice system. Despite only a small rise in the juvenile population in our state over the past few years, the number of children being held in secure correctional placements has nearly doubled. If one adds to that the number of delinquent youth being placed in residential treatment centers because judges are reluctant to send any but the most threatening youth to our overcrowded correctional facilities, we have what seems like an avalanche.

One explanation for this situation might be that teenagers are much worse now, and that the decline in the character of our youth continues to accelerate. However, this assumption gives us nothing to work with, and paints an unnecessarily bleak picture for the future.

A more useful approach might be to search for hidden patterns in the structures of our systems of care which may be contributing to this increase. The latter suggestion is based on the ideas of Peter Senge, whose book "The Fifth Discipline"<sup>1</sup> is a top-selling treatise on business management. Senge's work applies the basic principles of system analysis to the study of organizational problems and offers strategies for helping change to occur, once the underlying causes of the situation are better understood.

The goal of this article is to borrow a few ideas from the "Fifth Discipline" and use them to give us a better handle on our snowballing rates of juvenile incarceration.

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<sup>1</sup>Senge, Peter M., *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York, Doubleday, 1990.

## **Boiled frogs and learning horizons**

Senge points out that most of us are conditioned to see life as a series of events, and that we generally assume that for every event there is one obvious cause. This linear focus on short-term events is reinforced by the popular media which can rarely look more than a few weeks or months into the past to find some person or event to blame for our most recent catastrophe. But this narrow point of view prevents us from seeing longer-term patterns of influence. Early in our evolution as a species, our concentration on the immediate had some powerful payoffs. If a Neanderthal spent too much time contemplating his or her navel, he or she would have the illuminating experience of exploring the insides of a saber-toothed tiger. But these days, Senge points out, “The primary threats to our survival, both of our organizations and of our societies, come not from sudden events but from slow, gradual processes.”

As an illustration he offers the parable of the boiled frog. If you put a frog in a pot of hot water, it will immediately try to scramble out. But if you place the frog in room temperature water, and don't scare it, and if you gradually turn up the temperature, it'll stay put. As the temperature increases, the frog will become more and more lethargic, and, unable to save itself, eventually it will be cooked.

In essence, Senge says a boiled frog is suffering from a severely limited learning horizon. Like the frog, many of us find it difficult to pay attention to the results of our actions when the effects occur far from us in time, in geography or in the steps of a complex process. Our narrow learning horizons place us in a dilemma: “We learn best from experience, but we never directly experience the consequences of many of our most important decisions.”

If their learning horizons are too limited, individuals, organizations, communities and countries can engage in behavior which someone looking at the bigger picture could see was self-destructive but which those trapped in the behavior nevertheless believe is unavoidable.

To overcome the boundaries of our learning horizons, Senge proposes that we search for both the patterns of behavior that contribute to our problems and the structural components in our organizations which may be influencing those patterns. But for this effort to succeed, he believes that decision-makers must come to realize that “their problems, and their hopes for improvement, are inextricably tied to how they think.” We have got to be smarter than a boiled frog, if we want to avoid that amphibian's fate.

## **Expanding our horizons: the tools of system analysis**

The fifth discipline referred to in Senge's book is systems thinking. He describes it as a “framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static ‘snapshots.’” To accomplish this, system theory borrows a body of scientific methodology from the feedback concepts used in cybernetics and the servo-mechanism processes that are a key component in mechanical engineering.

