2013

Schooling in Illinois Detention Centers and Youth Prisons: What Works?

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December 3, 2013

In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the MA in the Journalism program at Columbia College Chicago.

SCHOOLING IN ILLINOIS DETENTION CENTERS AND YOUTH PRISONS: WHAT WORKS?

Deficiencies in Illinois Youth Prisons

When Principal Rita Adamitis interviewed candidates for teaching positions at St. Charles youth prison in late September, 2013, she hoped they could make up for a staff shortage at the prison. Schools in detention centers and youth prisons across the state suffer either from a shortage of teachers or educational programs, ultimately failing to properly educate kids behind bars.

This understaffing and lack of educational programming results from a state budget crisis, according to a juvenile justice report by the Illinois State Bar Association, a lawyer's group dedicated to promoting improvements in justice.

This report stated Illinois spends over $100 million each year to lock up nearly 1,200 youth in state correctional facilities, and even more to incarcerate more than 2,000 youth while they await trial in detention centers across the state.

Funding for intervention programs for at-risk and detained youth, which received about $22 million for the fiscal year 2013, was cut by 15 percent this year, according to an annual report by the Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission.

Four years ago, these programs received twice as much as they do today.

There are six state correctional facilities, also known as youth centers, which are located in Chicago, St. Charles, Kewanee,

Warrenville, Harrisburg and Pere-Marquette.

Adamitis said out of 27 teachers total, the St. Charles youth prison is 12 teachers short and new teachers most likely won't set foot in a classroom until next year.

"It could take up to six to seven months," said Adamitis, who has worked at the Illinois youth center in St. Charles (IYC-St. Charles) for six years. "Not having the correct number of staff here really hurts our programs."

Heidi Mueller, executive director of the Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission, said there are difficulties in hiring and retaining qualified staff at youth prisons, especially those in rural areas.

"It's hard to find people in remote places. There isn't as much of a pool to draw from." said Mueller.

She added that about half of the state youth prisons, Harrisburg, Pere-Marquette and Kewanee are located in rural areas.

The teacher to student ratio at St. Charles youth prison is five students to one teacher, according to a 2012 monitoring report by the John Howard Association, a juvenile justice reform organization.

In its 2011 report, the John Howard Association stated the ratio was 11 students to one teacher.

In August, the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice released a monthly youth profile, which is the most recent data of detained youth at all state prisons.

This document stated that a total of 904 youth were detained at all

youth prisons in the state; 99 at IYC-Chicago, 197 at IYC-Harrisburg, 240 at IYC-Kewanee, 39 at IYC-Pere Marquette, 286 at IYC-St. Charles and 43 at IYC-Warrenville.

Out of all students detained, 626 youth were enrolled in school and 509 were enrolled online, according to the monthly profile. Also, 259 students earned credits online, 7 earned General Education Development degrees and four earned high school diplomas.

Just a month earlier, 660 youth were enrolled in school. Out of these enrolled detainees, 527 were enrolled online, 102 earned credits online, 19 earned General Education Development degrees and two earned high school diplomas.

"Everyone knows the longer you're out of school, the less you remember and the worse your skills become. This is even more true of kids with special needs," said Adamitis. "Even if we got them to the point where they could read, write and do arithmetic, they would lose a lot of those skills by not being in school."

IYC-St. Charles offers core classes to students such as English, health and general science. Adamitis said the rate at which a released youth returns to prison or a detention center, is about 50 percent among all youth centers in the state.

"If you go back to the same situation that got you here in the first place, what are your chances of doing anything differently?" said Adamitis.

Kanako Ishida, policy research analyst for the Juvenile Justice Initiative, recently visited the St. Charles facility and described the educational programs at the center as "beyond horrible." She added that some classes have been canceled because there aren't enough

teachers at the facility.

"What do you expect them to do everyday?" said Ishida. "It's a child's right to have a proper education-that's the law."

Ishida said students at this youth prison don't get any homework, never read or study and aren't allowed to bring textbooks to class.

"The highest level of academic activity was a GED program, and, for me, that class was remedial," said Christopher Huff, former detainee at St. Charles youth prison.

"For high achieving students who go into the system, the educational programs can be ineffective."

