

FOCUS GROUP WITH OFFICERS FROM GREENSBORO POLICE DEPARTMENT'S JUVENILE SERVICES DIVISION

Reducing Disproportionate Minority Contact in the Juvenile Justice System, Guilford County Demonstration Project

“We’re raising other people’s children.”

METHODS and BACKGROUND

In the Winter of 2006, a focus group session was conducted with 4 law enforcement officers and a lieutenant assigned to the Delinquency and Undisciplined unit of Greensboro Police Department’s Juvenile Services Division. When the police receive complaints about youth, patrol officers actually respond to the call, gather suspect information, and write the report. This report is then forwarded to the Juvenile Services Division to conduct appropriate follow-up investigations. In 2005, this unit handled approximately 2,000 cases, and officers estimate that 80% involved African American youth.

The goal of this session was to gain insight into the issues confronting law enforcement officers working with youth offenders, as well as their perspectives on what contributes to minority over-representation in the juvenile justice system in Guilford County. It was conducted as a part of the Disproportionate Minority Contact in North Carolina’s Juvenile Justice System Project, funded by a grant from the North Carolina Governor’s Crime Commission. Findings and interpretations represent major themes and perspectives of the sessions as summarized by multiple observers and readers.

MAJOR THEMES

- Families contribute directly and indirectly to youth delinquency.
- The juvenile justice system oftentimes offers ineffective sanctions.
- Discipline is inconsistent and begins too late for many youth.
- Change must occur in the home, at school, and in the justice system itself.

FAMILY DYNAMICS

Some delinquency problems may stem from the teen pregnancy epidemics of the 1980s and 1990s. Today’s parents may have been raised by parents who were very young and inexperienced themselves and did not know how to care for or advise them.

Officers rarely encounter parents who are genuinely interested in helping to address the problem behaviors of their children. Often, they have difficulty even locating parents, and they estimate that less than 1% of them respond to their calls. Those that do are nearly always mothers, and they often want the officers to take their unmanageable children to detention. Fathers are not often in the home or in the child’s life. There are some cases, however, when parents involve police because they are in dire need of help and don’t know where else to turn.

In other cases, youth have been taught criminal behavior from their families and are surprised when they are sanctioned for something they learned to do from their parents.

Some youth may even view “jail” as a normal part of the family culture. White females, in particular, do not appear to view shoplifting as a crime. In other cases, youth may be committing crimes to support a family member’s drug addictions. Still others may be enabled by parents who ignore their behavior. In one case, an officer was working with a ten-year-old involved in a robbery committed between 11:00 pm and midnight. In another case, an underage youth was allowed to drive the family car. In some cases, officers directly fault parents. A father actually gave his fourteen-year-old son a shot gun, “for protection,” and the son accidentally killed his sister with it.

Officers believe that the only way to get through to many disengaged parents is to charge them with neglect or with contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

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SYSTEM ISSUES

Officers believe that the juvenile justice system itself is failing youth. Designed in the 1940s or 1950s to manage minor offenses, it is inadequate for addressing the very serious offenses committed today. It is not unusual for youth in their early teens to be charged with violent felonies, such as armed robberies or drug offenses. But, in the words of one officer, “The system has stayed virtually the same—hasn’t kept up.”

Legal consequences are both inadequate and ineffective. Youth often know what type of sanction to expect for various offenses, and do not always view short stays in detention or other moderate penalties as deterrents. Some even learn from each other habits that will keep them in the system. Moreover, many youth do not foresee the serious consequences of committing similar

offenses when they turn 16 and can be tried as adults.

These officers report high rates of recidivism, and they rarely encounter first-time offenders, anymore. In fact, they commonly work with youth who have already had 15 to 30 prior charges. Some youth have been in the juvenile justice system for ten years.

“The system has no meat to it and the kids know it.”

RECOMMENDATIONS



“The only way to make an impact is to be consistent across all these systems.”

- Laws must change so that there are real consequences for behaviors. Youth who commit their first violent felony may be deterred in the future if they expect the consequences to be severe and immediate.
- Discipline and responsibility should also be taught in schools, beginning in kindergarten. Youth must be reached early and often and need to see consistent consequences at home, at school, and in the legal system.
- Parents need help raising their children and parent training so that they can model love, respect, and discipline at home.
- Students should be required to wear school uniforms to reduce social segregation.
- Gang colors and paraphernalia should be banned on all school campuses.
- Drug awareness and prevention programs, such as D.A.R.E., should be reinstated in the schools.