There are three building blocks in the theory: *reinforcing feedback loops, balancing*

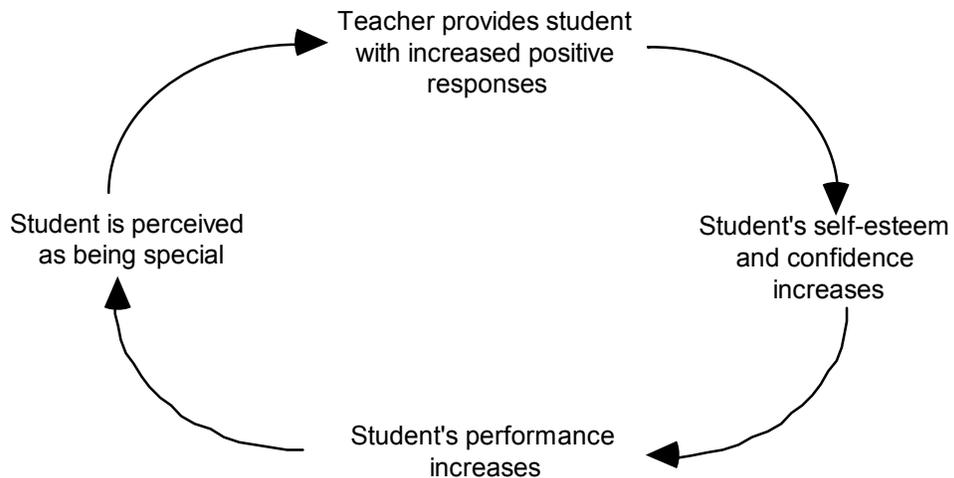
*feedback loops* and *system delays*. All three can be used to better visualize underlying complexities which may be contributing to the rapid increase in our use of correctional placements.

1. *Reinforcing feedback loops*

The first element for analyzing complex patterns is the reinforcing feedback loop. In reinforcing loops some action affects another action which (either directly or through further steps) affects the initial action causing the process rate of the system to increase or decrease.

A well-known example of a reinforcing feedback loop in human behavior is the “Pygmalion effect” first reported by psychologist Robert Merton. Merton conducted an experiment which demonstrated the degree to which a teacher’s opinion of a student can influence the student’s performance. He came to a grade school and selected a few students at random from several teachers’ classrooms, spent some time with the students and then brought them back to their teachers. The teachers were told that the selected students had been found to be especially talented, and the teachers were asked to keep track of their progress.

The teachers were observed to pay more attention to the selected students. The students responded to the increase in positive feedback by improving their performance. The teachers in turn noticed this additional improvement, further increased their positive responses and the cycle continued. The following chart demonstrates the process:

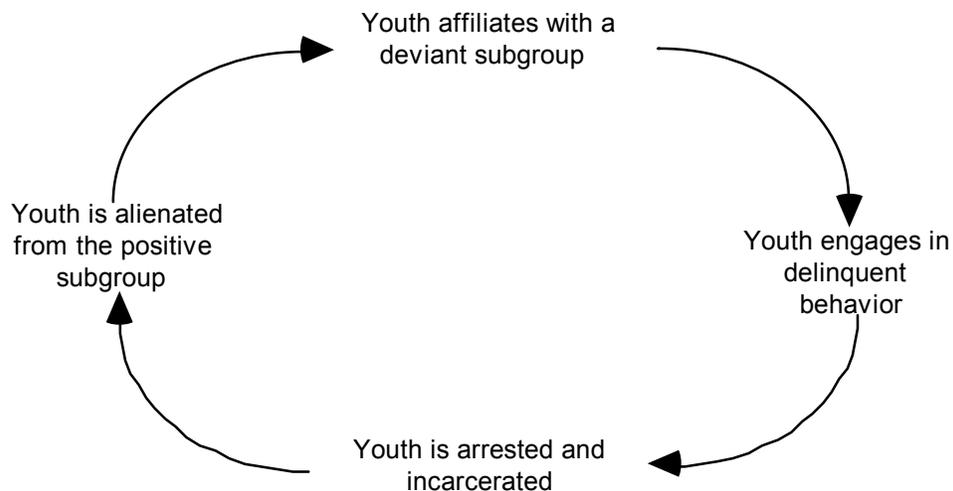


**Chart One: An example of a positive reinforcing feedback loop.**

Unfortunately, reinforcement loops can be negative as well as positive. Merton also showed that where circumstances led a teacher to view a student negatively (for example, mistakenly assuming that a child is unmotivated when in fact the child is coming to school exhausted from helping out at home ), the teacher often would provide the student with less attention, leading to a decrease in the student’s performance, reinforcing the teacher’s negative perspective, and so on.

