

When 'off the streets' isn't good enough

By **PATRICK LEE**, Star Tribune

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One parent in Dakota County told authorities she preferred juvenile detention over home monitoring for her delinquent son because "His temper, it was real bad. I wanted him to sit and think about it."

Too often, experts say, detention is used as an all-purpose response to questionable juvenile behavior, for kids estranged from parents to those who cause a commotion at school. Last month, Dakota County launched an initiative to ensure the right kids are detained for the right reasons, with similar reforms to follow in Hennepin and Ramsey counties.

A 2007 study of Dakota County discovered that, although black youths account for only 3 percent of the youth population, they make up 29 percent of the youths in detention. By providing alternative, community-based or in-home detention options, the county aims to reduce the number of detained juveniles and chip away at racial disparities.

Detention is overused and overrated, said Gail Mumford, senior associate with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a nonprofit advocacy group based in Baltimore. The foundation works to implement what is known as the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative nationwide.

"Detention is to hold and detain," she said. "One of the things we try to get away from is ... detention being like a Wal-Mart, or Super-Wal-Mart," a one-size-fits-all approach to juvenile issues.

Angelique Kedem, a state-level coordinator for juvenile justice reform, said most people misjudge the effectiveness of detention as punishment.

"Placing a youth in detention is not beneficial. It's harmful to the youth, and it's also harmful to public safety when you have a youth who hasn't committed a serious crime being placed in an environment with very high-risk offenders," she said. "The public doesn't yet understand that detention in and of itself ... doesn't work."

Racial imbalance

But Minnesota's primary motivation to support reform stems from concerns about the racial disparities evident in juvenile detention centers, especially involving black youth. The county's juvenile detention reforms have made available alternatives to detention, such as foster care or electronic home monitoring, and have produced a new screening tool to place juveniles appropriately. The tool recommends detention, an alternative option or even the release of the individual based on public

safety threat and flight risk, or the likelihood the delinquent will skip out on a court hearing.

"In the past, without a valid screening tool and not having detention options in place, I think that definitely impacted children of color and all youth coming into our facility," said Al Godfrey, Dakota County's deputy director of community corrections. "If we're able to ... remove low-risk kids out of our facility ... that will definitely make an impact."

In 2004, Maurice Nins, a senior planner with the state's Office of Justice Programs, started promoting juvenile justice reform to counties in Minnesota as an effective way to address the race issue and correct for overuse of detention. Hennepin County signed on immediately, followed in 2005 by Dakota and then Ramsey County.

But Nins conceded that although the track record of judicial reform sites across the country, from counties in Massachusetts to others in California, is promising, it indicates no success in significantly reducing racial imbalance.

"It's been very effective at reducing the total numbers of juveniles in the system, but it hasn't really had an impact on [racial disparity], and we're really focused on that here in Minnesota," Nins said. "Despite the fact that we have these counties on board, there are many folks in leadership positions that aren't totally bought into ... trying to unravel and get to the bottom of why the disproportionality is occurring."

Cost of detention

One of the main reasons Minnesota's three largest counties agreed to participate in the state's juvenile justice reform initiatives was that their juvenile detention centers were at or near capacity. Given the 40 juvenile beds Dakota County has available, Godfrey said the numbers alone would have convinced him of the need for reform. The average daily cost to keep a juvenile in secure confinement is about \$200, whereas various forms of home monitoring cost about \$9 a day and nonsecure shelter housing ranges up to \$150 a day.

Since 2005, when Dakota County first began planning these changes, juvenile crime has decreased, which mirrors a decrease in the number of kids in detention. "This is actually an evolving process. We're constantly looking at our system to see if we can do things better, and making sure that we have community-based options for kids," he said.

Since Dakota County implemented the changes in late May, Godfrey estimates that about 50 percent of juveniles screened have been given alternative detention options. The county screens 15 to 25 each month. Nins said the main challenge facing Dakota County will be to continue expanding on its available alternatives: home-monitoring, shelter and foster care.

"Detention has been the only game in town," Nins said. "Most folks don't know ... the extent to which detention is harmful to kids."

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