But, he said once the teacher found out the work was too easy for him, she made him her assistant.

"I was able to get a different set of knowledge and skills that other students weren't able to do--this helped me gain higher grade levels on standardized tests." said Huff. "So, I look at my case as an anomaly."

Huff, now a graduate student at the University of Chicago, also spent time at the Juvenile Temporary Detention Center in Chicago. He said his mother spent her life savings to get him released.

"Ever since then, I promised myself I wouldn't let her down," said the 23-year-old. "Now her main concern is that I graduate grad school. I'm two semesters away from making that dream happen."

He said being locked up makes it even harder for detained youth to obtain a formal education.

"The natural stresses of being locked in a room for 20 hours a day--when you go to the classroom the last thing you're thinking about is the lesson. This is your free time." said Huff.

The graduate student said there is a 20-hour-lockdown at St. Charles and when students go to class, that's one of the few times they have to socialize.

"I think there's a level of resentment that builds up naturally as being locked in a cell and being totally open to the whims of the guards," said Huff. "Having no control over when you eat or when you can talk to another human being--there's a rage that builds up over time that detained youth never have an opportunity to release."

Class Size Matters

Huff said when he was detained back in 2007, the classroom size at St. Charles was 15 students and at the Juvenile Temporary Detention Center it was 20 to 25 students.

Other youth prisons in the state currently have larger numbers.

In a 2013 monitoring report by the John Howard Association, the Illinois youth center in Chicago (IYC-Chicago) received an unsatisfactory rating for its educational staffing. The report said the teacher-to-student ratio in general education is one teacher to 13 youth while the teacher-to-student ratio in special education is one teacher to 27 youth.

"That's awful. Twenty seven students to any classroom is too many, especially to students who are behind," said Perie Reiko Koyama, author of the Status of Education in Pre-Trial Juvenile Detention. "Special ed students need to have the smallest setting possible. You can't ignore their deficits."

The previous year, the teacher-to-student ratio in special education at IYC Chicago was one teacher to every 10 students.

The Illinois Administrative Code limits teacher-to-student ratios in special education between one teacher to five students and one teacher to 15 students. So IYC Chicago's special education staffing was extremely deficient.

Similar to IYC-Chicago, the Illinois youth center at Kewanee (IYC-Kewanee) received an unsatisfactory rating for its educational staffing in a 2013 report by the John Howard Association. In special education, the teacher-to-student ratio is one teacher to 30 students. Last year, IYC-Kewanee, a male youth prison, had a ratio of one teacher to 20 students in special education.

Koyama said special educations students not only have academic issues but behavioral issues as well. She taught special education middle school students in Washington, D.C., for the past two years.

"When they're not performing on grade level, they become frustrated," said the author, who taught middle school students for the Teach for America program.

She said students began acting chaotic when the class size shifted from six students to 12.

"The students became agitated. It was a nightmare," said Koyama.

The John Howard Association reported the teacher-to-student ratios at IYC-Kewanee and IYC-Chicago fail to satisfy minimum standards of care and fail to ensure that Illinois provides detained youth with a free

and appropriate education.

Unlike Kewanee and Chicago, the Illinois youth center at Warrenville (IYC-Warrenville) has a satisfactory teacher-to-student ratio, with one teacher to seven students in general education and one teacher to 10 students in special education, according to a 2012 report from the John Howard Association.

Also, in its 2012 monitoring report, the John Howard Association noted that Warrenville has a number of highly innovative arts programs aimed at reducing violence, increasing academic achievement and decreasing recidivism.

The previous year, the John Howard Association stated in its monitoring report that the Warrenville prison was nearly full staffed, with a teacher to student ratio of one teacher to seven students.

Principal Sandi Ivemeyer said students at Warrenville, which is a female youth prison, attend class six hours a day Monday through Friday. She added that students attend classes year round and that they can even earn their high school diploma or G.E.D. at the prison.

"On average, about 10 to 20 students out of 40 earn their diplomas," said Ivemeyer, who has been principal at Warrenville for six years. "When released, our students are required to go back to school as part of their parole; if they don't go to school, they come back here."

After an online education pilot program was introduced to all youth prisons last year, administrators and staff at Warrenville had nothing but positive feedback about the program. The staff indicated that the program allows youth to work at their own pace on computers, according to the John Howard Association.

