

County curbing young offenders

New tactics help reduce detentions at Juvenile Hall

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WATSONVILLE — If you were a kid 10 years ago in Santa Cruz County and committed a crime, your chances of spending time in Juvenile Hall were pretty good.

But that was a decade ago. The county's juvenile justice system has since undergone extensive reforms, and statistics show more kids are staying on the right side of the law.

"We have always been very innovative and wanted to do the right thing for our youth," said Laura Garnett, the county Probation Department's juvenile division director.

In 1999, the department partnered with the Annie E. Casey Foundation to provide juvenile offenders alternatives to detention.

Garnett said a screening process to determine which offenders are high risk and need to be detained and which could benefit from alternative programs has helped reduce the number of kids admitted to Juvenile Hall.

"It's not a go easy on crime, ... it's going after the core behaviors," she said.

According to the 2006 Community Assessment Project report released Monday, the population of juveniles increased 9.9 percent across the county from 1996 to 2005, while the number of juveniles arrested for both misdemeanors and felony offenses dropped 40.5 percent during the same period.

"We are following the national trend as far as crime going down," said Patty Sapone, Santa Cruz deputy chief of police.

The dip in youth crime also has brought admissions to Juvenile Hall down to its lowest level in 10 years, falling 51.4 percent since 1996, according to the report.

"It takes time to see results from the things you implement," Sapone said.

Establishing partnerships with community organizations also are proving effective to keep kids clear of trouble and turning others back

Juvenile felony and misdemeanor crimes by age

AGE	1996	2005	% CHANGE
10 and under	22	2	-90.9
11	48	7	-85.4
12	114	47	-58.8
13	361	109	-69.8
14	306	224	-26.8
15	517	355	-31.3
16	619	381	-38.4
17	654	460	-29.7

Source: State Department of Justice, California Criminal Justice Profile, 2006.

Crime

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on the right path, Garnett said.

"It used to be you really had to get in trouble to get services," she said.

Nane Alejandrez, executive director of Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos, a community group aimed at keeping kids out of gangs, said more opportunities to help youth in the justice system has allowed his organization to increase its effort to reach youth.

Alejandrez said collaboration with other services are making the fight pack an added punch in some instances.

"We can sort of double team them," he said of the work they do with youth.

Despite the decreases in youth crime, one area that saw an increase was driving under the influence, according to the report. Juvenile misdemeanor arrests for drunken driving in the county increased 18.5 percent, while the state average dropped 19.5 percent in the past decade.

"We know substance abuse is one of our kids' biggest issues," Garnett said, adding there is no clear reason why. "It's a constant battle."

Still, she remains optimistic those figures can decline, too.

"We have a community where people are willing to step up and make things happen, not just talk about it forever and ever," Garnett said.

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