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Keep youths out of jail

It's a glaring disparity: Minority youths end up in juvenile jails at far higher rates than white kids. But it's encouraging that local stakeholders are working to turn that around with smart, persistent efforts to find alternatives to jail.

Consider: In 2003, 75 percent of all youths admitted to the Sedgwick County Juvenile Detention Facility were minorities, despite the fact that African-Americans and Hispanics account for only 12 and 10 percent of the local population, respectively.

Mark Masterson, director of corrections for Sedgwick County, told The Eagle editorial board that low-income minority offenders often don't get the counseling, resources and family support needed to stay out of jail.

He and other local stakeholders have been working for more than a decade to lower the detention rates with preventive strategies. Among the efforts:

- Providing screening to divert low-risk offenders to alternatives such as home supervision, minimum-security shelter and electronic monitoring.
- Providing tutoring and academic intervention at two Wichita middle schools to address minority dropout rates and the achievement gap.
- Requiring cultural diversity training for hundreds of county corrections employees.

These and other efforts seem to be paying off by reducing rates of minority juvenile detentions.

That's important, because research shows that juveniles who go into jail are more likely to engage in future delinquency and transition to adult crime -- burdening taxpayers with more costly jail and prison options.

Despite the progress, though, a recently completed three-year project to research Sedgwick County juvenile crime data found that black youths were nearly four times more likely to be arrested than white youths.

Another finding: Urban schools with school resource officers showed much higher arrest rates for disorderly conduct than suburban schools, even though many of the arrests didn't lead to charges.

Are schools with SROs relying more heavily on police than on their own internal discipline policies?

As the report said, such patterns warrant a closer look.

To their credit, Wichita Democratic state Reps. Melody McCray-Miller and Delia Garcia have worked hard to get local African-American and Hispanic neighborhoods involved in juvenile justice solutions. But it takes money, too. State funding for juvenile programs has been flat for the past three years.

The Kansas Juvenile Justice Authority has submitted a \$4.5 million budget request for the upcoming legislative session that would "bring us back to where we were in 2002," Masterson said.

The Legislature needs to support these juvenile justice efforts. Everyone benefits when minority youths stay out of jail and on a productive path.

For the editorial board, Randy Scholfield

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