However, many students, especially special needs students, either became frustrated or bored with the program because there was not a teacher present to guide them.

In its monitoring report, the John Howard Association observed one student with mental illness struggling to use the program. It also observed another youth skip the explanatory section of the lesson and begin selecting random answers.

Ivemeyer said representatives from the organization come to the prison for only a couple of hours and then make a report about what the faculty is doing wrong. She added that John Howard needs to spend quality time at Warrenville to make those kind of assessments.

"In one of the reports, they talk to a kid who said teachers don't help the students; they put that in the report without looking into it or interviewing teachers," said Ivemeyer. "I think that's wrong, they take what the kids say and go with it. Believe it or not, some of these kids might not be totally honest with what's going on."

Also, at Kewanee, many youth disapproved of the online educational program, saying they spent much of their time skipping over questions and lessons they didn't understand because a teacher wasn't readily available to assist them.

Deficiencies at the Chicago Juvenile Temporary Detention Center

Juvenile detention centers in Illinois are also suffering from a deficiency in educational programs. There are 17 detention centers in the state in Adams, Cook, Champaign, DuPage, Franklin, Kane, Knox, Lake, LaSalle, Madison, McLean, Peoria, Sangamon, St. Clair, Vermilion, Will and Winnebago counties.

Youth centers and juvenile detention centers are administered by state and local agencies. The Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice operates the youth centers and each county operates its own detention center.

If troubled youth are convicted, they are sent to the youth center. But, if only arrested, youth are sent to a detention center and remain there until they can be released without a formal charge or until the case is over.

During pre-trial, youth complete an intake screening and have a detention hearing, according to a policies and procedures report by the Illinois Justice Juvenile Commission. The screening process determines whether youth can be detained or released, based on their behavior.

Detention centers in Illinois only hold youth ages 10 through 17. After being detained for a period of time, youth can either be released to their guardian or, depending on their behavior, sent to informal probation.

After informal probation comes a delinquency petition, and after the petition comes a discretionary transfer.

Huff said his experience at the Juvenile Temporary Detention Center in Chicago was chaotic. He added that the educational programs there were teaching students discipline rather than academics.

"The grading process wasn't a measurement of your level of intellect or critical thinking, but your level of discipline-- Can you stay in a seat? Can you not argue back at the teacher?" said the former detainee. "It was focused on more socio-emotional learning rather than intellectual learning."

He said this learning method is disadvantageous to students who can behave in a classroom.

Another former detainee said he remembers his experience as more of a daycare rather than school.

Seven years ago, Miguel Rodriguez was sent to the Juvenile Temporary Detention Center in Chicago, also known as Nancy B. Jefferson Alternative High School, said he never did any math problems in his algebra class.

"All we had to do is copy a paragraph from a textbook for our assignments," said the former detainee, now 21. "After that we could get on the computers and log onto MySpace and Facebook."

Rodriguez said he attended school only twice a week. He added that education at the detention center was non-existent.

"It's as if the administrators were just checking a box just so they can say they were offering it," said Rodriguez. "No positive results were produced from these programs."

Rodriguez said there was one teacher to about eight students per classroom. He was at the center only a few weeks before he was released.

Unfortunately, he was arrested again and sent back to the same detention center the following year. But this time around, attending school wasn't even an option.

"They told me no school; I didn't ask them why," said Rodriguez, who is now a program director for an after-school arts program called Graffiti Zone. "All we did was watch TV, play cards and draw."

Rodriguez was arrested both times for painting on walls in different areas throughout the city. After being released the second time, Rodriguez joined a local youth council, where he later became an art teacher.

This youth council, called Broader Urban Involvement and Urban Development (B.U.I.L.D.), allowed Rodriguez to participate in organizing conferences, workshops and discussions involving world issues.

"I began to see what was going on in my community more consciously. I wanted to do something about it," said Rodriguez, who first joined B.U.I.L.D. when he was 18. "It pushed me to become an advocate for change."

Rodriguez said it's important to have a great educational system where it's needed most -- in detention centers.

"One way of keeping people from returning to the system is by educating them even more," said Rodriguez.

