

Report says youth detentions on the decrease

Written by Brian Stimson, Special to the NNPA from the Portland Skanner
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OREGON (NNPA) - From the mid-'80s to the late '90s, the number of youths in detention nationwide skyrocketed, with average daily populations ballooning from 13,000 to 28,000 in about a decade.

A new report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation finds that number is finally decreasing. The foundation, concerned for the large number of youth detained for non-violent crimes and the nearly system-wide practice of not properly screening youths for best-outcomes, developed the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative in 1992.

Although the initiative received mixed success in its first five pilot sites, those in Multnomah County and Cook County in Chicago, IL, came back with positive results. Racial disparities were reduced and more youths remained arrest-free and showed up for their court dates.

There are currently 110 jurisdictions that utilize the JDAI model with the majority of them reporting deeper reductions in juvenile arrests for serious violent offenses than jurisdictions that hadn't employed a detention reform initiative. Studies show that locking up youths indiscriminately can often lead to more, rather than less, crime in the future.

It also appears to have a positive effect on recidivism.

Washington state has become a model in its own right, using the Assessments Research Database, which tracks juvenile offender assessment, tracking and treatment in the state. The project will be fully operational by June 2010, when it will be used to measure the utilization and outcomes of treatment programs, prevalence of behaviors, risks, behavior trends and demographic differences.

In 2007, 70 percent of offenders remained offense-free in the next 12 months. Although Gov. Kulongoski has made it a priority to reduce the number of African-Americans and other minorities in the juvenile justice system, recidivism disparities remain. Looking at just the African-American juvenile offenders, 57 percent did not recidivate. With White juvenile offenders, 78 percent did not recidivate. Of Hispanic juvenile offenders, 65 percent did not recidivate.

According to the Oregon Youth Authority, overall recidivism decreased from 1998 to 2007, from 37 percent to 32 percent of all youth offenders.

The initiative has had uneven affect on disparate rates of detention for minority offenders in Multnomah County.

Detention rates hit an all-time low in 2000, when only 22 percent of youth brought to the juvenile justice center were detained. This was the second year that the percentage of minority youth and White youth detained were equal, a statistic that began to diverge soon after.

The next year, detention rates rose again, but minority detention rates rose higher. By 2003, the number of White juveniles detained decreased and the number of minorities detained increased. In 2007, 41 percent of minority youth detained by police were held in detention

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compared to 31 percent of White youth.

David Koch, director of Multnomah County Juvenile Justice, says they pay close attention to the statistic and believe it is moving back to equality after a few years of blips. He said the statistics were largely influenced by events out of their control – an influx of Hispanic youth brought in by cartels to deal drugs and a rise in high intensity crimes by some African American youth.

Largely, though, the disparities represent the disparities system wide – minority youth are more likely to live in poor, higher crime areas and therefore are more likely to have had contact with the police. They are also more likely to be in the foster care system and community support systems have been negatively affected by reductions in the county budget.

He says the JDAI model has had positive effects after 14 years in the county.

“These are embedded principals in the way the Multnomah County Juvenile Justice System operates,” he said. “It’s about making good policy decisions on the data.”

While helping to reduce the overall number of youth held in detention, it does not directly address the issue of mental illness.

Mark McKechnie, director of the Juvenile Rights Project, says it indirectly helped mentally ill youth by freeing up money spent on detention to be spent on mental health resources. Still, critics say the juvenile justice system in America tends to be the modern day asylum under a different name – much like the adult system, where it is estimated that 25 percent of prisoners suffer a serious, chronic mental illness such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia.

“Part of the problem with treating mental illness in juvenile detention is that the institutional care they’ve received hasn’t been effective for them before,” he said. “So rather than trying a different approach, we’re doing the same thing but calling it something different.”

Koch says decreases in the county budget have affected the sex offender treatment program, and increased reliance on community mental health providers. Many of the treatments offered by Juvenile Justice address underlying mental health issues, he said. A mental health coordinator also screens youth when they enter the system to determine their status.

He said, “It’s not good practice to have mentally ill youth in detention if they can be managed in the community safely.”