



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Greater use of electronic monitoring and home detention has helped reduce crowding at Juvenile Hall.

Overcrowding eases at Juvenile Hall

Juvenile Hall 1220
Fewer Latinos kept in custody; more home detention used

✓ By **MICHAEL IACUessa**

SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

FELTON — Billy, a 17-year-old, has been in and out of Juvenile Hall since he was 13.

He recalls the days when mattresses were on floors and “you had to step on someone’s bed to get to the toilet.”

Just three years ago, crowding at Santa Cruz County Juvenile Hall was serious enough to warrant cries for expansion, attention from the state and even questions of constitutionality.

Since then, the number of inmates has dropped by up to 50 percent. This year, the hall has been over its legal limit of 42 juveniles on just a few days, down substantially from a daily average of 57 in 1998.

In addition, Billy notes space-saving renovations, such as doors that swing out to allow new plastic bunks to be placed so they are away from the toilets.

The conditions at Juvenile Hall and the decline in inmates has less to do with a drop in crime than it does in giving more scrutiny to who should be detained. That scrutiny is being done by a task force formed in 1999 that includes almost every player in the juvenile detention process.

According to John Rhoads, the county’s chief probation officer, not all children sent to juvenile hall in the past belonged there.

“There are a lot of ways to handle children in a less
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Juvenile Hall: Overcrowding problem eases

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restrictive manner," he said. "It has to be an efficient, fair system without increasing public safety risks."

Rhoads came to Santa Cruz in 1997 with a background in detention reform. He headed a similar effort in Sacramento and makes presentations on the subject at conferences across the country.

He also has been affiliated with an initiative called Ann E. Casey Juvenile Detention Reform, from which many of Santa Cruz's ideas have been taken since the initiative's inception in 1992.

Initially, he said the task force looked at the number of children going through the system, how quickly they were released and the array of options available.

Some of those alternatives have included more reliance on electronic bracelets and home-monitoring programs, expanded counseling provided by Fenix Service in Watsonville and the addition of an expeditor to ensure cases are not being unnecessarily delayed in the system. Fenix counselors work with the kids and their families every day, spending about a week at a time with each family before moving on to the next family.

One of the biggest changes in the probation department is the drop in Latino detainees. The high ratio of Latinos in juvenile hall had come under criticism in recent years.

Latinos once made up 64 percent of inmates, despite only representing one-third of children ages 10 to 17 in the county. The number of Latinos detained at Juvenile Hall, however, has fallen by 18 percent since that peak.

There have been no shortage of opinions as to why so many Latino chil-

'There is a rush to punish without looking at the underlying causes of delinquency.'

VYLMA ORTIZ, CENTER FOR JUVENILE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

dren were being locked up.

"A lot of it isn't probation keeping them in, it's police officers arresting them," said public defender Jamyrson Pittori. "You have to follow the chain of why they are in detention."

Rhoads, however, said he chose to focus primarily on areas within the Probation Department's control. Instead of trying to determine where racism may have been a factor or proposing moving Juvenile Hall from Felton, a considerable distance from the South County where most Latinos reside, he tried more practical changes.

"One of the things we discovered was that we didn't have enough cultural capacity in the department," he said. "We increased the bilingual capacity in the department by up to 42 percent. We also increased the cultural competency in the department to more closely reflect the community we serve."

The result was an increased ability to find a parent or other adult to release children to, even if it meant providing transportation. And with the aid of mental-health and crisis-prevention programs and the greater ability to explain how the programs worked, more parents accepted taking the children home.

Rhoads also increased the hours for an intake officer working weekends to help prevent juveniles from being detained over the weekend unnecessarily.

"We took a very proactive stance to eliminate artificial barriers not relat-

ed to the risk issue itself," he said. "It was a matter of bringing in awareness and building a culture within the department that accepts that. It takes time for that to happen."

Ellen Campos, the district attorney associated with Juvenile Hall, said when the task force meets every six weeks, there is not always agreement. She said the Probation Department and District Attorney's Office clash on some issues. She sometimes believes the Probation Department focuses too much on keeping inmate numbers down.

"For my department, it's a concern for public safety and also the fact that some kids just need to be in Juvenile Hall," she said. "The focus has been on rehabilitation, but sometimes the best thing for them is to keep them in the hall."

Nonetheless, she said the electronic bracelet and home monitoring programs have been effective.

In fact, 95 percent of those on home supervision have made all their subsequent court dates without committing a new crime. For those on electronic monitoring, the success rate is 98 percent.

