

Arrested development: Effort to reduce teens in jail

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In 2005, Ramsey County began planning a Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) and Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) strategy. This two-pronged approach to reforming juvenile corrections practices is based on a model developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, with additional assistance from the W. Hayward Burns Institute and is designed to address the escalating number of juveniles involved in corrections. It places special attention on the disproportionate number of juveniles involved in corrections.

“The purpose of the initiative is to increase public safety by reducing the number of low-risk youth offenders in our Juvenile Detention Center,” said Chris Crutchfield, Deputy Director of Community Relations and External Affairs for the Ramsey County Community Corrections Department. “Some children who are arrested do not need to be held in detention until they see a judge. They may be better off at home or in a detention alternative.”

Two main groups, or committees, head the JDAI/DMC efforts, with various subcommittees acting as support. The Stakeholder Group provides oversight. It sets policy objectives and keeps the effort moving in the right direction. The Steering Committee focuses on administration and operations.

According to Crutchfield, who chairs the JDAI communications sub-committee, JDAI in Ramsey County is a large partnership of juvenile justice system players and community stakeholders. System participants include Ramsey County, the city of Saint Paul, District Court, the public defender’s office, the county attorney’s office, St. Paul Public Schools, law enforcement agencies and elected officials. Working in partnership with community agencies, these offices and individuals are all trying to examine how certain children end up in detention and why there’s a disproportionate number of minority juveniles in the corrections system.

The roots of Ramsey County JDAI/DMC began with the state Disproportionate Minority Contact Coordinator Maurice Nins, Jr., who sought out the Casey Foundation and their nationwide JDAI and DMC programs as a way to impact and address racial disparity in the Minnesota juvenile justice system.

Nins said he wanted to directly impact the alarming growth and overuse of juvenile detention, especially among youth of color.

“I talked to the Casey foundation five years ago to find out if Minnesota “At that time HennepinCounty was the only jurisdiction in the state of Minnesota that was ready to go ahead with the JDAI. Next on board was Dakota CountyRamsey County.” would be a viable site for JDAI,” said Nins, who is part of the

Office of Justice Programs in the Minnesota Department of Public Safety and is staff to the Minnesota Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee which has a federal mandate to address racial disparities. and then The Casey Foundation granted Minnesota's JDAI program \$150,000 for all three counties.

"The Casey funds were leveraged by additional funds from the Minnesota Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (JJAC) and JDAI officially began three years ago in Ramsey County," Nins added.

Last summer, JDAI was awarded \$100,000 from the JJAC and an additional \$162,000 over a three-year period.

According to Crutchfield, starting in January of 2008, juveniles arrested in Ramsey County are now evaluated with a new Risk Assessment Instrument or RAI. The RAI is an objective screening tool to determine which juveniles must be detained, which are best served by going to detention alternatives (such as a shelter), and which could be released to their parent(s) or guardian(s). In order to do this, JDAI members had to examine the facts and determine the risks factors in an attempt to accurately determine the risk levels of youth who come into detention.

"What we really want is to have a juvenile justice system in Ramsey County that does two things," Crutchfield explained. "We want to increase public safety and we want to have the best outcomes possible for youth. Those two things can coincide."

Crutchfield explained that the first step was that all Ramsey County stakeholders had to agree on the purpose of detaining youth. Next, they agreed to develop and implement the RAI for determining whether a juvenile should be detained, released to their parents, or be sent to an appropriate alternative to detention.

"We are using objective criteria to separate which kids need to be detained, and which are better served in other ways," Crutchfield added.

All children arrested, regardless of race, get the same objective RAI evaluation. The RAI takes many things into consideration such as the severity of the juvenile's offense, whether the juvenile had any prior offenses, and the ability/likelihood of the juvenile to show up for court if released. If the juvenile scores high enough on the RAI, then that juvenile would be placed in detention; if the juvenile scores lower, then (depending on the score) the juvenile would either be sent to a detention alternative or be released to their parent(s) or guardian(s).

"We want to take children who are at low risk to re-offend and send them home or to alternative places than the Juvenile Detention Center. That will be a win-win situation."

Crutchfield said law enforcement has been a significant partner in this process. The RAI allows for police overrides. If the arresting police officer believes that detention is necessary no matter the RAI score, they may request that the youth be detained. As everyone has become more comfortable with the reliability of the RAI, however, there have been fewer requests for overrides, Crutchfield said.

“We are proud of the fact that this is a data-driven process. If you detain a low-risk child, you are ripping him out of his house, his neighborhood, his school, his job, and any positive sports or extra-curricular activities that he is involved with. The data suggest that you are actually adding more risk factors by detaining a youth. The low-risk, detained child is now more likely to re-offend. In other words, by detaining a low-risk child, you may be doing more damage than good to both the child and your efforts to increase public safety,” Crutchfield added.

Since January 2008, Ramsey County has seen an approximately 39% drop in juvenile detentions. As a result, Ramsey County has been able to close down a “pod” (living unit) at its Juvenile Detention Center. “In a world where corrections populations always seem to be increasing, this is very significant,” Crutchfield said.

According to Ramsey County Commissioner Toni Carter, JDAI will help Ramsey County provide more effective help for juveniles at risk of detention, and should also free up resources to be used for more appropriate alternatives. In this tough budget year when \$268,993 already from closing one detention unit has unfortunately been absorbed by 2009 reductions, Commissioner Carter emphasizes Ramsey County's commitment to continuing JDAI reforms, including prioritizing and expanding detention alternatives, a necessary prerequisite for JDAI and youth success.