An example of a negative feedback loop in the juvenile justice system is found in Dennis Maloney's work around the Balanced Approach.<sup>2</sup> One theory for the development of delinquent conduct focuses on alienation and the need for affiliation. Step one in the process assumes that some action or situation causes a youth to feel separated from the dominant group of his or her culture. (For example, a youth might speak or look differently, perform below the group's expectations, belong to a devalued subgroup, or be caught in an embarrassing situation.)

If the youth is blocked from participation in a cohort that engages in positive behavior, he or she may look around for other friends. Often the only group that will accept the youth is a deviant subgroup that includes delinquent conduct as part of their pattern of behavior. Once a part of the group, the youth may also engage in this behavior, in order to continue to belong. If the youth is caught and charged with the delinquent conduct, our response as a society is often to lock the youth up. Being formally labeled as a delinquent and being locked up results in the youth being rejected even more by the dominant group and reinforces the youth's attachment to the deviant subgroup - leading in turn to more delinquent conduct. This process is illustrated in chart two.



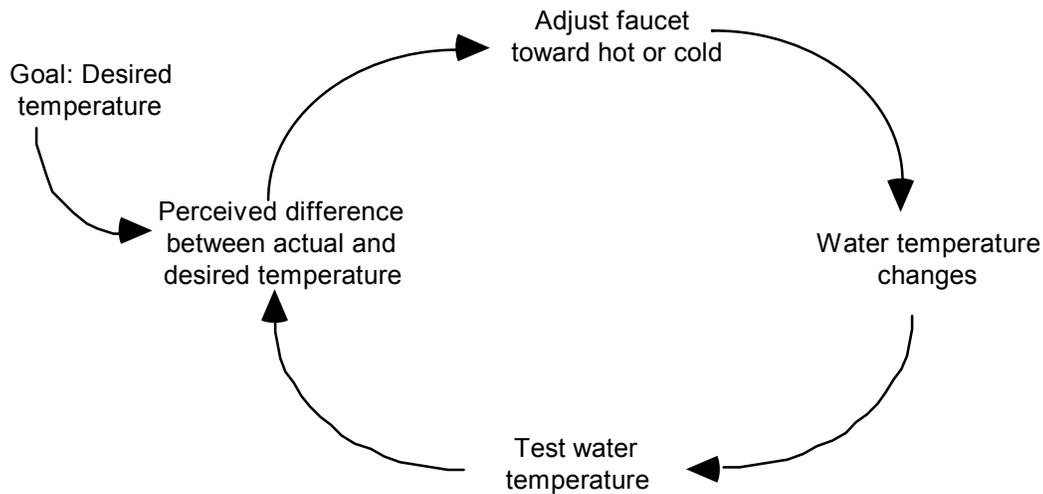
**Chart two: Example of a negative reinforcing feedback loop**

## 2. *Balancing feedback loops*

A second type of feedback loop is one in which a system adjusts itself in the attempt to reach or maintain a pre-set goal. A simple example is one we use each day when we set the temperature in the shower. We have start with an idea of what a good temperature will be, sample the water and turn it hotter or colder until it feels right.

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<sup>2</sup> Maloney, D., Romig, D., and Armstrong, T., "Juvenile Probation: The Balanced Approach" *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 39 (3) (1988). His work has been discussed in earlier Calliope articles, including "Wraparound and the Juvenile Court," September, 1994.

