

Detention Redemption

In one California county, progressive leaders and law-enforcement officials are transforming a troubled juvenile-justice system

PEGGY TOWNSEND | *August 14, 2005*

Santa Cruz County's juvenile hall sits on a pine- and oak-studded hillside across from a state park. It is a low-slung building made of concrete block with doors painted a bilious shade of green.

From outside, it hardly looks like a national model for juvenile-justice reform. But inside, empty cells stand as testament to what has happened over the last eight years. Instead of locking young criminals behind bars, this mostly liberal seaside community has bucked the national trend and is sending all but the worst offenders into alternative corrections programs. Led by a band of reformers and embraced by a community that was one of the few in California to vote against a get-tough-on-crime initiative in 2000, the county is keeping kids at home, supervising them closely, and enrolling them in community-based programs that provide drug counseling and job training. Data is assembled to see who is coming into the system and why they are there, and the time it takes to get a youngster into a group facility has been more than halved. Notably, this progress has occurred in a state known in justice circles as the "Great Detainer," because some 25 percent of all detained youth nationally are held here.

The result is that juvenile hall is half empty most days, youth felony arrests are down 48 percent, and officials say that instead of spending money on building new cells, they are putting it into programs that work. "The fact is," says Scott MacDonald, one of the reform effort's architects, "our outcomes have been excellent."

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Santa Cruz County sits 70 miles south of San Francisco. Its northern half is home to the University of California, Santa Cruz and tourist-filled beaches; its south is mostly Latino and agricultural, with long rows of strawberries pushing up against housing developments. And although the county is known for its liberal bent -- Santa Cruz city-council members once held a medical-marijuana giveaway on the steps of City Hall -- it faced many of the

youth crime problems other California counties did in the mid-1990s.

Santa Cruz's 42-bed juvenile hall routinely held 50 to 60 teenagers, and failed even minimum health and safety standards. Kids were doubled up in the tiny cells, remembers Judy Cox, an easygoing woman who was an early engineer of the reform movement and is now the county's chief probation officer. "We had them sleeping on the floors," she says. "Their heads were right next to the toilets." It was a struggle just to get the young inmates showered and fed. Tensions were high, fights were common, and injuries to both staff and kids were rising. "We were just dealing with day-to-day survival," Cox says.

County officials and probation staff sought change, but it was like trying to turn an ocean liner. Entrenched ways and lack of money made it hard to do. Then John Rhoads came to head the department in 1997. A former deputy probation chief in Sacramento, Rhoads had been part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation juvenile-justice reform initiative there. "John brought these tools to help our jurisdiction reduce reliance on detention," Cox says. "The first thing we did was to develop an objective screening process at the front door."

That meant that when police brought a young offender in, probation officers would use a set of objective criteria to determine if he or she was a threat to public safety or would skip out on his or her court date. Those at high risk, such as violent offenders and teens with prior arrest records, were locked up. Those deemed "medium risk" were sent home with electronic monitoring, receiving daily visits from probation officers. Those who were picked up for misdemeanors and would likely make court appearances were simply cited and sent home.

But street cops complained that young crooks were beating them back to the neighborhood. They said the county had gone soft on crime. So Rhoads sat down with the county's law-enforcement chiefs and hammered out a list of crimes -- like high-speed chases and robbery -- and criminal history that should result in bookings and those for which a young offender should simply be cited. The chief-approved lists were handed out to every street officer. The county also streamlined its placement process so that children spent less time waiting to enter treatment centers or group homes; the average dropped from 27 days to nine. The number of kids in juvenile hall fell, too.

Soon, probation officials realized that just emptying the hall would do nothing to improve public safety -- or to help at-risk kids. "As we loosened detentions," says MacDonald, assistant chief probation officer, "we tightened

our relations with the community.” Probation officials began to link with local organizations that provided services kids needed: drug treatment, counseling, job training, and work programs. One of them, the Youth Community Restoration Project, sent weekend detainees out to restore sensitive environmental areas and build retaining walls instead of idling in juvenile hall. With additional training, some eventually landed jobs in the community. “If 328 youth a year meet on weekend work projects, and if 46 of them are referred to job training and mentorship, and 28 of those are placed in entry-level jobs, success seems small,” says David True, who heads the program. “But that’s 28 youth who aren’t stealing your TV or hitting each other. It’s a very hard road, but still more effective than incarceration.”

In his cluttered office, MacDonald thumbs through statistics to show what the broader reforms have meant for the county. In 1996, juvenile hall had an average daily population of 50 children, he says. Last year, the average was 22. He jumps up and phones the hall: Today’s population is just 16. More importantly, MacDonald says, since the county reformed its detention practices, its juvenile crime rate has fallen -- even as the youth population has risen. Juvenile felony and misdemeanor arrests are down 48 percent and 43 percent, respectively. While it’s true that juvenile crime is down throughout California, Santa Cruz’s concurrent drop shows that reform doesn’t, contrary to popular belief, cause more crime. “The reality is that *not* locking these kids up does not result in an increase in crime,” MacDonald says.

It also doesn’t result in increased costs. Much of the reform happened by simply changing how things are done in the department, Cox says. While keeping a teen locked up costs \$184 a day, letting one stay home with electronic monitoring, supervision and counseling, or work programs costs \$64. The county also avoided spending millions of dollars to staff and build bigger detention facilities.

Change could not have happened without political will, however. Voters, political leaders, and even judges supported reform. Superior Court Judge John Salazar, who presided over Santa Cruz County Juvenile Court for four years, says that when he began, “My approach was ... to draw a line in the sand and give options and tell the kids what would happen if they didn’t follow through. We kept drawing lines in the sand and kids kept walking over them.” It took seeing youngsters repeatedly recycle through the system to change his mind. He now talks about the benefits of keeping young offenders home and addressing their needs -- whether it’s drug treatment or just buying them a new set of clothes because they were too embarrassed to go to school in hand-me-downs -- instead of throwing them in jail. “The

government,” Salazar says, “does a lousy job of raising other people's kids.”

Also key to reform was the mundane task of data collection. Santa Cruz monitors everything from the race of young arrestees to case resolution. Such attention to data not only keeps people working more efficiently but also helps to defend reform practices and to develop new programs, local officials say. For instance, when data showed that young Latino heroin addicts had more success getting clean if programs kept them connected to their families, the county helped design a drug program to do just that. “We scrutinized everything and looked at what does work, and we implemented the things that did work,” Cox says.

Maria Griselda Hernandez knows that firsthand. A 20-year-old with almond-shaped eyes and long brown hair, Hernandez spent so many days in juvenile hall as a teen she lost count. She used heroin, sold drugs, got into fights. Then, when she was 17, instead of locking her up again, officials sent her through a drug-rehabilitation program and to the Youth Community Restoration Project, where a young Latino counselor helped her get a job interview. Today, Hernandez works full time at a local nonprofit and is attending college. “My counselor told me something I will never forget,” says Hernandez quietly. “She said, ‘Your life is a testimony.’ She told me that everything I had been through I could use in a positive way.” Hernandez doesn't even hesitate when asked where she would have been without those programs. “I would probably be in jail.”