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Norfolk meeting explores racial gap in juvenile justice

NORFOLK

Sometimes it's the little things that can contribute to a disproportionately higher number of black children in the juvenile justice system, experts told some 300 people attending a town hall meeting Saturday.

Bias may be unintentional. Small changes can make a difference. By asking more questions, maybe a grandparent or aunt can be found to supervise a child, when detention would be required otherwise because the single parent must work.

And by probing deeper, authorities can see what kinds of crimes are snaring children - is it murder? contempt of court? - and perhaps do something about it.

"Even if it's not hundreds of kids, every child in detention is a problem," said Clinton Lacey, a staff member of the W. Haywood Burns Institute of San Francisco, which works to reduce racial disparities in juvenile justice. "Your kid in a cage is a problem."

Old Dominion University's Institute for Community Justice and the city of Norfolk sponsored the Saturday morning meeting, held at ODU before a standing-room-only crowd of court officials, lawyers, educators, students and others. It was prompted by statistics showing that four times as many black children as white go into Norfolk's juvenile justice system, while black residents make up less than one-half of the city's population.

Panel members said most studies show that a statistical bias does exist against minority children, as well as those from foster or group homes, when it comes to referring children to the juvenile justice system - even with first-time offenders.

Some of it is based on stereotypes. But sometimes it's how the system is set up, said Shay Bilchik, founder and director of the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University. Poor parents are less able to leave work and pick up children immediately when summoned, so the children might be detained.

Location also can make a difference, he said: Misbehavior at an urban school staffed with police officers might lead to an arrest, while a suburban school might be more likely to handle it in-house with a suspension.

Important, Bilchik said, is recognizing the potential for bias at every "decision point" in the system, from initial referral to detention before trial to punishment. He and others said data should be analyzed and

shared with other justice, child-welfare and other agencies, and used instead of "gut feelings" to establish policies.

More objective assessment tools, such as forms, also could help, said Shauna Epps, of the Center for Children's Law and Policy in Washington.

"So you don't look at someone, the color of their skin, the way they wear their clothes, how they respond to you" when deciding what to do with them, she said.

Norfolk has a committee that meets monthly on the issue, with help from the Haywood Burns Institute. The city has used data to reduce the number and length of juvenile detentions, Lacey said. But others must get involved, he said.

"If we say the system is being overused," he said, "... the question is: 'Who's going to be in the community for them?'"

Bilchik said that too often society counts on the "resilience of our youth" to weather the institutional odds stacked against them.

"We need to be accountable for the basics for our young people," he said. "We need to make sure that we are reaching out to every one of them, grabbing them by the hand, and lifting them to a better and safer life."

Afterward, two ODU students said they came away with the importance of giving young people positive direction.

"Being able to have a college education, I always felt it is our responsibility to promote that to other minorities," said LaKeith Sutton, a sophomore from Washington who's black. "I think people underestimate how important a mentor is."

Overrepresentation of minorities in the justice system is "everybody's issue," said Chantal Matthews, a junior from Portsmouth who also is black. "It's not just a black issue or whatever. It's everybody's issue. It's a societal problem."

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