



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Public Defender Jon Minsloff speaks at a Barrios Unidos press conference about how Santa Cruz received high marks for its efforts in juvenile justice.

County lauded for juvenile justice methods

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SANTA CRUZ — Latino youth in the U.S. juvenile-justice system receive harsher treatment than their Caucasian counterparts charged with the similar offenses, according to a national report released last week by a Washington, D.C.-based youth justice watchdog group.

However, Santa Cruz's juvenile-justice system received high marks for its initiation of several promising approaches. The county was cited as one of two nationwide to reduce the Latino youth incarceration rate. The other was Multnomah County, Ore.

Still, community leaders say more can be done to equalize the playing field.

"There are programs in place throughout the system to deal with people who are drug-addicted and who have mental-health issues," said Public Defender Jon Minsloff at a press conference at Barrios Unidos on Monday. "Unfortunately, the resources available to Latino youth and adults is not as great as that for the general population."

Si Se Puede is the only alcohol and drug treatment program available for Spanish-speaking Latino youth, he said. In the county's adult system, only one psychiatrist who accepts court appointments speaks Spanish.

According to the report "Donde Esta La Justicia?" (Where is the justice?) by Building



Francisco Garcia talked about how the Si Se Puede program worked to help him.

Blocks for Youth, 35 percent of the county's youth, ages 10 to 17, are Latino. In 1998, they represented nearly 64 percent of the youth held in the county's Juvenile Hall. That dropped to 49.7 percent in 2001 thanks to efforts to combat disproportionate minority confinement.

Statewide, Latino youth are confined 69 percent more than Caucasian youth, the report says. In California, Latino youth make up 39 percent of the youth population, but account for more than 46 percent of those in residential juvenile facilities.

In Santa Cruz, officials have worked toward detention reform by employing more bilingual staff and providing cultural training. Surveys of youth and their families helped pinpoint barriers to services and family involvement. Community-based alternatives to detention were created, including mentorship programs, and an array of treatment, supervision and placement options were developed.

"It's not being soft on crime," said Marcia Rincon with Building Blocks for Youth of Santa Cruz. "It's about assessing (Latino youth) differently."

The system has worked for 17-year-old Francisco Garcia, who recently enrolled in Si Se Puede. He was given a mentor, a former drug user, who reminds him of "the good things that are going to happen to me in my life," Garcia said. As a result, he has been drug-free for four months.

"If I'd had help the first time (I was incarcerated), I bet I would have stayed clean," Garcia said.

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