



CYA charges return to their barracks at the Ben Lomond Youth Conservation Camp after a full day of work.

UNDER FIRE

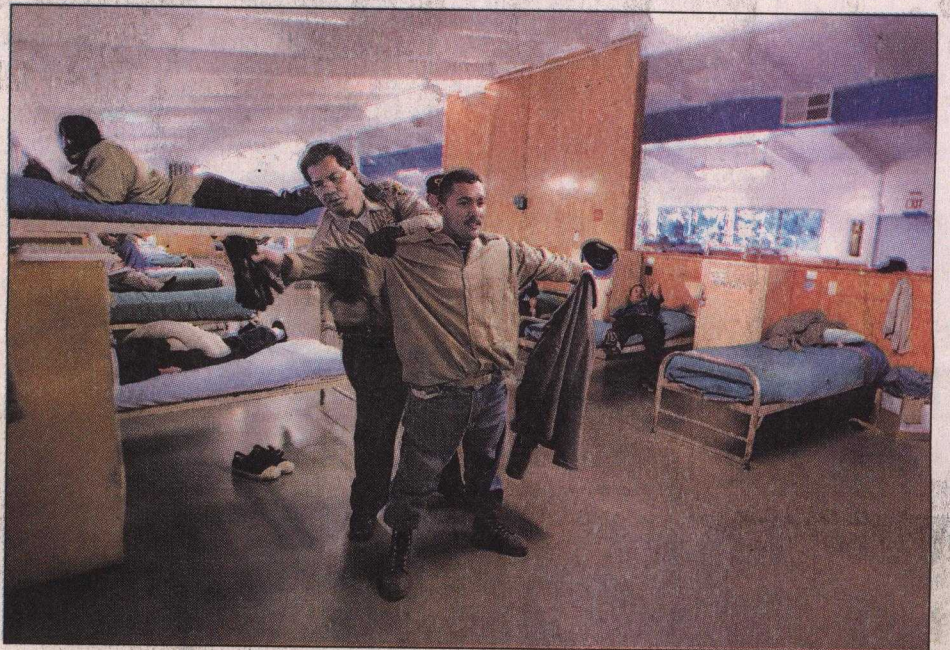
Juvenile Delinquency
Youth camp endures
amid incarceration
reports, budget woes

On any weekday, the Ben Lomond Youth Conservation Camp — a detention facility for some of the state's most serious juvenile offenders — is deserted. Save for a few young men sweeping the floors and scrubbing the sinks, the barracks — a spotless dorm room with rows of neatly made beds and an overpowering smell of disinfectant — will stand empty until late afternoon when 57 men come "home" after a long day of community service.

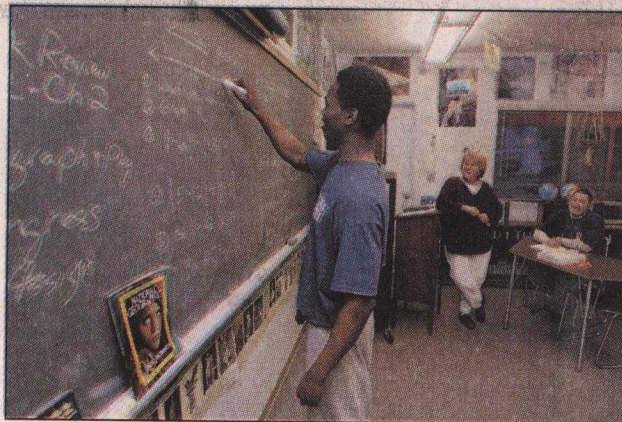
The men, ages 18 to 25, are here as a result of committing a variety of crimes from petty theft to carjacking to murder. Most have already spent time in and out of detention programs ranging from juvenile hall to adult jails.

But in the eyes of the law, all have demonstrated they're on the road to recovery and worthy of the

See **CAMP** on **PAGE A22**



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TOP: A ward is searched in the bunk house after returning from a day's work in the community.



LEFT: CYA ward Demetrios Potter charts the right answer during evening classes with teacher Ann Schenk.

Felton man recounts abuse at Stockton detention facilities

An extensive and highly publicized statewide critique of the California Youth Authority is lending credence to comments from former CYA inmates like Felton resident Chris Perro.