Santa Cruz County is being used as a model by the Center for Juvenile and Criminal Justice, a nonprofit organization in San Francisco and Washington, D.C., which lobbies for alternatives to detention.

Vylma Ortiz, an attorney for the organization, said the probation department has been able to set up a system where there is more individ-

ual attention and an accurate monitoring of statistics to determine what programs have been effective or not.

"A lot of places, they don't keep track and there is never really an evaluation of whether a program works," she said.

As an example, she singled out a family conferencing initiative, in which a probation officer sits down with the child, the family and a counselor to figure out the underlying causes of delinquency.

"Many probation officers are jailers and they want to lock kids up. There is a rush to punish without looking at the underlying causes of delinquency," she said.

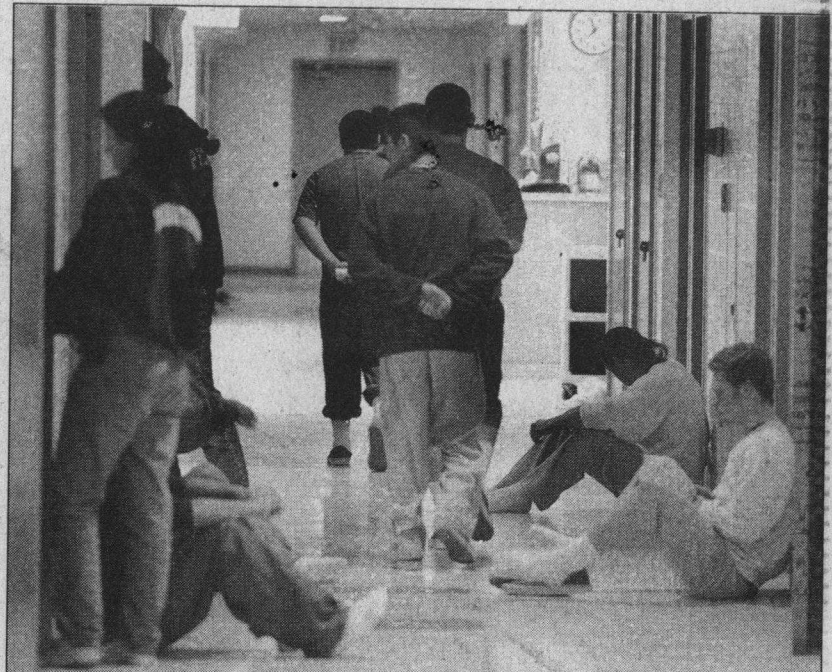
Billy, who has spent a lot of his teens running away from group homes, also has noticed the change in attitude of the probation department. He said they seemed more focused on getting him home with his mother. He also notices a change in attitudes at Juvenile Hall.

"Before, the staff here really didn't care," he said. "The staff now will work with you if you do something wrong."

One area Santa Cruz has in its favor, which other counties experiencing crowding do not, is its speedy judicial process. The state's average length of stay in juvenile halls is 27 days. Santa Cruz was below that average even when it was overcrowded. Now it is down to nine to 10 days.

The addition of an expeditor who monitors cases on a daily basis to ensure none fall through the cracks has "helped make it a little bit faster," Rhoads said. That alone contributes to reducing the inmate population.

"The kid also feels the consequences right away," Ortiz said. "It's not like the kid gets arrested for shoplifting and doesn't go back to court for a cou-



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

Efforts to release youngsters from detention have helped to reduce the crowding that was evident at Juvenile Hall in 1999.

ple months."

The county's juvenile population is expected to increase during the next 15 years. The greatest increase in crime among juveniles in the past decade has been for violent offenses. Approximately one in five arrested fall in that category.

The problem is not unique to Santa Cruz County. California incarcerates more teens than any other state, nearly twice the national average.

The problem peaked in Santa Cruz County in January 1997, with a daily average of 61 inmates. That brought an increase in disruptive incidents, inadequate segregation between genders and less room for health care and education.

"Any time you double up kids in a room, you are opening the door to

physical abuse, sexual abuse, them not getting along," said Laura Garnett, assistant superintendent at Juvenile Hall. "The tension is higher when overcrowded and day-to-day necessities like meal times and showers take longer."

Jane, a 17-year-old first incarcerated at age 11, has served more than two years at Juvenile Hall. The girl, who said drug problems have kept her in trouble, notes conditions are far better now.

Although, she adds the point system for gaining extra time out of the room has gotten stricter.

"When there are a lot more people here, the staff is more stressed out," she said. "They split the group, too, so you get less time out. That hasn't happened in a long time."