

The Commission on Disproportionality in Youth Services has recently begun a 10 month effort to improve the way minority children are treated in child caring systems in Indiana. This commission has been charged by the Indiana General Assembly to develop a plan to evaluate and address disproportionality in four areas, one of which is juvenile justice.

Why? Because juvenile justice—like the other study areas, education, mental health and child welfare—is an area where children of color are often disproportionately represented in outcomes that are frequently harsher than experienced by other children. Disproportionality is a term that refers to the difference in the percentage of certain racial or ethnic group in the general population compared to the percentage of that same group receiving various children services.

The hallmark of our system of justice is impartiality and fairness. We hold these same precepts as true for those of our children who experience trouble with the law. Yet a growing body of data in every state, and in Indiana, indicates that children of color are treated differently and are afforded much less access to needed services and programs than what white children experience. For children of color who come in contact with the juvenile justice system, harsh or punitive outcomes, such as higher rates of arrest or being held in secured settings, happen more often than for other children. Here are some examples of what the commission is learning:

- Data indicates that African American youth are 3 times as likely White youth to get arrested.¹
- African-American youth are referred to juvenile court at twice the rate of Caucasian youth.
- Of all juvenile arrests for violent crimes, 55 percent involved Caucasian youth and 42 percent involved African-American youth. Following arrest, however, African Americans are detained eight times more often than their Caucasian counterparts.²
- While African-American youth represent approximately 10 percent of the juvenile population in Indiana, 39 percent of the youth confined in Indiana correctional facilities are African-Americans.
- Black youth are incarcerated five times the rate of their white counterparts for equal offenses, and are likewise underrepresented in diversion or probation programs.

The consequences of harsh treatment on a young person's life are not minor. Even a small period of time out of school while in detention, or longer periods removed from family and community in a secured correctional facility, can be the difference in whether a youth is able to successfully meet challenges in addressing behaviors that ultimately resulted in his or her having contact with the juvenile justice system in the first place. Disruptions in schooling; punitive responses directed toward behaviors that are better addressed by providing behavioral services or supports; extended peer contact with other youth that have troubled pasts; stigma and a growing, adverse record of juvenile sanctions that make adult criminal sanctions more likely--can ultimately affect whether youth of color can make the transition from adolescence to adulthood, with the life skills and education he or she needs to be productive, successful adults.

To address these issues, the committee is focusing its attention on several factors, trying to understand the policies and practices that underlie decision-making that may ultimately disadvantage a youth of color in the juvenile justice system. Such matters as how minority youth enter the juvenile justice system and the available alternatives to arrest, detention and confinement--are areas under review. Cultural sensitivity training, professional practice standards, legislative changes in policy at both the local and state level, and improvements in data collection are also critical to the discussion. We welcome hearing your thoughts about disproportionality as we move forward with the commission's work. Please refer to the commission's web site for the latest available information about our efforts, at <http://socialwork.iu.edu/site/indexer/1598/content.htm>

¹ Fanton, Jonathan, "Towards a Juvenile Justice System that is Effective and Fair"

http://www.macfound.org/site/c.iKlXJ8MOKrH/b.1142281/apps/nl/content3.asp?content_id=%7BCC3F891E-5EF2-4138-89F7-0F0BF3001EBE%7D¬oc=1, accessed June 2, 2008.

² National Stats: Building Blocks for Youth (2005). Resources for disproportionate minority confinement/overrepresentation of youth of color http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org/issues/dmc/facts_yoc.html