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Summit offers hope for teen minorities

(<http://www.post-trib.com/news/opinion/1724253,edit-summit-08xx.article>)

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The Indiana State Bar Association is hosting "Summit on Racial Disparities in the Juvenile Justice System" on Aug. 27. While summits come and go and often have little impact, this one could be special.

Organizers and participants know there are too many minorities in the juvenile justice system. They want to find out why and reduce those numbers in the future. The areas of focus are child welfare, juvenile justice, education and mental health systems.

Lake Circuit Judge Lorenzo Arredondo, Lake Juvenile Court Judge Mary Beth Bonaventura and Hammond Police Chief Brian Miller are three key participants in the statewide effort.

Indiana created the Commission on Disproportionality in Youth Services two years ago, after the state ranked near the bottom nationally in criteria dealing with troubled minority youths.

There are more minorities in the juvenile justice system because there is a greater incidence of crime in poor neighborhoods in urban areas. Summit participants knew that going in.

They intend to find ways to reverse the trend. Too often, when a teen is expelled or suspended, the school has washed its hands of a problem. That teen then often becomes law enforcement's problem. And if the youngster is arrested, he or she becomes the problem of the juvenile detention system and then the courts. Ultimately, the individual may end up incarcerated. A host of people passed the buck.

The chain has to end, participants have said. Shortly after the Aug. 27 summit, the nationally recognized Annie E. Casey Foundation will fund research to help the area to stop the revolving door on juvenile justice. It's an exciting new approach to an old problem. Troubled teens will be the winners.

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