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How Sacramento turns at-risk kids into criminals

Why do children with serious mental-health issues end up in juvenile hall instead of a doctor's office?

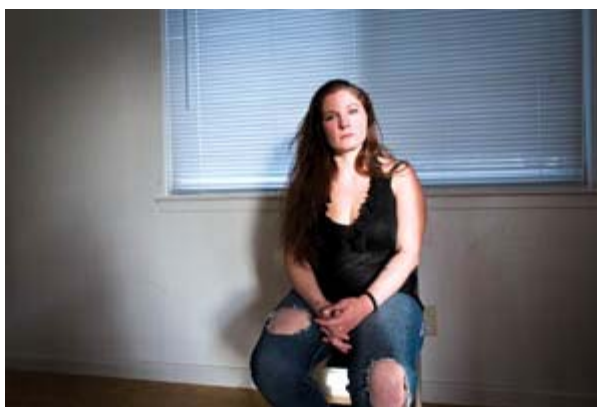
By [Raheem F. Hosseini](#)

Ashley Drake is trying to be something other than a cautionary tale. In a north Sacramento law enforcement office, the 22-year-old waits on a probation officer, the same one she's had since childhood. It's time again to reach for the straight and narrow.

She's never had much help in that department.

Afflicted with bipolar disorder, clinical depression and avoidant personality disorder symptoms, Drake's childhood is a blur of family discord, 10 juvenile hall detentions and 13 separate group home placements. Therapy, counseling and treatment? They never happened. Instead, she began self-medicating with hard drugs as an adolescent, and has since graduated to adult jails.

"A lot of my issues were having to do with me being split from my family," she says. "Just throwing us inside of a room doesn't really help."



First detained at the age of 12 for stealing beef jerky, Ashley Drake, now 22, is struggling to escape the juvenile hall-to-prison pipeline that inordinately impacts psychologically troubled youth. She's getting help from Turning Point Community Solutions, a local mental health provider that got her into subsidized housing.

PHOTO BY STEVEN CHEA

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But that's increasingly the only option for society's most plagued youth—deeply troubled boys and girls, warehoused in the absence of decent alternatives.

According to a comprehensive analysis completed in September for the Sacramento County Criminal Justice Cabinet, nearly 43 percent of the average daily juvenile hall population received mental health services this year, a 19-percent increase over 2000. Of the 84 children who were served, 52 received psychotropic drugs. The representation of medicated juveniles at the hall rose by 16 percent in comparison to 2004, when the population was larger and the number of medicated kids smaller—around 32—an examination of state and local data shows.

“About half of our juvenile hall is a mental health facility. And we don't have adequate services to keep up with that,” says Arthur L. Bowie, supervising assistant public defender of the county's juvenile division. “We're making criminals out of them, instead of what they are.”

What they are, says Bowie and others, are victims of abusive homes and failed institutions. Institutionalized at a young age and too often deprived of proper psychiatric care, they're groomed for lives on perpetual lockdown.

“Half these kids don't belong in detention,” says deputy probation officer Gabo Ly, who supervises the special needs unit, where juvenile hall's most emotionally and psychologically unstable are segregated. “But this is all we have.”

It's a crisis in quiet, sapped of any grand political campaign or national outcry. Mental health resources evaporated so gradually that few outside the criminal justice system took notice of the mass migration. And the kids in this jackpot don't have stable families or powerful lobbyists who fuss when they're confined. As a result, halls originally conceived as way stations for delinquents have transformed into long-term commitment facilities for the mentally unwell and emotionally troubled.

Efforts to reverse this tide have been scattered and makeshift. In Sacramento, probation officials are searching for community partners outside of the hall to intercept their mentally ill, but options vanish for the toughest cases. Kids like Arturo.

The victim of horrific abuse, Arturo lashed out in a like manner and ended up in juvie. Courts from Sacramento to the central coast have tossed him back and forth like a jurisdictional hot potato. No one wants to confront his increasingly complex needs. For the time being, he's Sacramento's problem.

