

## **Minority point of view**

### **Maryvale study could level the justice system for all Arizona's youth**

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For years, people have been lining up on opposite sides of an inflammatory debate about why there are disproportionate numbers of minority youth in the juvenile justice system.

One side says institutional racism is responsible. The other side insists that minority youth are just more prone to getting into trouble.

One Valley community has the potential to lift the discussion above those unproductive mantras and onto a plane where solutions are possible.

The place is Maryvale and the opportunity comes from Arizona's participation in the national Building Blocks for Youth Initiative. At the invitation of the state Supreme Court, the group is involved in a process designed to get to the deeper "whys" behind numbers that should make all Arizonans uneasy.

Statistics reveal a system in which minority youth show up in juvenile court, county jails and state prison in higher proportions than their numbers in the population would suggest they should. African-American youth, for instance, make up 4 percent of the juvenile population in Maricopa County, but they make up 9 percent of those referred to juvenile court and 12 percent of those sent to state prison. The numbers are also disproportionate for Latino and Native American youth.

The Building Blocks initiative has begun by looking at the Maryvale community for clues. For instance, the child may have to overcome the temptations of an area where drugs are readily available and face the risks of breaching a rival neighborhood's turf just to get to court-ordered drug treatment sessions. The lack of transportation can raise another barrier to success.

Once the challenges - and strengths - of a community are well understood, the policies and practices of law enforcement, justice and detention systems will be analyzed in the context of that community. Few would argue that the system was designed to defeat minority youth, but it was generally designed around a middle-class, White model. If that model puts minority youth at an unfair disadvantage, Arizona needs to know where and how that is happening.

In 16 to 18 months, researchers will be ready to make recommendations for changes, says Jesus Diaz, program specialist with the Administrative Office of the Courts.

It's a long time to wait for a solution to a problem that has endured for too long. But the process of examination can identify opportunities for incremental improvements. It can

also help community members understand the role they play in helping assure youth success.

Best of all, it rises above superficial arguments to focus on what has to be the real goal: a fair shot at success for all Arizona youth.