Perro, 23, said he experienced the horrors of the youth authority firsthand during the four years he was locked up at two different institu-

tions in Stockton.

The recent report from the attorney general's office evaluated the state's 10 youth detention facilities, not including fire camps, and reported widespread abuse and harsh treatment of juveniles and a lack of rehabilitation services.

"I've been hit with every kind of gas you can imagine," Perro said in

a recent interview. "My last couple of years I was in a '23 and one,' five bricks wide and 15 bricks long."

A "23 and one" means being locked in a tiny cell for all but one hour of the day, he said.

Perro, who was released in 2002, said he also spent six months in solitary confinement as punishment for his participation in a riot.

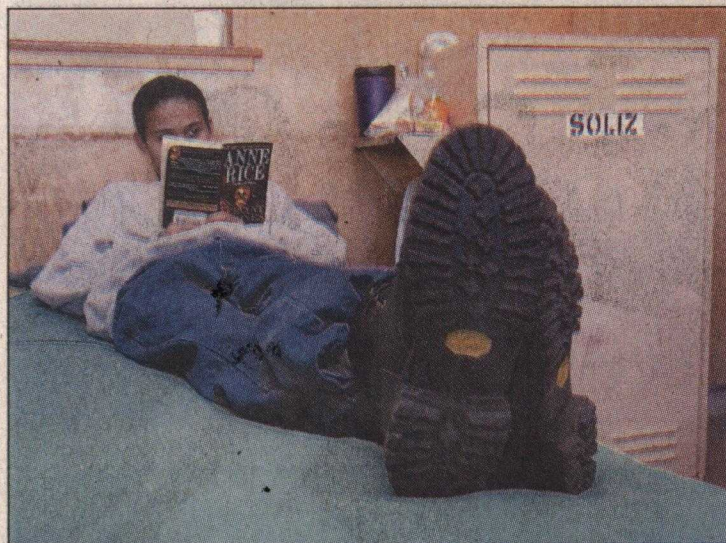
"They don't give you nothing in there. They pretty much strip you down to your boxers and feed you, just locked in a cage, they cover your windows so you can't see outside. You're just there."

CYA administrators have acknowledged that the system needs reform

See **REPORT** on **PAGE A23**

Stories BY ROSY WEISER
Sentinel correspondent

Photos BY DAN COYRO
Sentinel photographer



CYA ward Ramon Soliz delves into his book.

Camp

Continued from Page A15

"privilege" of coming to a fire camp to serve the final part of their sentences, said Rudy Luna, superintendent of the Ben Lomond Youth Conservation Camp.

"We are not a custodial camp. We don't just take care of (the wards') needs. We get involved. We spend a lot of time with these young men and we do care about their well-being," Luna said.

As a 27-year veteran of the California Youth Authority, Luna has good reason to be defensive. His employing organization, which runs 10 high-security institutions in addition to six fire camps, has been under intense scrutiny recently as reports continue to emerge revealing a system in which inmates are routinely subject to harsh treatment, including being locked in solitary confinement cages and sprayed with chemical agents.

And while the CYA contends the fire camps were not part of the state-sanctioned review, Luna and others worry the Ben Lomond camp may suffer negative consequences as the popularity and viability of the CYA model of incarceration takes a nose dive.

There has even been talk of shutting down the Ben Lomond fire camp.

"I'm watching closely just to make sure there's not a negative backwash that would lead to a closure of that facility, but it is a fluid situation," said state Assemblyman John Laird, D-Santa Cruz, adding that he would "work hard" to keep the camp open.

Many of the juveniles here agree that the camp has been integral to their personal development.

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JOHN LAIRD, D-SANTA CRUZ

On a clear day, the ocean glittering through the camp's wooded scenery, a handful of fit young men, tattoos creeping out of their collared work shirts, were on a break from kitchen duty to do "military." A series of push-ups, arm rotations and jumping jacks is part of a program that has seen some wards rise through the ranks of the military while serving time, usually between two months and two years in Ben Lomond.

Arius Hall, 18, who, after more than three years in various institutions, is nearing the end of a 9-year sentence for carjacking, said it's programs like this that have helped time go by faster for him.

"There's nothing to dislike here. This is one of the best programs to get into while incarcerated."

