

# Full house

*San Francisco's new juvenile justice program could be a national model. So why is the city's decaying youth lockup still overcrowded?* **By A. Clay Thompson**

**S**AN FRANCISCO'S JUVENILE crime rate—like the crime rate as a whole—has dropped dramatically in the past five years. The city picks up fewer kids for serious felonies; the number of minors sent to the California Youth Authority dropped by almost two-thirds from 1993 to 1998.

But the city's musty old juvenile detention center, now 50 years old and in bad repair, has been packed past capacity in recent years. The hall was built to hold 132; a 1987 city-commissioned report by Jefferson Associates argued the city should cut the number of detainees down to 60. In November 1998, 147 kids slept in juvenile hall.

Despite the hard work of many conscientious counselors, the detention center, located just below Sutro Tower and euphemistically dubbed the Youth Guidance Center, has been the site of one crisis, tragedy, or scandal after another. In 1986 a detainee committed suicide; in 1991, James Bell of the Youth Law Center sued the city over conditions in YGC, prompting \$5 million in renovations. The next year, the city suspended a counselor who choked one boy until he soiled himself and nearly lost consciousness, and banged the head of another against the floor.

A 1995 audit by city budget analyst Harvey Rose found that detainees couldn't count on getting back the money and possessions they had on them when they were arrested: during one two-month period, nearly \$4,000 in cash and 271 possessions had disappeared. A year later, juvenile probation accountant Sebastian Rico allegedly embezzled between \$400,000 and \$750,000 before fleeing the country. Some role models.

Instead of seeing petty offenders kept in the hall, where the primary concern is security rather than education or therapy, critics of the

city's juvenile justice policy would like to see them placed in community-based programs that can get youths back in school, help them deal with emotional issues, and develop life skills. The city, along with the nonprofit Delancey Street Foundation, started a comprehensive set of programs in May 1998 to divert young people from detention. More than \$5.5 million later, many of those programs are running successfully.

But the centerpiece of the new

system—Delancey Street's intake center, the Community Assessment and Referral Center (CARC)—isn't open after midnight and on weekends. Young people arrested for minor offenses when the center is closed go straight to juvenile hall—where the Delancey Street programs can't do them any good.

"The population of the hall is a thermometer. When crime is down and the [YGC] population is up, then the system is breaking down," Taj James of Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth told the *Bay Guardian*. "The reality is that most youth in the hall don't need to be there."

## Human congestion

Plenty of those kids have the city's

juvenile probation system to thank. A large chunk of the hall population is made up of "repeat offenders"—but in a lot of cases, their second and subsequent offenses are minor probation violations.

For many of the 1,200 or so San Francisco minors on probation, one petty offense—like tagging or shoplifting—can be enough to get them stuck in the system until they turn 18. Kids arrested for smoking pot might be put on probation under requirements that include frequent urine tests, a 6 p.m. curfew, near-perfect school attendance, and passing grades in all classes. If they can't meet those conditions—and how many kids can?—they're likely to wind up in juvenile hall, then sent to out-of-town group homes



**Alternatives:** Delancey Street Foundation's Community Assessment and Referral Center and staffers such as Claudia Ahlstrand, Alexis Olivier, and Heidi Isaac (from left) provide guidance for petty delinquents, keeping them out of juvenile lockup with the harder kids—and steering them away from crime.

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or out-of-state boot camps.

"Myself, the only charge I ever had was when I was 13. I got caught shoplifting in a department store," says a 19-year-old former ward of the system. (Like many young offenders and graduates of the juvenile justice system we spoke to, she asked us not to use her name.) "I was in and out of juvenile hall 13 times, went to two group homes, two rehabs. And I never got caught doing another crime. Once you get on probation, it's hard to get off. I didn't get out until I was 18."

After failing probation, kids are typically assigned to group homes for a year or more. The residential facilities scattered throughout California were set up in the 1970s as an alternative to incarceration. But the homes' astronomical expulsion rates suggest that the system doesn't work for many young offenders. The city's Juvenile Probation Department's 1996 annual report—the most recent available—doesn't catalog placement failure.

