



Disproportionate Minority Contact in the Juvenile Justice System

INTRODUCTION

Each year, thousands of minority youth are arrested in the United States. Some will be released to caregivers, others will spend time in a detention facility, and still others will participate in a detention diversion program. Though many studies consistently find racial disparities in juvenile justice processing, challenges remain in identifying effective ways of reducing minority over-representation in this system and in addressing the needs of minority youth.

“It’s so easy just to get into the system, but it’s so hard to get out.”

METHODS

In the Summer of 2008, a series of focus groups was conducted by the Dept. of Juvenile Justice Services in Clark County, Nevada. They were convened as part of the Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) work plan for the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Initially, the goal was to gain insight into the disproportionately high number of Hispanic youths with Bench Warrants, but the perspective widened to include the issues that minority youth confront in their daily lives and to identify factors contributing to their over-representation in the justice system. Multiple sessions were conducted with both youths and adults representing the racial diversity of Clark County. While some groups included system professionals, others included youths and families of youths who were being detained in the Juvenile Detention Center. Findings revealed major themes, and perspectives from the sessions have been incorporated into many of the efforts undertaken in the last year.

“This is what happens to kids in my neighborhood.”

KEY FINDINGS

- Multiple factors contribute to entry into the juvenile justice system.
- Youth perspectives reflect gendered role expectations: males emphasize the need to appear tough, while females focus more on issues related to unstable home environments.
- Issues of race pervade the lives of Youth of Color and manifest across multiple social settings.
- These young people question their futures.

“I got a lot of things I want to do with my future, but it just seems like nobody wants me to do anything good.”



“Voices of Our Youth”

Sharing knowledge and accelerating progress in the reduction of racial and ethnic disparities in the juvenile justice system

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

- Growing up in low-income, high-crime neighborhoods
- Too much unsupervised time
- Pressure to fit in and win the respect of peers
- Few positive adult role models
- Distrustful and disrespectful relationships with adult authority figures
- Few culturally-diverse extracurricular activities in school
- Inaccessible, unaffordable community resources
- Intimidating and confusing legal system



FACTORS UNIQUE TO MALES

- Disconnection between actions and punishment, ineffective deterrents: *“Bein’ locked-up ain’t really nothin’. You get used to it.”*
- Importance of being tougher and more fearless than the next guy:

“I was scared, but I didn’t run. Everybody else ran, but when the police came, I walked.”

- Little guidance or discipline from respected adult males: *“If I would’ve had somebody to look up to, maybe I wouldn’t have done this.”*

FACTORS UNIQUE TO FEMALES

- Volatile, unsupportive and unstable home life with neglect, abuse, and violence common: *“I felt I could do better on my own.”*
- Unplanned pregnancy: *“They judge you for things you’ve done, without even knowing you.”*
- Alienation and isolation: *“We don’t have that loud a voice, so it’s rare that we find someone who wants to help us.”*
- Low expectations from caregivers, and very few advocates: *“You have people that care about you, and people that don’t care, and people that want to see you fail, and people that want to see you succeed.”*



RACE PERVADES DAILY LIFE

- Different treatment for Youth of Color and White youth in school, court, and the community
- Over-diagnosed, labeled, and medicated
- Targeted for punishment
- Judged by perceived “nature” rather than social circumstances
- Little empathy or understanding from authorities



“My neighborhood’s just bad. If you grow up in that environment, you gonna be bad, too.”

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

If nothing is done to address the issue, the answer is obvious:

- Same old troubles
- Poverty
- Stigma
- New offenses
- Individualized successes and failures

“When we get out of here, what’re we gonna do besides go back to the same old stuff we used to do? I mean, some people, they might change. Some people, I think, are less fortunate – they might not change.”

SUMMARY

These youths remind us that their troubles reflect the collective problems of a larger community, and improving the lives of minority youths requires a genuine community response and an enduring commitment. Through partnerships with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, and the W. Haywood Burns Institute for Juvenile Justice Equity, Clark County has invested substantial time, effort, and funds toward creating a comprehensive, DMC-centered change initiative to coincide with the strides we have made in reforming our juvenile justice system. The system now emphasizes the importance of providing essential services within and with the support of the community to ensure the best life outcomes for all youths in Clark County.

“For something good to happen, the community needs to start coming together for us.”



What can Clark County do?

1. Foster collaborative efforts to raise awareness of DMC in the juvenile justice system.
2. Organize and implement advisory workgroups that work to reduce (consistent with public safety) the disproportionate percentage of minority youth referred to and served by the juvenile justice system.
3. Develop and implement evidence-based delinquency prevention and intervention programs that are culturally competent and address the needs of both the community and youth.
4. Foster positive relationships between families and local law enforcement officials, juvenile justice practitioners, educators and other entities serving youth.

What Can the Community Do?

1. Develop, promote, and support community-based diversion programs in order to reduce the number of youth committed to detention and correctional facilities.
2. Volunteer as mentors and role models for minority youth.
3. Provide educational resources for youth who have been suspended or expelled from school.
4. Provide resources that encourage and ensure the academic success of minority youth.

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Background

Perhaps the most heated debate in juvenile justice is the reality of Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC). This elevated contact further generates disproportionate confinement in detention centers, training schools, and correctional facilities for both racial and ethnic minorities.

Several causes for this phenomena have been proffered, each likely holding some portion of the true causes. Identifying the causes generates passionate debate, but does little to foster any positive resolution.

The facts are:

- Minority youth are overrepresented at all levels of the juvenile justice system.
- While, statistically, minority youth do commit more serious offenses, this does not fully explain the disproportionate levels of detention and incarceration rates.
- Economic, family and community forces play as much of a role in disproportionate rates of arrest and incarceration for racial and ethnic minorities as do the decisions of officials at each level of the juvenile justice system.

The time is here to bring all of these positions to the table, to work to ensure the juvenile justice system is fair and equal for all youth, and to seek meaningful solutions to the issue.

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