

New Jersey study indicts jailing of mentally ill youth

John Levine

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Because of these conditions, attempted suicides have become commonplace at these detention centers. These detained children made more than 90 suicide threats or attempts in the first eight months of this year alone, according to the report.

By law, the juvenile detention centers can house only two types of people: violent offenders, who could endanger their community, and those who have repeatedly missed court appearances. These facilities were meant to be last-resort temporary shelters before court appearances or permanent placement elsewhere. Instead, New Jersey officials now use them as a dumping ground for mentally ill children, rather than provide them safe housing and medical care.

New Jersey's 17 county detention facilities commit about 11,000 teenagers every year, an average of more than 900 per day. Of these, 21 percent have severe mental health problems requiring "acute psychiatric care" and by law do not belong there. Many more have less urgent but still significant need for psychological help for "substance abuse and disruptive disorders."

The average length of stay is about 27 days but varies widely. In the state's wealthiest county, the average stay is 17 days, while in the worst-performing county, it is 55 days. One in five children stay more than 60 days, and for those who stay more than 60 days, the average length of stay is 125 days. The investigators discovered one adolescent who had been in a center for 527 days and a number who had been there for more than 300 days. The legal limit is 30 days.

The facilities, forced to accommodate more than their physical capacity, crowd the children in obscenely tight quarters. The *Star-Ledger* wrote about a specific facility: "The Camden detention center was built in the

1970s to house 37 youths, but has operated far beyond capacity for many years, according to monitors. It hit its peak of 131 in August 2003, when 94 kids were sleeping on floors or desk shelves."

The report noted that in a few instances up to six youth slept together in an 8-by-11-foot room. The report notes that "ironically" the mentally ill youth, who should not have been placed there in the first place, stay an average of a week longer than the rest of the children.

The report provided grim details on three individual cases uncovered by the monitors.

One boy attempted suicide five times, showered with his clothes on, and urinated on the floor. He pulled the fire alarm twice within one hour. He threatened to beat up a staff member and refused to take food from white people, threatening to kill them if they tried to give it to him. When he was put in isolation, he was found attempting to hang himself from a light fixture with elastic from his underwear tied around his neck.

Another boy was treated for drinking the chemicals out of an ice pack. He displayed suicidal behavior on multiple occasions. His sheets were removed from his room when he tried to hang himself. Later on, staff members found him in his room with a screw in his mouth. When they tried to convince him to spit it out, he swallowed it and was brought to the hospital. In addition, he was charged for assaulting three staff members.

A 16-year-old revealed during his evaluation that his mother died, and that he wished to die as well. He destroyed several mattresses so he could make figurines out of the foam inside. During his stay, he made 14 suicide attempts. Even when he was handcuffed, he managed to rip his shirt and attempt to tie it around his neck.

The report was issued by the Office of the Child Advocate, a new independent commission created by the state in the wake of another highly publicized tragedy that implicated the Department of Youth and Welfare Services, when four children were found starved by their adoptive parents. A week before this report was published, a 17-year-old youth committed suicide in a juvenile jail, and the Child Advocate placed blame on county officials.

The study points out that this is not just a New Jersey issue: “As reported by the U.S. General Accounting Office on July 13, 2003, child welfare and juvenile justice officials across the United States estimated that over 12,700 youth in 18 states were placed in those systems in order to access mental health services in 2001. Approximately 9,000 of those youth in those States were placed in the juvenile justice system.” A 1999 report by the US Surgeon General showed that one in five detainees at these centers across the country have serious emotional problems, the same percentage as in New Jersey.

The background of the detainees was not the focus of the report. However, a separate 1999 study showed that African-Americans and Hispanics accounted for 60 percent and 18 percent of the detained youth, respectively. In the general population, they account for 19 percent and 14 percent, respectively. There is no information on the income levels of the children’s families, but it is clear that these problems disproportionately affect the poor.

With every new tragedy, state officials respond with palliative measures and assurances that the issue will be studied further. What is needed, among many other things, is a massive investment in safe homes and facilities for mentally ill children, so they do not have to languish in these prisons while waiting for a spot to open up. The issue has been studied numerous times, but neither Democratic nor Republican administrations have shown any inclination to make such an investment.

In fact, the lack of decent facilities only grows more severe. In June, a private facility in Newark that treated boys with serious behavioral problems closed down. At the same time, the state began moving children out in preparation for a possible closing down of New Jersey’s only state-run psychiatric hospital for kids.



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