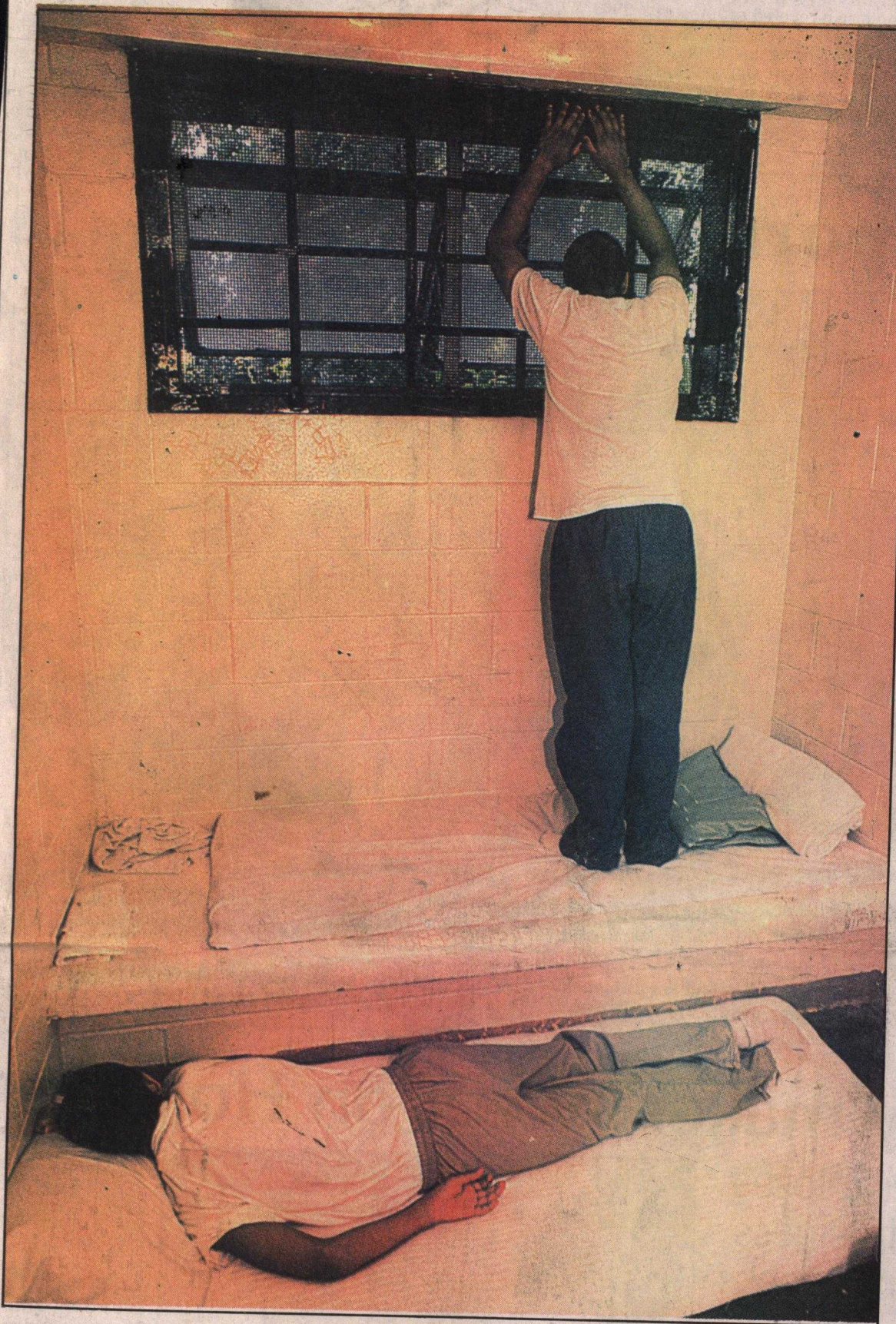


'Juvenile Hall is not safe.'



Two wards of juvenile hall often must share the small room built to house one. Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Overcrowding and violence plague county juvenile hall

By KATHY KREIGER
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The county's juvenile hall is overcrowded, understaffed and so dangerous it is a lawsuit waiting to happen, said the county's juvenile crime commission in a call for action Tuesday to the county Board of Supervisors.

"Currently, Juvenile Hall is not a 'suitable' place," said the June 19 report by Richard Swanson, chairman of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Commissions. "Simply put, Juvenile Hall is not safe — not safe for the detainees, the wards or the staffs."

