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Pima Gets Handle on Violent Crime by Girls

Numbers not rising locally; mentoring part of strategy shift

By Patty Machelor

Mean girls are everywhere these days – or so one might think.

In the movie realm, there's Mean Girls, in which teens are merely mean but not violent.

Locally, there are scant but chilling details in a May 14 police report, in which an ice-cream vendor reported three teen girls claimed they had a weapon and tried to rob him as he pushed his cart.

Other recent stories include last May's videotaped beating of girls by girls in a wealthy Chicago suburb, and a 12-year-old Baltimore girl who was stomped into a coma by girls at a birthday party last February.

Teenage boys still commit four times as many violent acts as girls nationally, the U.S. Department of Justice reports. But a generation ago, they committed 10 times as many.

In Pima County, girls' arrests for violent crimes increased from 37 in 1990 to 63 in 2003, mirroring a national trend of growing violence among girls younger than 18.

Fortunately, these numbers are not continuing to rise locally even as the youth population grows.

In looking at the last 13 years, arrests for violent crimes by girls peaked here in 1999 – help the Columbine year – with 92 for such charges as aggravated assault, domestic violence, child abuse and robbery.

In 2003, that number had dropped to 63 for an overall decrease of 32 percent.

Local professionals aren't sure of the reasons, but believe more focus on rehabilitation and fewer school referrals to Juvenile Court could be driving the numbers down.

There has been a philosophical shift at the Juvenile Court Center in recent years, said Presiding Juvenile Court Judge Hector Campoy.

Over the last six months, for example, the center at 2225 E. Ajo Way has been using a new approach with the girls that includes role models instead of simply a consequence-based system. The girls fill out lengthy packets on their lives and have one-on-one mentoring.

They are also encouraged to call back to the center as needed after their release.

“Everything that you can do to make these kids more confident is what you should do, but that doesn’t mean we’re not holding them accountable,” said Program Coordinator Kim Chumley of the Detention Mentor Step-Up Program. The program will eventually be used with all detainees.

“In some cases, these officers might be the first adults they’ve ever developed a relationship with,” she said.

Detention Officer Shannon Lanning, 25, said Step Up helps her understand why the girls are there, and how to help them avoid coming back.

“Before we often had no idea what they’d gone through,” she said. “The kids I mentor, we have good bonds. I know their needs, their mistakes. You have to lift them up and get them on the road again.”

Sigrid, a current detainee, was first held for assaulting a schoolmate two years ago when she was 14. She is now accused of threatening her sister with a knife.

She said she wasn’t afraid when the police first came for her “because where I used to live, the police were always coming to my house for my brother and sister.”

“When I get angry, sometimes I explode,” she said. “Sometimes I hold it in until sometimes it just comes out.”

She said Step Up is helping her “become mature.”

“The more you express yourself and let out what’s going on, the better you feel,” Sigrid said.

Compared with their male counterparts, females jailed for violent crimes are much more likely to report previous sexual or physical abuse, ranging from 40 percent to 70 percent, according to criminologist Meda Chesney-Lind, a national expert on females in the justice system.

Howard Goldwyn, a retired counselor who has volunteered at the Juvenile Center for four years, doesn’t find those percentages surprising.

“Sometimes we get into some pretty personal stuff and they start talking about abuse. I’m guessing, but when you get a group of 25 in a pod, at least 20 of them have been abused by a parent or a relative or a boyfriend,” he said.

Gangs of girls have not increased here recently, said Tucson police Sgt. Mark Nisbet, who oversees gang units. However, he sees more females getting involved in violent situations through their relationships with male gang members.

He estimates about 75 percent of the girls he sees are in violent romantic relationships or are from homes where there is abuse – or, at the very least, a total lack of parenting.

Nicole, 16, dreams of becoming a mathematician but said she first has to face up to her problems.

It’s her second time in detention. This time she is accused of running away while on probation. The first time she attempted to steal a car with friends.

She recently had to spend 48 hours in lockdown after making a threatening gesture at a detention officer. “I’ve learned my lesson,” she said.

She likes Step Up: “It really makes you think about your wrongs, how you’ve hurt and affected others,” she said.

Judy Bowers, head of counseling for Tucson Unified School District, said reaching kids early is a goal. They’ve been able to hire more elementary-school counselors in recent years and she credits that with helping to keep down the number of kids referred to court.

“I think we’re doing a much better job teaching kids how to get along with each other and I think it’s really making a difference,” she said.

Another reason for the drop might be the county’s School Multi-Agency Response Team, which expanded to several area schools in 2000.

Prosecutors and law enforcers meet each month with school officials and discuss which cases should be sent to Juvenile Court, said Deputy County Attorney Pete Hochuli.

The Columbine shooting near Denver in 1999 led to more school referrals here, he said. “I think that schools were being overly cautious for protection of students and as a result there were more referrals,” he said.

Referrals to Juvenile Court are a last resort, said Simi Vanisi, a school resource officer at Doolen Middle School. “Most of the time it doesn’t advance to that point. Most of the time it’s handled by the school,” he said.

Chesney-Lind praised the trends in Pima County.

“In your criminal justice system, it sounds like they’re not allowing the inappropriate detention of these girls compared to what we’re seeing nationally,” she said.

“People there are understanding they need to pull these offenses apart a little bit and not necessarily lock these girls up.”

Contact reporter Patty Machelor at 807-7789 or at pmachelo@azstarnet.com.

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