

Juvi system seeing more girls incarcerated

By Carrie Johnson, NPR

The number of boys locked up for crimes has dropped over the past decade, but the number of young women detained in jails and residential centers has moved in the other direction.

Experts say girls make up the fastest-growing segment of the juvenile justice system, with more than 300,000 arrests and criminal charges every year. A new report by the Georgetown Center on Poverty, Inequality, and Public Policy says the system isn't doing enough to help those young girls.

Most girls who wind up tangled in the justice system have family problems, trauma or a history of abuse, says Georgetown University professor Peter Edelman, who co-authored the report, "Improving the Juvenile Justice System for Girls."

More than half of the girls detained these days don't commit big crimes. More often their transgressions are things like skipping school, breaking curfew or running away from home, says Edelman, who has studied justice up close since the 1970s.

"Getting them back into school and getting them back on a path without invoking the sanctions of the juvenile and criminal justice system," Edelman says, "that is so much better in terms of not leaving those wounds and scars and preserving the possibilities for the future."

Jabriera Handy says she is still living with some of those scars.

Four years ago, Handy was locked up in the Baltimore City Detention Center. Her 69-year-old grandmother had died of a

heart attack shortly after they had a fight. Handy was charged with second degree murder in the adult system and spent 11 months in the detention center.

One day, on the way to school behind bars, the jail was put on lockdown because someone had been stabbed to death.

“I was looking, and I saw the man was just laying there with a limp body,” she says.

She says they continued on to school like nothing had happened.

“So it wasn’t like anybody came to us to talk about what [we had] just seen,” she says.

The Georgetown report says no juveniles – girls or boys – belong in adult jails and prisons. It also says prosecutors should never lock up kids on technicalities, like violating probation or other minor offenses.

That doesn’t sound right to longtime prosecutor James Backstrom.

“We’re talking about kids that are violating curfew laws, being truant from school [and] violating court orders,” Backstrom says. “Do we need the authority to pick those kids up? I think we do.”

Backstrom, the district attorney in Dakota County, Minn., says not all of those juveniles need to be in detention.

“[But] if you ignore the small issue, you might not get to the big issue before it’s too late,” he says.

Backstrom says he agrees with Edelman on a key point in the report, that it makes sense to devote resources to kids.

“I’ve long believed if we’re going to reduce crime in America in the long run, we have to start with our kids, with early

intervention and prevention efforts," he says.

Handy, who got out two years ago, says she is doing her part. She wants to become a social worker and is visiting girls at a detention center in Maryland to try to listen and help.