To many teenagers separated from home and friends, a year in a group home is an eternity: unsurprisingly, many of them run away and rack up more charges on the streets. Others have a hard time abiding by the rules of communal living and get booted from one group home after another.

Rasheedah, 18, spent six months in a group home as a minor. During her time there, she says, 3 of 10 girls went AWOL; 2 got kicked out. "Staying is the hardest thing. I was on the verge of running myself," Rasheedah told us. "It's too many people to live in one house. The people they got working there, well, some of them can't handle the stress themselves. The counselors be overdoing it, exercising their authority over you too much."

What did she miss most while doing time in a group home? "Being free," she says. "Being able to do things. It's still a force thing. You're still locked up."

Kids thrown out of group homes and residential rehabs (usually for fighting, drinking, or using drugs) are sent back to YGC to wait for a bed in a program that will accept them. Though the hall is designed

to hold low- and mid-level offenders for a few weeks at most, many spend months in the center awaiting placement.

Rasheedah has a simple message for the authorities: "Stop putting people in group homes. Let them work it out from home," she says. "When people run, they go home most of the time anyway."

Last year a pair of tragedies prompted questions about the safety of teens sent to private residential programs. The department shipped Ian Worden, a 17-year-old from the Mission District, to R House, a nonprofit drug rehab in Santa Rosa. He hung himself in an R House closet. His parents have filed a \$2 million wrongful-death suit against the city and R House.

Sacramento authorities sent 16-year-old Nicholas Contreras to the Arizona Boys Ranch—a private facility that draws incarcerated teens from around the country. In March 1998, Contreras began to defecate and vomit on himself. Ranch staffers thought he was faking and wouldn't let him see a doctor. Contreras died of staphylococcus, bronchitis, and pneumonia; as a result, San Francisco's probation department pulled the kids it had exported to Arizona and returned them to YGC.

Another factor contributing to the city's consistently high detention rates is the ongoing war on drugs—a factor nobody at the local level can likely tackle. One kid told us he had spent two years in detention, residential placement, or under supervision for possession of a single rock of crack. The 17-year-old would have spent less time locked up had he been an adult when he was busted.

For all the lurid headlines about gang violence, drug charges are the number one offense in the city: 1996, the most recent year for which statistics are available, saw 735 drug and alcohol cases. Kids picked up by the SFPD for selling bags of pot in Dolores Park are likely to get hit with hard time in the juvie system.

## System 2.0

Youth advocates cheered when the Delancey Street Foundation, an acclaimed nonprofit program for reforming cons and addicts, won a \$5.5 million state grant to overhaul the city's juvenile justice system 18 months ago. A year earlier, Mayor Willie Brown had promised to create a new system that would serve as a national model; he gave the Delancey plan his backing.

In Delancey Street's 85-page Comprehensive Action Plan, a 1997 report it released before winning the grant, the foundation described the problems with the existing programs: "Appropriate treatment and supervision are insufficient and juvenile facilities are intolerable."

The nonprofit's goal is to set up services to track and help kids at every stage of the judicial process. Instead of low-level offenders being dragged to YGC, youths nabbed for small-time crimes in Chinatown, the Tenderloin, the Mission, and Bayview-Hunters Point—and only those neighborhoods—can go to CARC rather than juvenile hall. Accused killers, rapists, arsonists, gun users, felony assaulters, kidnappers, and the like are not eligible; most every other young offender is. Social workers at CARC talk to kids, match them with a mentor, and help them stay out of trouble. The new system could prevent petty delinquents from spending months locked up with harder kids—and steer them away from crime.

Other Delancey Street ventures include a soon-to-be-opened 50-bed girls residential facility, a 30-student "life learning academy," the Mission District "safe corridor," to help kids move peacefully through that neighborhood's gang turfs, and a "safe haven" in Bayview-Hunters Point.

Carol Kizziah heads up CARC. Over the last seven months or so, 110 youths have come through the center. But CARC could have handled more.

Soon after the center opened in May 1998, insiders say, police weren't bringing teens to CARC.

Kizziah told us she's now getting "unbelievable cooperation from the police department."

The Police Department did not return *Bay Guardian* phone calls by press time.