“It makes good sense to move in this direction. It has not been a hard sell,” Commissioner Carter said. “We observe the number of juveniles getting into trouble and what that trouble means. Helping them stay out of trouble means a better life for them, safer schools and a healthier community overall. We want all our children to do well in school, graduate, and become productive citizens and contributors to our community.”

“JDAI has had a tremendous impact on the total number of kids coming through the system and it has impacted how the counties conduct business with communities and how they interact with other agencies within their own jurisdiction but not in terms of racial disparities,” Nins explained. “Our initial hope was that any successes that came from JDAI would then be able to result in reduction in racial disparity, and that has not happened yet. It has had very little impact.”

Nins admits that some sites, including Ramsey County, were behind by a year because of the method of implementing JDAI.

“Some sites did not start addressing DMC and racial disparities until this year and we are in our third year. They have just now begun to get their committees up and running and start looking at the data and trying to figure it out along the criminal justice system. We are eventually getting there but not yet.”

According to Melvin Carter, Jr., DMC first stood for disproportionate minority confinement not disproportionate minority contact. Carter is a former St. Paul police officer and now sits as a JDAI co-chair on the Steering Committee. He said when he first entered law enforcement he thought justice was going to eventually be color-blind.

“Since then I have found the system to be color coded in how it handles those of color,” Carter explained. “More specifically how the justice system deals with young Black men in the system.”

Carter says he has seen firsthand how the justice system works and now takes a more comprehensive approach to justice rather than having the attitude of “zero tolerance” or the “three strikes” mentality.

He said that the Annie E. Casey foundation brought the facts of what many African Americans have been saying about racism in the justice system to light. The Casey Foundation did the research and showed the hard facts about the racism in the justice system.

“Suddenly, those of us who hollered racism were validated. Nobody wanted to bring up racism before in the justice system but Casey Foundation found it to be true, whether intentional or not, validating what we knew all along,” Carter said. “Blacks are treated harshly all along the way of the justice system. Now data supports it with no argument and all arguments to the contrary are off the table. It was commonly believed kids coming from broken, abusive or drug ridden-homes were repeat offenders, but the research now proves that the main risk factor to juveniles is if they spend one single day in detention,” Carter said. “Secure Detention trumps all other factor all together as to whether the child commits another crime or not.”

“The question now is what to do with this data,” Carter said. “That is where alternative becomes an active word, an alternative to detention, an alternative to putting kids in cages. The missing component has been what alternatives are available. With the JDAI all those stakeholders can focus on developing alternatives rather than focusing on crime and punishment of kids.”

Sarah Walker, chief operating officer of 180 Degrees, a St. Paul-based community organization, said the idea is to provide services before youth get to detention. 180 degrees was established in 1971, focusing on services for those who are in transition from prison to the outside world. The organization also works to provide intervention and support for youth who are at-risk or currently involved with the justice system.

“If juveniles get referred to the justice system, we try to work on the underlying problems so that we can get them out ASAP,” said Walker, who is a member of JDAI Stakeholders group and co-chairs JDAI’s Disproportionate Minority Contact Committee. She began working with JDAI in 2005.

“We found most kids are not serious offenders. They are low-level offenders who were not appropriately served in their communities by people who know them best and cultural based. Either way the kids return to the communities with connections,” Walker explained. “Even the most serious offender kid has one positive person in their life. So we want to build on those connections rather than taking kids away.”

Walker emphasized that data showed more kids out of detention had no impact on crime. “Through the JDAI process we focused on data. This helped us understand that many of the youth held in detention were low level offenders who are most appropriately served in their communities with attention to culturally specific programming. The reality is that kids return to the communities. When a youth commits an offense, it is an opportunity for intervention; it is an opportunity to build on pro-social connections. When kids with low-level offenses are removed from communities, more harm is done than good by disrupting community connection.

“We have also found that racial disparities are greatest among youth who commit low-level offense. Prior to JDAI youth of color were more likely to be detained for low-level offenses than similarly situated youth not of color,” said Walker.

She added: “I strongly believe that all youth, even those youth with more serious offenses, have at least one positive connection. Our job is to find ways to build upon the positive, even when it is hard to find. Our job is to encourage more community connections.”

In recent history there have been trends to be more punitive under an argument of getting tough on crime. But research shows this overuse of punitive measures such as secure detention does not achieve the goal of changing a young person’s behavior. In fact detention can have a negative effect where after detention the person commits more offenses and more serious offenses than prior to detention. That is why we must be smart on crime and provide appropriate effective interventions in the community.

“It could be the fact that youth of color are committing more serious crimes and need to be detained. It could mean we need specific intervention to address those causes or reasons why those kids are committing those offenses. So we are in the process of doing that,” Walker said.

According to Walker, the DMC wants to make sure to have community engagement and people who know the kids help come up with solutions and keep policy changes that reduce the numbers.

Nins said many counties need a breakthrough in courage, leadership and will, and they need to begin the process at particular decision points in the system.

“Courage, leadership and a willingness to tackle the issue. If you don’t have leadership and courage to talk about this, then you just sit around the table and do nothing,” Nins said. “Nothing has been done in the past. In order to impact this you need real leadership and courage to take this on and take the lead.”

According to Nins, in 2009 JDAI in Ramsey County should be institutionalized rather than just exist as a project on the side of the way they do business. “We hope JDAI becomes business as usual and then we should begin to see decreases in juveniles that need to be in detention or further,” Nins said.

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