

## Experiment yields drop in juvenile detention

JEAN HOPFENSBERGER, Star Tribune

An experiment designed to divert teens -- especially teens of color -- from the juvenile justice system has produced a dramatic decline in detention use, with Ramsey County reporting a 57 percent drop since 2005 and Hennepin and Dakota counties reporting 33 percent.

The Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative is based on research showing that most young offenders don't need to be jailed to get them to show up in court or keep the streets safe, organizers said. That's especially true for lower-risk offenders who enter detention because of truancy, curfew violations and fifth-degree assault.

The three metro counties are part of an experiment taking place across the nation, in which dozens of communities are purposefully choosing to offer teens "alternatives" to jail and are closely monitoring the results.

"In jail, I didn't think of anything but getting out," said 15-year-old Kenny, who is attending a five-day-a-week "learning center" in lieu of another stint in detention for truancy and assault. "Time goes so slow, and it's the same thing every day.

"Out here, I have more opportunity to grow [as a person]."

The notion of letting more young offenders stay on the streets can make some people uneasy, project leaders acknowledged. But three years into the initiative, counties report no increase in court no-shows, in crimes committed while awaiting a court hearing, or beyond, they said.

"Kids need to be held accountable and need services, but why is jail such an integral part of that?" asked Michael Belton, deputy director of juvenile corrections in Ramsey County. "If they're a public safety or flight risk, sure. But it short-circuits our thinking [on how to rehabilitate them] and cuts off our creativity."

Kenny, for example, is among those attending two new learning centers for teen offenders that Ramsey County opened this summer. Last week, he relaxed in a conference room at the Cultural Wellness Center in St. Paul, a center decorated with colorful African wall hangings, masks and paintings. The decor reflects efforts to instill self-worth among the disproportionate number of black youths in juvenile justice.

The session started with the teens repeating affirmations such as "I am 100 percent responsible for myself." Then the facilitator for the day, Michael Steward from the St. Paul YWCA, launched into an hour-long session loosely called "Pay Now, Play Later -- or Play Now, Pay Later." Steward challenged the boys to find their inner strengths during a session that covered everything from job interview techniques to the importance of education. After the discussion, the group went to dinner, followed by some job-hunting help on a computer.

"I like how they're so helpful to you," said DeMarco, another 15-year-old in the group. "They don't force it on you. You ease into it."

The counties launched their experiments in 2006, following a model that's been promoted nationwide by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Instead of routinely sending young offenders into detention after they're apprehended, they use a new "risk-assessment tool" that rates offenders based on their risk to society and chances of showing up for court, explained Peter Jessen-Howard, co-coordinator of the initiative in Ramsey County.

With a rating of zero to nine, the teen gets to go home. A rating of 10 to 15 means he is not sent to detention, but is ordered to participate in an "alternative." That could range from house arrest to community-based services to day-treatment programs.

Those scoring 15 and above are sent to detention. Their numbers are relatively few.

Ramsey County, for example, reported that the average daily population in its juvenile detention facility dropped from 89 in 2005 to 50 in 2008.

Hennepin County reported a drop from 95 to 64 during the same period. Dakota County's numbers fell from 33 to 19.

But the change is more than just numbers, said Ramsey County Commissioner Tony Carter. It's a whole new way for communities to look at the role of juvenile detention.

"At the beginning, one of the hardest things was to agree on the purpose of detention," Carter recalled. "It's not just to house people, it's to keep people who might commit another offense or who might not show up in court."

For folks such as Melvin Carter, a former St. Paul police officer who long has worked with at-risk teens, the detention alternatives are needed for boys of color in particular.

"We used to think that a boy who came from poverty, a broken home, had been in a gang or used a weapon -- that they were most likely to be the repeat offenders," Carter said. "But if you peel back the onion, the biggest single factor is whether they spent one day in jail."

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