

Youth crime linked to home life

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For some Grant County kids, conditions in a detention facility are better than the environment they are living in.

Brenda Chambers, a lieutenant in the Grant County Juvenile Detention Center, said home environment is a factor when it comes to juvenile crime.

"There's been too many times I've spoke with kids who have said they like it better in detention versus home," she said. "(At the center) they have their own room, they're held responsible for keeping it clean and it's their space. It's sad, but it's so true. They get three meals a day, and they're not fending for themselves."

Though some of the kids aren't locked up for long, and those who are may not be comfortable talking to an officer at the facility, each child has their own story.

"And most of them aren't very good stories," Chambers said.

She's seen an average of 25 to 30 kids in the detention center at one time, but those numbers have seemed to increase recently. In addition to Grant County kids, some juveniles from Wabash and Huntington counties also are housed here.

"I've seen a lot of school problems, a lot of theft, and I think a lot of parental guidance comes into play with that," Chambers said.

But several children still have behavioral problems, even though their parents are involved. A lot of caring parents visit their kids in the center.

Lack of respect is a big problem she's seen among kids, and the population at the center is becoming younger. The typical age used to be 12 to 17 years old. Now, it's not uncommon for an 8, 9 or 10-year-old to be locked up, she said. At that age, she believes parents should be able to control their children. On the other hand, it seems kids are acting older than they are when it comes to things they say and do.

"Parents used to discipline their children, but anymore I think they feel like their hands are tied with the system when it comes to child abuse," she said. "Now the kids have free reign."

Despite an increase in kids at the detention center, the number of juveniles arrested in the city of Marion has decreased this year compared to previous years. According to the Marion Police Department, 278 people ages 17 and younger were arrested this year through Dec. 19. From Jan. 1, 2001 through Dec. 31, 2010, an average 390 kids were arrested each year.

The trend isn't just with juveniles - crimes committed by adults have decreased as well because of increased enforcement, said Deputy Chief Cliff Sessoms.

The city rewrote a curfew for teenagers in 2008 so that more kids would be at home instead of committing crimes, and police have tried to reduce drug activity among minors through the Joint Effort Against Narcotics Team and through its D.A.R.E program.

"We've been more aggressive and proactive," Sessoms said.

Police also have worked to rid the city of gangs by arresting gang members. Though kids are still committing crimes in group settings, the city doesn't have the gang problem it did in the 1990s, he said.

Chambers said about half the kids who are in detention are there because of serious crimes, while the other half commits less serious offenses. But the ones who commit so-called petty crimes continue to break the law and eventually the crimes turn more serious, she said. Recidivism in the facility is high.

Grant County Sheriff Darrell Himelick said kids are becoming more violent. A couple of kids were waived to adult court this year because of the seriousness of the offense they committed.

"I've had some pretty violent kids over there - more so than the inmates in the jail," he said. "Society's just changed an awful lot. It's a more violent period."

Not all children who commit crimes go to the detention center. Some are cited into court for running away from home or for possession marijuana, Himelick said.

Chambers said when children go to the detention center, they are assigned a probation officer who decides whether the child should be held at the facility or released. If the kid is a first-time offender, the officer may release him. Otherwise, the kid will be sent to court, where a judge will determine his sentence. Chambers said a sentence may be for 10 days to 120 days. On average, a child used to spend about 30 days at the facility, but the sentence lengths have increased. It's not abnormal for a child now to spend 60 to 120 days locked up. Some are given weekends, if they are doing well in school.

During their time in the center, officers work with the kids. In addition to talking to a probation officer, the kids also can attend church services at the facility. Pastors and members of the Grant County Sheriff's Chaplaincy visit the kids. Officials from Family Service Society also meet with them three times a week to discuss their behavior.

Chambers said many of the kids are already seeking counseling from either Family Services or Cornerstone Behavioral Health Center. Those services are continued during the sentence. The kids

are in counseling because many are taking medication and suffer from disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