'Pipeline to prison'

Removed from a home of drug-addled turmoil when she was 4, Ashley Drake and her siblings scattered to divergent fortunes. Adopted by a family in El Dorado Hills, two younger brothers rebounded into stable homes.

Drake and her big brother weren't so lucky. The brother took his first bust at age 8, graduated to juvenile detention at the state level when he was 12 and is in jail today. The system concocted a similar destiny for Drake, first locked up when she was 12 for shoplifting a bag of beef jerky.

“From there, it just got worse,” she tells SN&R.

Arrested last year for felony assault after going off her meds and fighting with her ex, Drake was jailed two additional times for violating the terms of her probation. During the last bust, five months ago, she caught a drug possession charge after being out of jail for only 24 hours.

Some might call that bad luck. Others name it fate.

“They’re on that pipeline to prison and causing harm along the way,” Bowie says of troubled minors who get sucked into the system. “The conversation about treatment comes after the juvenile justice system.”

This transformation of the state’s juvenile halls into psychiatric facilities of last resort charted a largely unheralded path for at least 15 years. An accumulating number of reports, audits, white papers and lawsuits casts the blame far and wide: The drastic downsizing of youth correctional institutions at the state level, expulsion-prone schools, budget-busted county mental health programs, recession-bled community resources, judges and lawyers who don’t understand the intricacies of child psychology.

“This is how juvenile halls become de facto mental hospitals,” says Toni Gardner, a retired field representative with the Board of State and Community Corrections, which oversees local jails and juvenile halls.

As a result, the new California geography looks something like this:

The 11th-most populated county in the state, Kern, has the biggest mental health population in its juvenile hall, where nearly 82 percent of the kids are medicated, according to an analysis of BSCC data from the first nine months of 2013, the most recent figures available. Riverside County notches second with nearly 65 percent. Santa Clara County claims the smallest percentage of medicated juveniles in detention among the 11 most populated counties, with just over 9 percent.

Sacramento County falls fifth in this line, with almost 33 percent of its juvenile hall wards reported to be on psychotropic drugs in 2013.

Research suggests that local policies play roles. Kern and Riverside are both conservative counties with more traditional—i.e. punitive—approaches to crime and punishment, while the counties of Santa Clara and San Francisco, which also boasts a smaller percentage of medicated juveniles, have adopted more progressive policies.

There are commonalities statewide, however. One is that children without family support fare the worst.

Drake’s frequent attempts to escape foster placement and reunite with her mother branded her a ward of the court at the age of 13. Instead of a social worker, she was assigned a full-time probation officer. Instead of foster placement, she was banished to group homes for other problem children, where her difficulties intensified.

“Once the foster care system cut me off, that kind of cut my ties to seeing my brothers,” she says. “From then on, I felt like there was nothing else to work for.”

A spiral of suicide attempts, doped-up psych admissions, escape attempts and detention followed. By 15, she was hooked on crack and heroin.

“It was easier for me to do that than deal with what was really going on,” she says.

Drake is not unique, say advocates. California is the only state where children are cut off from foster system resources and programs once they’re declared wards of the delinquency court, says law professor Robert C. Fellmeth, director of the University of San Diego’s Children’s Advocacy Institute. “It is quite crazy,” he writes in an email. Tailored mental health programs for transition-age foster youth—disproportionate victims of trauma, drug abuse and juvenile incarceration—have also been slow to develop, the institute said in a report released this year.



The special needs unit in Sacramento County’s Youth Detention Facility is where juvenile hall’s most vulnerable wards are segregated from the general population.

PHOTO BY STEVEN CHEA

Drake’s first real brush with therapy didn’t come until she was almost an adult, during a six-month exile at an Arizona camp for at-risk girls, where she earned her GED certificate.