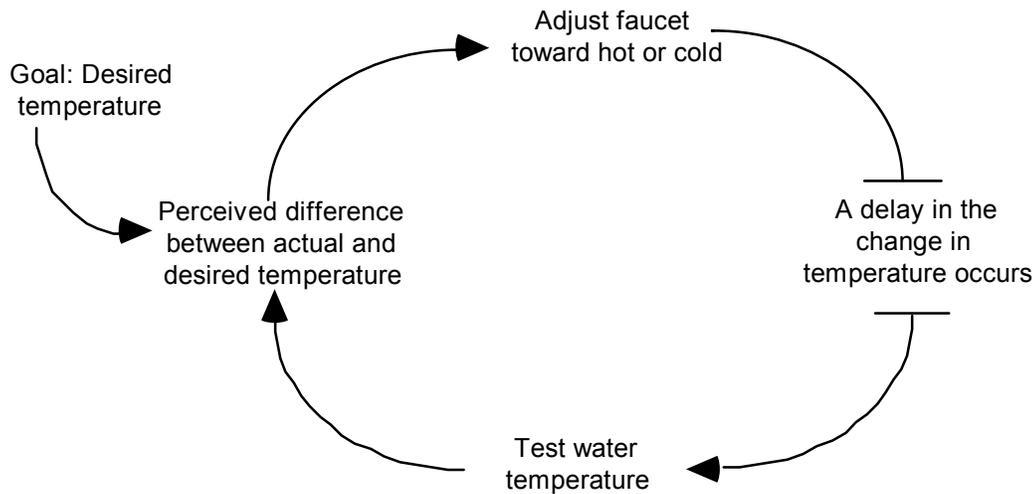


**Chart three: A balancing feedback loop**

Balancing processes are nature's way of maintaining the status quo. In our bodies, thousands of balancing feedback loops help to maintain our homeostasis. But it is also the way systems resist change. Leaders may attempt to institute massive efforts at system redesign, only to find that the harder they push for change, the harder the system pushes back. Senge suggests that in such a situation, the key is to look for a balancing feedback loop powered by an often hidden goal that contradicts the explicit goals being put forward as part of the mandate for change.

### 3. *System delays*

The third building block in system analysis is the response delay. When the effect of an adjustment toward a goal in a balancing feedback loop takes time to occur, the impact on the operation of a system can be devastating. Consider the example of adjusting the shower water. Assume that you are trying to take a shower in an older home with outdated plumbing. You turn the knob to where you think the temperature should be right, and it stays cold. As the delay persists, not knowing that it takes time for the plumbing to respond, you continue turning the knob farther and farther. Suddenly the plumbing kicks in and scalding hot water pours out. You react by turning the knob rapidly into the cold range, and turning even farther when at first it doesn't respond. When the cold water does arrive, it gushes out with an Arctic chill.



**Chart four: A balancing feedback loop with a delay**

A sign that a balancing loop with a delay is in operation is when system values continually oscillate from too high to too low, just like the water in the shower when the plumbing needs repair.

It is possible that part of the cause for the continuing increase in the juvenile correctional population is the result of a system delay in a balancing loop. In the juvenile system, instead of adjusting the temperature of the water between hot and cold, the variation would be between the use of community-based services and incarceration. If there is a delay between the increased use of community services and its impact on recidivism and the general behavior of youth in the community, there might be a tendency to turn the knob too fast in the other direction. In fact, one author who carefully examined the history of Wisconsin's juvenile justice system has found that it bounces back and forth between an authoritarian and a humanistic approach about every twenty years.<sup>3</sup>

Senge makes the following comment on effective strategies for dealing with balancing loops that have system delays: "Aggressive action often produces exactly the opposite of what is intended. It produces instability and oscillation, instead of moving you more quickly toward your goal."

