

Iowa View: Troubling changes in Polk County justice

Written by Brigitte Black and Denny Coon

Jun. 15, 2013 |

desmoinesregister.com

ABOUT THE AUTHORSThe REV. DR. BRIGITTE BLACK of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Des Moines and the REV. DENNY COON of Walnut Hills United Methodist Church in Urbandale are leaders of the criminal justice research team of AMOS, the acronym for the community organization called A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy. The column was signed by 15 other clergy in Polk County who are affiliated with AMOS. (See accompanying list). Contact: dennycoon@mchsi.com.

We have a crisis in Polk County.

A study just released by the Iowa Department of Human Rights' Division of Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning (CJJP) shows what we as pastors and leaders of AMOS have been saying for the last year. Polk County has largely abandoned its commitment to a restorative justice approach to juvenile accountability and replaced it with a punitive and increasingly racially biased system of justice.

Among other things, the study reports:

- A 767 percent increase in detention holds for African-American youths for misdemeanor offenses from 2010 to 2012.
- A 156 percent increase in filings of juvenile delinquency on African-American youths during the same period.
- A five-year high for detention holds among all Polk County youths (except for Hispanics for simple misdemeanors).
- And perhaps most disturbing of all, the study showed that in 2012 there were more African-American youths filed on for juvenile delinquency than Caucasian youths.

That might sound innocuous, but it's hard to fathom how that's even statistically possible considering that there are nearly eight times as many Caucasian kids in Polk County (35,035) as there are African-American kids. (4,558).

You might assume, "Well, kids must be committing a lot more crimes." You would be wrong. Juvenile arrests are only up 3 percent for the same time period.

As religious leaders in this community we must demand that these punitive and clearly racially biased practices stop immediately.

We also must ask what is going on?

Four years ago we found that the juvenile bureau of the Polk County Attorney's Office engaged in a "best practices" system holding kids appropriately accountable for the delinquent acts they had committed.

Repeat offenders and violent youths were detained, appeared before Juvenile Court judges and, in the

most serious cases, prosecuted in adult court. Juvenile court officers supervised most of the non-repeat, nonviolent offenders without formal court involvement.

These youths were also held accountable and were required to pay for their misconduct by performing community service, meeting with the victims of their offenses and paying restitution, and by participating in and completing corrective programs like the Re-Thinking Drinking and Chance for Change.

That best-practice system steadily chipped away at detention holds and delinquency petition filings. It kept kids out of our overburdened and underfunded court system. It also did something very important for the futures of those juveniles: It kept any trace of a crime off their records.

If you don't think that's important, we'd refer you back to the case of Richard Eggers, the 68-year-old Wells Fargo employee who was fired for putting a cardboard dime in a laundry machine nearly 50 years ago.

It was impressive for us as pastors and parents in this community to see how well the office of Juvenile Court Services worked with the County Attorney's office. To see how they were guided by research, by best practices, by collaboration with outside groups, by what they learned works when it comes to creating an effective system of accountability for juvenile offenders.

That's what makes this CJJP study so disturbing. Why would demonstrated best practices be abandoned? Why would the Polk County Attorney abandon an approach that was clearly working and was supported by contemporary research on juvenile justice?

What's more, why would best practices be replaced with worst practices? What evidence, what research on juvenile justice are Polk County's juvenile prosecutors relying on for this new approach?

Our AMOS criminal justice research team picked up on these trends over a year ago and, as a result, is developing a school mediation project to aid our middle and high schools in their efforts to address school conflicts before school resource officers are involved and result in detention and court involvement.

We are also engaged in an ongoing process of Court Watching to observe for ourselves what justice looks like in our juvenile courtrooms.

What we have found is that far too many kids are dragged into courtrooms in handcuffs and shackles for minor first time, nonviolent offenses. We are repeatedly dismayed at how often their faces are black and brown.

We have met twice with Polk County Attorney John Sarcone and his new juvenile bureau chief, Frank Severino, to raise these concerns. On both occasions we were told we were just plain wrong and there was nothing to worry about.

The CJJP study shows there is much to worry about.