He added that one way these detention centers can educate these at-risk youth is by providing career readiness programs.

"Teach them how to fill out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid [FAFSA], job apps and how to answer questions in job interviews," he said. "Give them tutoring, math and reading skills."

Rodriguez also mentors former juvenile offenders at a job training program at West Town Academy Alternative High School. This program offers a 10-week paid internship to mentees.

School to Prison Pipeline

He said he also hopes to work in a juvenile detention center so he can inform detainees of the school-to-prison pipeline.

"It starts with pushing out students from school with detentions and suspensions," said Rodriguez. "Once you're out of school, you're more likely to have interactions with the police, going to court and getting arrested."

He added that once an inmate is in the cycle, he or she is more likely to return to the system.

"I've been through every part of the school-prison pipeline," said Rodriguez. "Students should be more aware of what's going on in the scope of things."

Unfortunately, this deficiency in educating detained youth is not a problem only in Illinois, but nationwide.

National Statistics

A 2012 study by the *Journal of Correctional Education* surveyed 340 administrators from juvenile detention centers in 47 states. This study, called the Status of Education in Pre-Trial Juvenile Detention, said only 66.9 percent participated in No Child Left Behind assessments, which are mandatory annual tests for public school students that are aimed at specific academic areas.

The study also stated nearly three-quarters of those administrators didn't always receive students' academic records and more than 20 percent didn't systematically develop or use individualized education plans (IEPs).

It also said fewer than half of the programs offered transitional services for exiting students.

Are there solutions?

Former detainees and educational experts both agree that improving the status of educational programs in the juvenile justice system is vital.

Author Koyama said providing a high quality education, with more teachers and classroom resources, to detainees is important because it can give them enough confidence to get back in school.

"The child can be calm and immersed in an environment that's not necessarily their home life," said Koyama. "It should be about rehabilitation, not punishment; Make the kids feel good about themselves because you're dealing with the most vulnerable section of children."

She added that at some detention centers, students weren't allowed to have pencils because they could be used as a weapon.

"They want to give kids art classes but tell them they can't have scissors," said Koyama. "How are you supposed to run a school when it feels like a jail?"

The author said some prison law enforcement officials, such as sheriffs, act as principals but don't have a background in education.

"How do you find the differences between educating a child and punishing a child?" said Koyama.

To improve deficiencies such as this, Huff spends his free time

helping the Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission come up with better educational programs for at-risk youth.

He volunteers through the youth advisory board.

"The goal is to get young people who have been part of the juvenile justice system; they target folks like me to come together to inform policy." said Huff.

He said when these detainees get sent back to public school, most of the attention is put on academic performance and not enough attention is being paid to the psychological and social impact of being locked up.

"How do we give those juveniles the opportunity to release that negative energy that is building up as a product by being placed in those confinements?" said the former detainee. "I think that would have a much bigger impact on academic performance than any standardized system or any new technical measurements to our academic programming can ever do."

The graduate student said some of the stress doesn't go away until these detainees are able to talk about it in public.

"It's hard to be open when something you did is considered illegal and condemned by society," said Huff. "You have to carry that weight with you everywhere you go; the post traumatic stress never goes away."

Huff said society shouldn't give up on kids in the juvenile justice system yet.

"We just got the message on public education with all the research

that shows what happens when you improve early childhood and the impact it has in high school and college," said the graduate student. "Let's not be late when it comes to improving the system in a bigger effort to prevent the criminal justice population from exploding."

So, how can Illinois improve educational programming in youth prisons and detention centers?

With a much larger amount of state funding, these facilities can afford to buy more educational resources such as computers and textbooks, and be able to hire more teachers.

A fully staffed facility should be able to focus on each student's academic progress and provide more classroom hours for students.

George Timberlake, chair of the Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission, said these students only receive a couple of hours of instruction a day.

"That's absolutely no good enough, no matter how it's produced. We have to get to a point where a kid in a juvenile justice facility gets the same amount of time for education as a kid who's in a high school down the street."

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Pitch

I plan to pitch this story to WBEZ. Patrick Smith did a story in July for WBEZ about inadequate staffing at the Chicago youth prison. My thesis story and video could expand upon that, since my thesis focuses on all youth prisons and detention centers in the state.