### **Models of addiction**

Although the impact of a negative feedback loop or a balancing loop with a system delay might account for some of the characteristics we are seeing in our juvenile justice system, a clearer picture emerges when we examine the ways in which these basic cycles can interact in

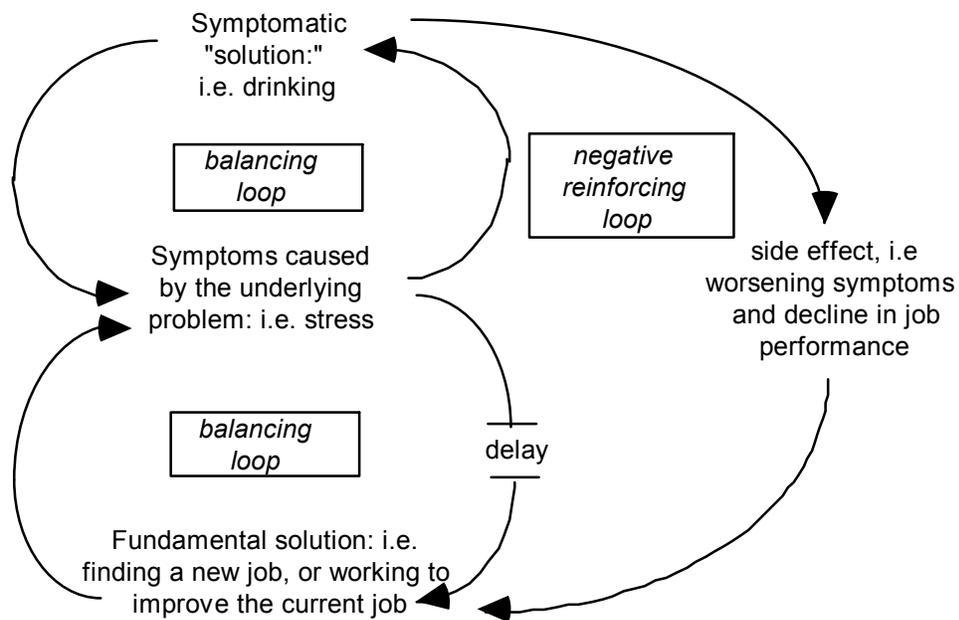
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<sup>3</sup> Schlossman, Steven L., "Love and the American Delinquent : the Theory and Practice of 'Progressive' Juvenile Justice, 1825-1920." Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1977.

complex arrangements. Senge has found that in real-life situations the three foundation elements often link together in distinct patterns which he calls “system archetypes.” One of these archetypes is called “Shifting the Burden.” It is composed of two balancing loops (one with a delay) and one reinforcing loop.

Certain patterns of substance abuse can be described using the shifting the burden model. For example, consider a person trapped in an overwhelming job. He experiences a variety of symptoms caused by stress: anxiety, depression, somatic difficulties. Although the fundamental solution to the problems he is experiencing probably lies in doing something about the nature of his work, there is often quite a delay between trying to do something about the underlying causes and any sense of relief.