Recounting her past, Drake doesn’t sound bitter. She reflects on her mom, an addict who still blames herself for losing custody of her kids. She talks of becoming a pastry chef. She’s been clean and sober for five months.

“Me and my older brother may not have had the best of life, but my two younger brothers at least had a better chance,” she says.

Two weeks later, Drake is re-arrested and booked into jail after missing a court date.

Sicker kids, fewer options

Four-foot-nothing with choppy, black hair and an elfin face, Arturro hardly looks the part of a predator. Seated at a bolted-down table with checkers and backgammon boards stenciled atop its surface, the 13-year-old slaps down playing cards during a frantic game of Speed. He giggles as he palms his last card, victorious. “I win, I win,” he needles his opponent, a smiling probation assistant. “You owe me 10 bucks.”

It’s closing in on a year since a sexual assault rap catapulted the minor 200 miles north of his central coast community to Sacramento. Early this fall, he was ordered to a local group home for youthful sex offenders, where he allegedly fondled one of the residents. That pinballed him to the special needs unit, where the hall’s most vulnerable are isolated from a general population that’s ever more colored by mental illness.

In many cases, the kids here have borne the worst the adult world can inflict—physical violence, sexual abuse, abandonment. Mistreated by those who were meant to protect them, they repeat the behavior modeled for them.

“We have kids that commit sex acts,” Bowie says. “The problem is not that they’re child molesters. The problem is that they’re not appropriately socialized.”

Take 14-year-old Chan, a lumbering growth spurt with hooded eyes. Two years ago, he made inappropriate sexual remarks to some little kids at a Sacramento schoolyard. He's been in and out of detention ever since, returning each time for conduct violations.

“Those kids stay in juvenile hall for a long time because, now, there isn't a community-based option for mental health care for those kids,” says assistant probation chief Michael Shores, a 23-year veteran of the department. “So if every group home in the state of California and every group home in the United States of America says that kid is not one we want to take, we're stuck with that kid right here in juvenile hall.”

It's ironic, in some ways. Though fewer children are being arrested and detained, those who do are younger, sicker and are jailed longer.

Between 2003 and the first three quarters of 2013, the share of detained youth who are 14 or younger climbed 21.5 percent, according to BSCC records. The average length of detention rose by more than a week to 29.4 days last year. For those awaiting outside placement, that interval grew by almost nine days, to a median 57 days.

Yet even these figures are misleading, as they don't account for the boomerang youths, like Arturo and Chan, whose lengthy detentions are briefly interrupted by outside placements and jurisdictional beefs.

Meanwhile, the hall's average daily population has declined 35.5 percent since 2002—to 198 this year—BSCC and Justice Cabinet tallies reveal. The population in alternative detention programs also dropped, but that's largely because those alternatives vanished during the recession.

One of the more popular options was the Neighborhood Alternative Center, a crisis intervention and referral option for children between the ages of 8 and 17. For cops responding to combustible family situations, it was an alternative to arresting kids or booking them into the hall. For minors on the verge of erupting, it was a place to cool off and access counseling.

Shores is seeking community partners to host a scaled-down version of the center, which closed in 2008. Earlier negotiations with Wind Youth Services to do so ended when the homeless youth provider closed its drop-in center in May.

“The biggest challenge for us is just to make all our resources spread to all these good ideas and best intentions,” Shores says.

When the center opened in 1970, it tended mostly to communication problems between parents and their kids. By the time it folded, staff was confronting escalating mental health issues, physical abuse, sexual molestation and dysfunctional home lives, the Justice Cabinet report states.

That's Arturo's story. Molested by a parent and removed from his home, the only friendly faces he knows belong to staff, who acknowledge this isn't the place for him. All of this has manifested in several ways. He hears voices. Sometimes he sees things that aren't there. And he doesn't respond well to raised voices.

“He was physically abused in ways I don’t think I can imagine,” says deputy probation officer Ron Parker, who headed up the special needs unit until August. “Pretty much every kid in here has some sort of PTSD.”

