

## **The Disparity in Criminal Numbers**

**By Lewis W. Diuguid, The Kansas City Star, May 8, 2002**

National and local statistics show we put young people of color in jail and in treatment centers in alarmingly disproportionate numbers.

If as a society we're serious about curbing crime and achieving real justice in this country, reducing those numbers is a place to start. In Jackson County, dozens of people have been meeting since January to try to reverse the negative trend, lower crime and redirect minority youths toward productive lives.

They've been excited by the work of James R. Bell, director of the W. Haywood Burns Institute for Juvenile Justice Fairness and Equity based in San Francisco. On Friday, judicial, law enforcement, corrections, community, elected and mental-health officials in Jackson County will meet with Bell again to explore new possibilities.

"This is a high priority," said David W. Kierst Jr., juvenile officer and director of Jackson County Family Court Services. "I think this is the way to go."

Bell has been studying confinement disparities in such cities as Seattle and Phoenix.

At an April community meeting Kierst said he and others had gone to Seattle and found that after 18 months of working with Bell, that area had reduced the number of minority youths in confinement.

Bell said he had found a disproportionate number of minorities who are arrested and held in detention in Seattle. Black juveniles constitute 12 percent of that population but 36 percent of those detained. Asian youths make up 18 percent of the population but 26 percent of those jailed.

Similar disparities exist here. Jackson County Family Court records for 2000 showed minorities ages 10 to 16 constituted 31 percent of the population. But they made up 64 percent of the youths arrested, 66 percent of those admitted to detention facilities and 76 percent of those sent to residential placement.

A study by the Justice Department and six foundations in 2000 found

that nationwide, minority youths were more likely to be arrested, held in jail, sent to juvenile or adult court for trial, convicted and given longer sentences. The report sponsored by the Justice Department and six foundations said blacks under age 18 made up 15 percent of their age group but 26 percent of those arrested, 31 percent of those sent to juvenile court, 44 percent of those detained in juvenile jails and 32 percent of those found guilty.

In this area, Josephine Brown with the Urban League of Greater Kansas City and Jim Caccamo, a longtime advocate for children, will direct an advisory board to work with Bell to correct the problem.

Bell's method includes analyzing data to determine why a disproportionate number of minority youths are detained and white offenders aren't. His work includes creating alliances with public defenders, prosecutors, judges, police, probation and parole officers and community groups to correct inequities.

Law enforcement and the judicial system shouldn't be influenced by the race or wealth of the accused.

"The sense is that if you have no money and are a person of color, there will be a disparate outcome to the system," Bell said. "I don't think you can eliminate disproportionality, but I think you can reduce it."

Kierst said keeping a youth in detention cost the state \$115 a day, or \$41,975 a year. Kierst and Caccamo said Bell's method could reduce that expense.

Mayor Pro Tem Alvin Brooks said keeping minorities out of the juvenile- justice system can lead to fewer people of color landing in prison.

Cliff Sargeon, a Missouri Mental Health commissioner, said, "The thing is to keep them out in the first place."

Kierst said Bell's involvement would provide "an objective look at what's going on, and we'll be able to deal with the facts and not just perception."

Gloria Joseph, superintendent of Western Missouri Mental Health Center, said, "This gives me hope."

Hope is a good beginning.

To reach Lewis W. Diuguid, a member of The Star's Editorial Board, call (816) 234-4723 or send e-mail to [Ldiuguid@kcstar.com](mailto:Ldiuguid@kcstar.com).