But many young people picked up for minor offenses don't make it to CARC. The probation department only staffs the center from noon to midnight, Monday through Friday, and petty delinquency has a fluid schedule: teens picked up in the wee hours or on Saturday nights go straight to juvenile hall, whether or not they belong there. According to figures from the probation department, almost a third of juvenile arrests occur between midnight and noon; nearly one-fifth take place on weekends. Supporters of the new system say the center should be staffed 24-7.

And Kizziah and other Delancey Street staffers are worried that a lack of clear directives from the city may be keeping the probation department from referring minor offenders, whose types of crimes fall between infractions and major felonies, to CARC and other community-based programs.

"The individual [parole officers] have been good—they're dying to get kids into our school," Kizziah said. "But you have to have directives that say, 'You will do this,' so that every kid who meets the criteria comes through here. Systemically, you have to be very clear."

A worker at a nonprofit youth agency recently discussed the Delancey Street program with detainees in YGC's Co-Ed Unit, which houses the youngest juvenile offenders and those whose crimes are least serious—the kids who should be referred directly to CARC. "Only one of the girls had heard of the CARC—but she hadn't been there," the staffer, who asked that her name not be used, told us. "They were there for really little stuff. CARC should eliminate that unit—it's there for kids who commit really minor crimes," such as fistfighting, shoplifting,

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and small-time drug offenses.

And while Delancey's Bay Area residential program for girls is days away from opening, some low-level offenders are still being shipped off to the Excelsior Girls School in Aurora, Colo.

"A successful juvenile justice system never has as its centerpiece its secure confinement facility," Youth Law Center's Bell said. Nevertheless, more kids are going into San Francisco's detention center than are seen by counselors at CARC.

### Checking out options

The Community Assessment and Referral Center, at 120 Leavenworth in the Tenderloin, feels like an upscale doctor's office.

The floors are carpeted and clean. Framed paintings hang on the walls. To the left of the front door lies a comfy waiting room for families, complete with couch and TV; to the right, a pair of private interview rooms in which kids and staffers talk. A mental health specialist and a physical health technician plow through stacks of binders; when kids come in, they're assessed to make sure they're not ill, injured, or a danger to themselves.

A short flight of stairs leads to an ID room, equipped with a computer-photo and fingerprint device, where staffers make sure that kids referred to the center aren't wanted for heavy crimes. On the third floor, mentors from teen shelter Huckleberry House and longtime youth organizations Horizons Unlimited and Columbia Park Boys and Girls Club counsel youngsters.

A probation officer is on hand to determine whether young offenders should be in the court system; a sheriff's deputy is ready to handle kids who get violent. But they're not often needed.

"Kids are very calm when they come here, because of the people

who talk to them," Kizziah told us. The veteran youth worker put this reporter in the shoes of a teenager fresh off the streets. "We interview you and talk about school, family, substance-abuse issues. Then we call a Delancey Street mentor who will come right over — someone matched for you. We ask, 'What are you into?' and look into suitable nonillegal activities." If the probation officer on duty recommends court, Kizziah said, the mentor "can go to probation intake with you and go to court hearings with you, reestablish you in school, present alternative options."

Among those options are the Delancey Street school on Treasure Island and the Real Alternatives Program charter high school in the Mission. Once the kids are reenrolled, their mentors keep tabs to make sure they're not playing hooky. Teenagers who attend the Delancey Street academy are picked up at home each morning and driven to school.

If Delancey can get kids back in school, pay them some extra attention, and make the education meaningful, the program can claim a major victory. Most of San Francisco's incarcerated juveniles are below grade level in such crucial areas as reading and writing; many haven't been to school in years.

Juvenile Probation Department representatives declined to be interviewed for this story and did not respond to a faxed list of questions.

Longtime critics of the juvenile justice status quo—such as Coleman Advocates, the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, and the Youth Law Center—are putting their weight behind the Delancey Street plan. Now they want the city to make it work.

"We've got the right system in place; it's just getting everybody to do their part. It's there, up and running," said Khaled Taqui-Eddin, a researcher with the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice. "But somehow it's

not entirely working, because the hall population is still high. We've taken the time and invested the resources to bring down the hall population—so it needs to happen." ■