Probation's culture shift

Aided by a five-year expansion that nearly doubled juvenile hall's capacity and carved out space for the special needs unit, suicide attempts and assaults on staff have plummeted sharply since 1999, when 105 youths tried to kill themselves and staff reported 55 assaults.

“We were overcrowded,” Shores says. “Everyone knows that when you’re overcrowded, other things start to happen. It’s sort of a snowball effect.”

That snowball rolled into a citizen-filed lawsuit alleging that guards were too rough, and wards were being denied mandatory instruction time due to a lack of space and an abundance of detainees. Five years ago, a signed consent decree promising reform settled the matter. A halting culture shift was already underway before then, says Shores, with probation officers who envision high-octane fieldwork pressed into the harder toil of junior psychology.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the special needs unit, a secluded dormitory with its own shower and classroom facilities.

The staff members here don’t possess psychology degrees—some never graduated college—and admit they’re not the best equipped to care for children in acute psychological distress. But they do the best they can with the instruments at their disposal.

When the hallucinations got bad for a schizophrenic girl in the unit, for instance, Parker would enter her cell and shoo away the apparitions. “Get out of here, ghosts! Go away!” he’d say, waving his arms toward the door. “OK, I chased them to Unit 6.”

The young father admits borrowing tricks from home. “To yell at a ghost in a girl’s room, you about have to role-play a little bit,” he says.

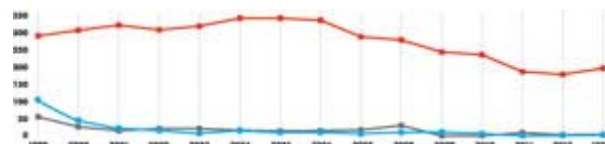
And course-correct.

Officers once commanded Arturo to back away from a youth he appeared to be threatening. Arturo retreated to his bunk, balled up his hands and pummeled his face until it bled.

To an abused child, it may have seemed a sensible response. But the behavior made him the toughest charge in a unit that specializes in hard cases.

After Arturo’s outburst, any time the boy appeared on edge, Parker handed him a racquetball and isolated him in a room that looks like a chapel sealed in Plexiglas. The feelings he can’t articulate, the memories that don’t make sense, Arturo puts them into that blue rubber wad and slams it against the wall.

The scheme worked. Arturo went two weeks without a write-up. For maybe the first time, adults were proud of him. He liked that, and has become one of the better behaved kids in



the unit. “He’s an ‘honor,’ currently,” Parker boasts.

This isn’t the normal way of doing things, Shores notes. “These kids fall outside our ability to force them into some rules.”

Shores and juvenile hall commander Jim Sanders say that learning curve really began straightening about seven years ago. Intake officers got better at noticing mental illness cues during the booking process, and redirecting youths to programs instead of detention. Officials are also learning that a get-out-of-juvie card and simple recommendation to seek help aren’t effective means of diversion.

“Some of these people are dirt poor. They don’t know how to navigate the system,” Bowie contends.

Recognizing the need for more intensive services, the county created the Juvenile Justice Diversion and Treatment Program in 2010 using surplus money from the voter-approved Mental Health Services Act, which taxes million-dollar earners for community wellness programs. The River Oak Center for Children is the main source of JJDTP services, but the program also funds probation supervision and behavioral health oversight, so that eligible families are helped one overwhelming step at a time.

“It’s the only one of its kind that I’m aware of,” Shores says.

There is a catch, however. The criteria for participating is that there is an intact family to reunite with the juvenile. For those unwanted or abused minors, as well as any whose offenses flag them as public safety risks, the answer remains detention in a correctional setting or placement in group homes, which aren’t always equipped to deal with a child’s needs, say those who work and reside in them.

“Then you really start to see a loss of options, because the state no longer provides any psychiatric hospitalization or care for adolescents,” Shores says. “We’re doing everything we can do to avoid those outcomes.”