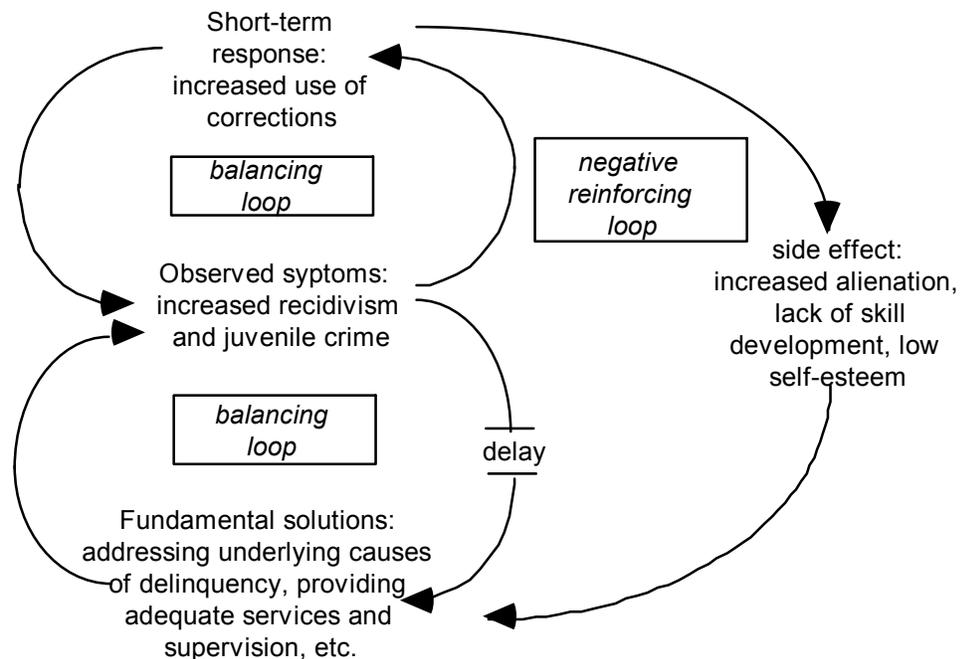
Instead, the person tries a more immediate “symptomatic” solution: he begins stopping off at the bar after work for a few drinks. For the short term this provides some relief, but of course does nothing about the real issues. Further, this drinking is likely to cause an additional decline in the worker’s ability to handle stress, and in his ability to do his job well, which will exacerbate the fundamental problem, increase the symptoms caused by the problem and lead him to rely more and more on the short-term solution of drinking. A simplified diagram of this pattern is as follows:



**Chart five: The “shifting the burden” model applied to a pattern of increasing substance abuse**

It is possible that this same pattern can help us come to a better understanding of our reliance on secure correctional placements. The observed symptoms in our system are increasing recidivism and juvenile crime. The short-term solution is increased use of correctional placement.

More fundamental approaches would require that we address factors such as the underlying causes of juvenile crime and the need for improved supervision in the community. But the effects of these efforts would only be observed after a significant delay, and so we would be more likely to choose the path of symptomatic relief. The side effect of increased use of corrections would be an acceleration of the alienation of the youth in our system, lowered skills as overcrowding reduces access to services and a downward spiral in self-esteem, all of which would make it even more difficult to implement necessary fundamental changes.



**Chart six: The shifting the burden model applied to an increase in juvenile correctional placements**

If this model is accurate, the more we use correctional placement as a short-term solution to the much more complex problems underlying juvenile crime, the greater the demand for correctional placements will become, while at the same time we will have fewer and fewer resources and opportunities available to address the fundamental issues causing the situations we are trying to correct.

### **Searching for solutions**

In his book, Senge makes it clear that while understanding a problem is necessary before any strategy for solving it can be developed, it is not nearly enough. Systems analysis only gives us the tools to define a problem. He devotes much of his book to describing ways in which the four other disciplines can be used to implement effective solutions:

- Developing personal mastery (which means acquiring the skills needed to break out of negative patterns);

- Understanding mental models (which means learning to recognize the often unconscious assumptions and presumptions which prevent us from making the changes which reason tells us are necessary);
- Building shared vision (which means helping all those working in a system to find a common purpose); and
- Maintaining team learning (which means fostering the ongoing ability of staff to carry out innovative, coordinated action toward the goals identified in the shared vision).

When addressing a complex problem, Senge advises searching for points of “high leverage,” where smaller, concentrated inputs can have the greatest impact. With regard to problems generated by a “shifting the burden” organizational pattern, Senge recommends a disciplined and steadfast focus on solutions to the fundamental problem. In situations in which symptomatic solutions are imperative (because of the time it will take before the results of strategies addressing the underlying problems will begin to show), he admonishes organizations to be careful to use the short-term solution only to buy time while working on the fundamental issues.

Acquiring Senge’s five disciplines is difficult. Implementing them is nearly impossible. But sometimes there is no choice but to try. Absent a concerted effort at systems change, our juvenile correctional population is on track to double again in a few more years. The time has come to work together to break out of the spiral of hidden addiction which seems to have captured us.

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