Ryan Mons, 19, due to be released next spring after serving

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RUDY LUNA, CAMP SUPERINTENDENT

two years for dealing marijuana, agreed. "When you come through the CYA system, fire camp is where you want to be," he said. "It's half-way freedom."

Mons is one of only three Caucasians in what administrators describe as a racially-charged system. But because of the way the Ben Lomond camp is structured, everyone manages to get along, Mons said.

"When we're out there on the fire, we depend on each other. We may not be friends but we learn to cope," he explained.

A record of success

The 200-acre Ben Lomond camp, established in 1947, is jointly operated by the California Youth Authority and the California Department of Forestry. It has an operating budget of \$2.5 million and a staff of 43.

After an intensive five-month training in fire suppression tactics, inmates are placed on fire crews and bussed into the community to work on projects ranging from fighting fires to road maintenance to bagging food for the homeless.

Luna is quick to point out there have been no suicide attempts in the camp's history and no violent incidents for more than three years, a considerable success for a detention camp. There are no cages, no mental health drugs are administered to wards, and disciplinary action usually involves nothing more than a retraction of privileges, such as not being able to participate on the fire crew or in recreational activities.

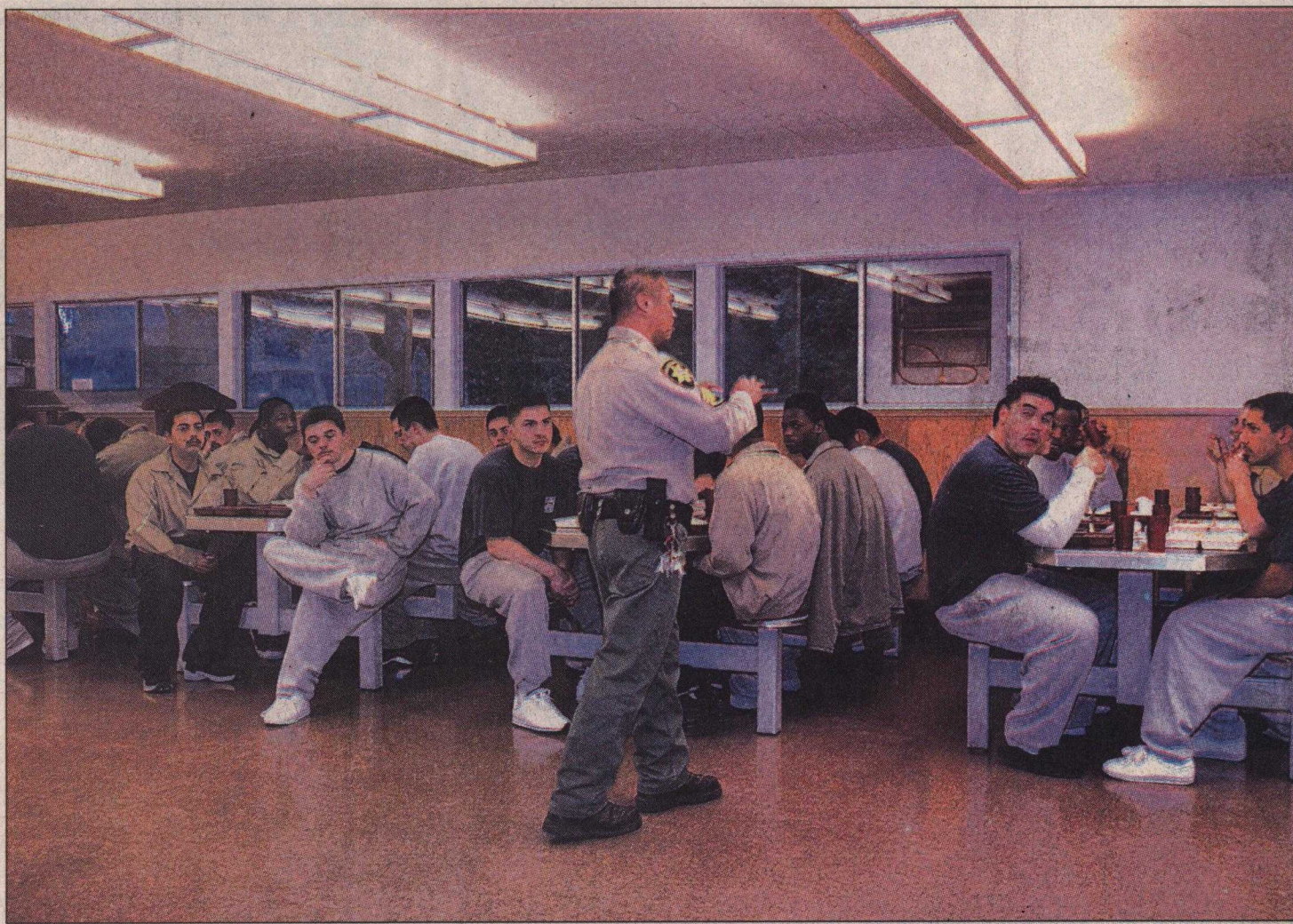
"It's a totally different environment (here), it's more therapeutic. Everyone here is involved in the treatment process," Luna said.