For real change, there needs to be action at every level.

Three state senators, including two leading voices on mental health issues, declined to comment for this story.

Recognizing that the current landscape won’t shift anytime soon, the Justice Cabinet report recommends hiring a full-time therapist to staff the special needs wing, as well as two additional mental health liaisons to work the rest of the facility. It also repeats a recommendation from 2005 for additional community resources.

Shores describes early talks to repurpose a closed youth center as a group home specializing in intensive family-reunification, residential substance abuse treatment and gender-specific services for sexually exploited girls, but cautions that there are “a lot of political issues to resolve.”

In the interim, the patchworks will have to suffice. Impromptu costume-making sessions. Hooking up the Xbox to coax the kids, lethargic from their meds, into physical activity.

“We try different things in this unit,” Parker says.

As he speaks, a girl’s spooked voice resonates around the corner. Then, a thrumming, soft at first, but unmistakable. It’s the sound of Arturo’s rubber ball returning to square one.

Big challenges, small victories

As the boys exit the ward, they automatically hew to the right wall and file toward the gymnasium in a straight, shuffling line. They're outfitted identically in baggy white T-shirts, dark gray sweatpants and navy, slip-on shoes.

They all need haircuts.

A stout probation officer is waiting in the balmy gym when the small procession enters. He runs the facility’s Leadership, Education and Athletic Program—a kind of P.E. for kids in detention. Despite some early grumbles, the boys are soon sprinting across the hardwood. One of the boys squeezes out a fart mid-run, crippling the others with laughter. “It smells like eggs over here,” Ben says, wafting the air.

The inhabitants of this gritty institutional setting have a way of reminding you of their age.

Three months ago, it was the schizophrenic girl, terrified of ghosts.

Last summer, it was a cognitively disabled boy who toted an imaginary lightsaber made of cardboard. In his mind, he was a hero, fretting over a hornet’s nest in the courtyard and offering to put himself in harm’s way to protect his fellow inmates.

Today, during a flag football scrimmage, it’s all of them.

Ben, getting down on himself for dropping passes. In and out of juvie in his home county of Nevada, the glassy-eyed boy was picked up in Sacramento seven days ago on a warrant. He loves dirt bikes and insists that his mother will arrive to pick him up soon.

Edgar, looking lost as he wades into center court, unsure where to move. A lanky kid with low-level autism, he threatened a classmate and has been here a few weeks.

Arturo, celebrating a touchdown with a silly dance. During a break in the action, he retreats to the sidelines so he can stand next to a matronly volunteer he calls “Grandma.”

Despite having every reason not to, the boy with the brutal past is dropping his guard. Who knows if it will last?

Local prosecutors opened up a fresh criminal petition for the group home molestation, a felony allegation that could brand him for life. It’s already put him in the middle of a jurisdictional battle. In mid-September, a judge ordered Arturo to the county where his original offense occurred; the court there volleyed him right back.

“This is the problem: No one wants to deal with these high-end kids,” says Bowie, who wants the Sacramento County District Attorney’s Office to drop its petition and steer Arturo into treatment. “We all got to come to the realization that we can’t use our juvenile halls as mental health institutions.”

In the meantime, the victories will come where they can.

It's the final quarter of the football scrimmage and the score remains knotted. Arturro, a natural athlete, has racked up the touchdowns but his teammate Ben keeps carrying his receptions the wrong way. Every. Single. Time.

As the clock ticks down, the probation officer sails the pigskin toward the rafters. Ben backpedals into enemy territory and unwraps his palms. He lurches when the ball first punches his gut, then gathers it close like something precious.

On the sidelines, an audience of officers, assistants and volunteers point in unison, screaming at Ben where to go. They're caught up in the symbolic magnitude of the moment: Just once, dear Lord, can the poor kid grab a win?

Ben juts out a leg. It's a false step. But then he twists and steps true.

The crowd goes wild.