Too many kids, not enough staff and an old building that was designed decades before anyone dreamed that kids too young to shave could be as violent as today's are — those are the root causes of the problem, said the report. It called for a task force to begin planning to expand or modernize the existing Graham Hill Road hall.

Probation Department head Linda Erwood echoed those sentiments at Tuesday's county budget hearing. So did Juvenile Court Judge Thomas Black.

Black recalled the days when kids went to the hall for stealing a box of artichokes — and it made the newspaper. The days when a note from the

'That means 16 youngsters sleeping on the floor. Two to a room is always problematic.'

— Linda Erwood,
Probation Department

teacher meant big trouble for you at home.

Those days are gone, he said.

"It used to be a more friendly atmosphere. ... That's hard to do when you have to watch out constantly for violence, and you know one little explosion can set off this inferno," Black said.

Erwood asked the supervisors to authorize two more staffers beyond the 26 recommended by county staff for the coming year. That would cost the county another \$62,000, Erwood said.

County supervisors approved Erwood's \$2 million regular budget Tuesday and put off until today a decision about the extra money.

Gangs, violence and overcrowding have changed

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Juvenile hall

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the nature of juvenile hall, she said.

Some 53 percent of the inmates are there for violent offenses, Erwood said, and more than 70 percent have gang affiliations.

The average number of inmates at the 42-bed hall has gone from 33 a day two years ago to 45 a day this year. Estimates for the coming fiscal year are 49 a day.

Tuesday, the hall held 58, she said.

Youngsters stay longer at the hall both because they're charged with more violent offenses than in the past, she said, and because the overloaded system takes longer to investigate juvenile crimes.

In practice, the numbers mean that many of the 7½-by-9½-foot cells intended for a single occupant now house two; the second occupant sleeps on a thin mattress on the floor. It's up to them to decide who gets which.

"That means 16 youngsters sleeping on the floor," Erwood said. "Two to a room is always problematic."

Friday, a boy beat up his roommate so badly that the roommate had to be taken to the hospital, Erwood said.

"He wanted to move to another room and we wouldn't let him," she said. "So he beat up his roommate to get our attention."

The hall has consistently been running over capacity since last fall, she said.

In the 30 years she's been in the local juvenile justice system, Erwood said she's always been able to say that the hall was a safe place.

Those days are gone, she said.

"It is no longer a safe place for the youngsters or the staff," she said.

The hall, and the juvenile justice system, is failing today's youngsters, Erwood said. She hears this from victims, from parents, from the courts, from prosecutors and the public.

"Even defense attorneys realize their youthful clients are not being served by our lack of response," she said.

Part of the problem is a shortage of intake workers to investigate kids accused of crimes, Erwood said.

She pointed to a pair of teens arrested April 1 after burglarizing five houses. One was 18; the other was 17. The 18-year-old went to adult court May 1, was sentenced June 15 and is now serving time.

The 17-year-old — as a juvenile — was not seen by juvenile officers until May 31 and has yet to see the inside of a courtroom. Because the crimes were not considered serious, she said, he is not in custody — and is likely to be out burglarizing more houses.

Most speakers noted the disturbing levels of gang violence.

Near-riots have broken out at the hall more than once, and staff now rigorously separate members of rival gangs. They live separately, they eat separately, they go to school separately and they exercise separately.

An unfortunate side effect of this has been the effect on juvenile hall detainees who aren't gang members, Swanson said. Most are classified with one side or the other, depending on where they live, or if their parents have gang affiliations.

"Consequently, at times, Juvenile Hall is a 'recruiting place' for gang leaders," he said.

The bottom line could prove very expensive to the county if something happens and someone sues, Swanson said.

Spending the money to improve matters, he said "would be far less than litigation we would be facing if someone were seriously injured up there."

The understaffing means that the teens spend more time in their rooms — for those charged with very serious crimes, as much 21 of every 24 hours. Most kids at the hall go to school at the hall from 9 to 2:45, minus a long lunch hour and PE time in the exercise yard.

In years past, PE often meant a game of volleyball, baseball or Frisbee outside on the well-kept field next to the hall. But for over a year, that's been off-limits — given the new breed of inmates, it's not secure enough against escapes.

Now, "going outside" means going into a 56-by-130-foot courtyard in the heart of the hall. The center is open to the sky, but well-guarded wire fences run on the inside of the roof lines.

"Even more frightening is the steady growth in the number of violent offenders," said Swanson in the report. "At the time of this writing, we had 53 youths in the facility, 28 of those for violent offenses, including two for murder."