But should a ward repeatedly violate the camp's strict code of conduct or display violent behavior, he is transferred to one of the higher security institutions, Luna said, adding that the CYA's harshest treatment measures are sometimes necessary.

"In the institutions, there's a lot of violence and they're not just trying to fight, they're really trying to hurt each other and sometimes there's a need to isolate them."

With two-thirds of CYA wards having "strong gang affiliations," and a racial population that is almost 50 percent Latino, 30 percent African American and 20 percent Caucasian, racial tensions at facilities are high, according to CYA spokesman George Kostyrko.

See CAMP on PAGE A23



Wards listen to Senior Youth Correctional Officer Benny Sirwet during dinner.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos



Rocky, the bunk house dog, gets some attention from CYA ward Oscar Tijero.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Camp

Continued from Page A22

"Gang problems are the single biggest reason we cannot deliver services," he said.

But while the racial breakdown at the Ben Lomond Camp is in line with the rest of the CYA, Luna described his camp as "neutral ground" that doesn't experience much friction, both because wards here are "more motivated and interested to learn" and because they are constantly kept occupied.

From the minute they wake up at 6 a.m. to "lights out" around 11 p.m., wards are busy. As well as working on the fire crews, they attend on-site high school classes and a host of mandated workshops including victim's awareness, anger management, gang awareness, drug and parenting programs.

An astounding 95 percent of

wards obtain a high school diploma while at the camp; the recidivism rate is 30 percent, 20 percent lower than the CYA average; and at least five graduates have recently been recruited by the California Department of Forestry, according to fire captain Jose Ruiz.

"I think if you keep them entertained and focused, they do really well," Ruiz said. "I can turn around the mentality of an 18-year-old. I will get to them eventually, if you lead by example, build their self-esteem and give them structure and discipline."

An uncertain future

But despite success stories like the ones shared by staff and wards at the Ben Lomond Youth Conservation Camp, there is no doubt the youth authority is in crisis.

Last week, Santa Cruz County became one of several California counties to declare a moratorium on sending young crimi-

nals to the CYA. Lawmakers continue to denounce the recent findings of abuse, some even going so far as to say the system is beyond reform and should be shut down entirely.

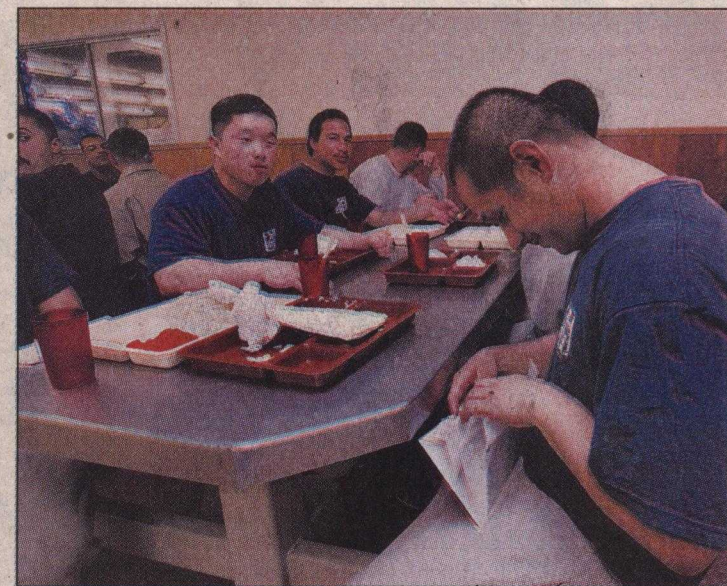
Even before the recent reports, the CYA, which shuttered one facility last year and has slated an additional institution and two camps for closure in June, was experiencing a sharp dip in enrollment. The Ben Lomond camp hasn't reached its capacity of 85 for at least two years; these days the average number of wards hovers around 60, Luna said.

