

Screening for mental illnesses prevents jail time

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The significant drop in juveniles committed to Texas Youth Commission facilities since 2000 can be attributed to increased screening for mental health issues before they enter the criminal justice system, said members of a panel on youth justice issues Thursday.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank, hosted the panel to discuss ways to keep juvenile offenders in Texas from becoming adult criminals. The panel included state Rep. Jerry Madden, R-Plano, who is vice chairman of the House Committee on Corrections.

In 2000, the commission committed 2,558 new offenders. In 2008, the number of commitments dropped to 1,582, according to the commission's Web site.

"It means we're doing something right," Madden said.

During the 81st legislative session, lawmakers cut more than \$100 million from state youth lockup budgets and reallocated \$48 million to juvenile probation departments, according to the foundation's Web site.

Texas juvenile criminal justice officials were authorized to screen incoming youth for mental disorders in 2001. To reduce the size of the commission's population, lawmakers have stressed evaluating the offender's mental health before committing them, Madden said. These offenders can then be diverted into the mental health system instead of the criminal justice system, Madden said.

Panelists at the forum agreed that mental health issues are a growing problem within the juvenile criminal justice system. Harris County already employs one psychiatrist to evaluate youth offenders. Harvey Hetzel, the county's chief juvenile probation officer, said they will use their portion of the \$48 million in funds to hire at least one more.

Fifteen to 20 percent of juveniles in the Harris County system are diagnosed with serious mental issues, he said.

Juvenile offense officials at the panel said they are seeing rising numbers of mental health issues in young offenders, but Hetzel said the rising numbers could be attributed to the criminal justice system getting better at identifying problems.

Vicki Spriggs, the executive director of the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission said it is not uncommon for young offenders to be prescribed several different medications for mental and behavioral disorders. These youth offenders come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and cannot afford to consistently see the same doctor, she said.

Michele Deitch, a professor in the LBJ School of Public Affairs, advocates for smaller, more local residential settings for juveniles instead of state institutions. In a local setting, children can rely on teachers, mentors, families and local employers for jobs, she said.

"These community facilities benefit public safety by pointing youth in the right direction," Deitch said.

Some 14-to-17-year-olds are tried as adults, which means they may end up in prisons and jails with adults. Deitch said the number of teens in state jails should be limited to only those who have committed the most heinous offenses.

"They don't become an adult just because we label them as an adult," she said.

Madden said that the reforms have already saved money, but legislators need to see significant results from the policy changes before the next legislative session, when they will be facing a budget shortfall.




Kari Rosenfeld/The Daily Texan

State Rep. Jerry Madden, R-Plano, spoke as a part of a panel on youth justice issues for the Texas Public Policy Foundation. Marc Levin is the director of the Texas Public Policy Foundation Center for Effective Justice. Levin helped facilitate the panel Thursday.

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