

## **The Virginian-Pilot**

**January 24, 2009**

### **A criminal disparity between black and white youth**

**By: Roger Chesley**

LOTS OF BLACK and brown teenagers in Norfolk — and throughout the nation — have contact with the juvenile justice system in numbers disproportionately higher than that for whites. Is that a sign of racial bias? Or are African-American and Hispanic teens simply more violent?

Those provocative questions are at the heart of a town hall meeting at 9:30 a.m. today at Old Dominion University, featuring experts from around the country and officials here in Virginia. Speakers will describe ways to reduce the disparity while keeping communities safe; the roles that police, prosecutors and judges play; and the need for partnerships among the criminal justice system, families, schools and others.

“I think most national studies have said there might be a limited disparity in the offense rates between blacks and whites. That in no way accounts for their disparity in the juvenile justice system,” Shay Bilchik, founder and director of the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University, told me Thursday. Bilchik, a former Miami prosecutor and former official in the U.S. Department of Justice, is today’s keynote speaker.

Officials tackling this issue make clear that violent offenders — charged with carjackings, robberies or even homicides — should be kept off the streets. They add, however, that many teens might be able to avoid detention for minor violations. That could prevent juveniles from spiraling deeper into a life of crime.

More broadly, easing the disparity in Norfolk and other localities could have benefits throughout the region. Hampton Roads has witnessed high-profile violence against teenagers and young adults in the past two years, including the shooting deaths of several local football players and the gang-related stomping death of a 19-year-old man in East Ocean View. True, most of those suspects in those crimes would be locked up.

The problem comes when African-American and Latino youths are kept in juvenile centers for minor incidents — fights, misdemeanors and the like — while their white counterparts are set free. That leads to distrust in the system and less cooperation with police and prosecutors, because African Americans and Latinos — and their families — believe they’re not getting a fair shake.

Bilchik cited crime statistics from FY 2007 as an example that, yes, blacks are charged more often for

all types of offenses. But at succeeding “points” in the process, the disparity compared with whites goes up even further.

Of the entire population of youths ages 10 to 17 in Norfolk that year, blacks represented 53 percent and whites 39 percent. At intake into the criminal system, 78 percent of the youths cited were black, 18 percent were white. By the time cases were transferred to criminal prosecution, Bilchik said, 93 percent were black and only 5 percent white.

The city of Norfolk has already taken strides to keep low-risk juvenile suspects from being held by authorities, said Norfolk Circuit Judge Jerrauld C. Jones. He’s the former state delegate who helped write legislation in the 1990s that reformed the state’s juvenile justice system.

With the help of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Jones said, the city has started a “juvenile detention alternative initiative.” Through it, officials have reduced the number of teens in juvenile detention and reduced the length of stay. The Norfolk Juvenile Detention Center, which in years past often had as many as 110 youths, now often is in the 40s on an average day, Jones said.

Clinton Lacey is a site manager with the W. Haywood Burns Institute in San Francisco, which advocates for minority and poor youths. He has worked with Norfolk officials in recent years on juvenile justice issues. One improvement, he notes, is that the criminal justice system here has done a better job of contacting families to make sure teenagers show up for court.

“It’s a number of relatively minor things that you can do to impact 10, 12, 20 kids,” he said. “Those are significant numbers.”

They’re also worth the upgraded efforts to turn young people away from crime and violence.