Declining numbers can be attributed to a combination of factors, which include unprecedented budget cuts, according to CYA spokesman Kostyrko. It costs about \$60,000 to house a ward in a CYA institution and \$35,000 in a camp.

Other reasons for the decline in the number of juveniles are a drastic drop in juvenile crime and the

fact that fewer judges are referring offenders to the youth authority in favor of more localized, less restrictive methods of rehabilitation, according to Kostyrko.

"It's increasingly difficult to find appropriate wards to place in the camp environment — wards who do not pose a threat to the community," said Kostyrko. "The reality is we have



CYA ward Jose Ojeda sneaks a peek during dinner at the letters from home he received.

enough vacancies to close two camps, we're short like 150 beds."

But despite rumors of a Ben Lomond closure, circulating among camp staff, neighbors, wards and the media since last year, Kostyrko insists the local camp has not yet been targeted for closing.

Assemblyman Laird agreed the Ben Lomond camp was on shaky ground, considering the broad-based review of the CYA combined with the current budget climate, and said a closure of the facility would be a loss.

"It's just an important place in the continuum of state fire services, and it's something I would hope would remain in the area," he said.

In fact, the camp provides fire suppression services for seven counties statewide; that amounts to 12,000 hours of fire suppression a year, said fire captain Ruiz. Last year alone, inmates at Ben Lomond were responsible for 141,000 hours of community service. At a dollar or less an hour, that's a very cheap source

of labor, Luna said.

"Could you imagine over 141,000 times minimum wage? That's \$951,000. That's a resource I don't know if Santa Cruz would be able to make up in any way," he said.

Although Santa Cruz County is one of the lowest users of the California Youth Authority statewide (county judges only recommended four commitments to the authority in 2002), many people working locally with juvenile offenders said they'd be very sorry to see the loss of a facility like the Ben Lomond camp.

Jamyrson Pittori, the deputy public defender for juveniles, is one of them. She called the camp an important educational organization that practices "restorative justice."

"It's the only thing about the CYA that's working," she said. "If anything they should start looking at closing the facilities they have and put their resources into what's working."

Rosy Weiser can be reached at llabarth@santacruzsentinel.com.

gaining awareness, drug and parenting programs.

An astounding 95 percent of

Report

Continued from Page A15

and are in the process of phasing out some of their treatment methods.

Perro said he feels the kind of treatment he got was a heavy price to pay for a "mistake (he) made as a kid."

"There's no rehabilitation. All they're doing is taking a chunk out of your life that you will never get back," he said.

Perro wouldn't divulge the nature of his original crime other than to say it was "a parole violation for strong-arm robbery."

He said his sentence of 18 months was increased to four years because he got involved in so many prison fights. Most of the fights were sparked by race issues, he said. Perro is white, and while he claims he's not an extremist, he said he prefers to stick to his own race and found it hard being a minority in close quarters with so much ethnic diversity around him.

"(The staff) set you up to fight when you're in there and then they'll spray you with Mace. They call it 'integrating,' " he explained. "Say if there's a riot that will kick off, they'll ask for volunteers to come out, they'll bring you out with one of your rivals, so that way only two people will come out and fight and that will quash the riot."

Since his release in 2002, Perro has been working as an equipment operator for a tree company and attending classes to be a fire medic.

"I haven't been in trouble since I got out of the youth authority. Maybe because I just grew up," he said, adding that the only thing he learned while incarcerated was how to "lash out in anger and violence" and that he didn't want to go back to jail.

He credits an "amazing family" that drove six hours every weekend to visit him with helping him turn his life around. Otherwise, he said, he would have been in the same boat as many of the people he met in jail.

"When they kick (inmates) out, they just put them on the streets and they know nothing other than how to beat people up and manipulate, and what do you expect them to do?"

Rosy Weiser can be reached at llabarth@santacruzsentinel.com.