

Juvenile justice study: Minority youths of single parents more likely detained

March 12 2009

As a teenager in the juvenile justice system, living in a single-parent household or having a family with criminal history doesn't help your case -- at least if you're a minority.

A study by social work researchers at Kansas State University found that circumstances like school truancy, living in a single-parent household or having family members with criminal records were more likely to land minority teens in detention than their white peers.

Don Kurtz, K-State assistant professor of social work, was part of a study of [juvenile detention](#) rates in a small Kansas judicial district. He and fellow researchers Travis Linnemann, doctoral student in sociology, Manhattan, and Ryan Spohn, assistant professor of sociology, published the study, "Investigating Racial Disparity at the Detention Decision: The Role of Respectability," in fall 2008 in the *Southwest Journal of Criminal Justice*, <http://swjcnj.cjcenter.org/archives/5.2/>

Kurtz said questions about school attendance and whom the teen lives with are part of an assessment tool that [intake workers](#) use to help them decide whether a teen should be detained or released. Part of what the researchers found, Kurtz said, was that this process isn't purely objective.

In the journal article, the researchers suggest that the reason these types of questions in particular may be detrimental for non-white youths is that they suggest a stereotype that minority families are less stable and

effective than white families. They suggest that stereotypes like this may mean that intake workers view minority teens as greater threats and are more likely to detain them.

In the study, Kurtz found a case that he handled as an intake worker himself. Four teens were picked up for robbery -- two black youths and two younger white women. The black youths were detained while the females were released. Kurtz said the fact that the young women's parents came to pick them up tempered his recommendation.

"I consider myself to be sensitive to race, but this case does display how subtle stereotypes creep in," he said.

The researchers suggest that one way to even out the disparity is to have intake workers use a decision-making tool based only on legal criteria rather than questions about teens' home lives. However, the researchers acknowledge that some intake workers and organizations may hesitate to use such a tool because they think it will downplay their profession and their role in making decisions.

That's why Kurtz and his fellow researchers suggest that alternatives to detention -- like home arrest or placing teens in a shelter -- also could help reduce the racial disparity.

Their research was part of a statewide look at disproportionate minority arrests that was originally an initiative from the U.S. Justice Department's Office of [Juvenile Justice](#) and Delinquency Prevention.

Source: Kansas State University

Citation: Juvenile justice study: Minority youths of single parents more likely detained (2009,

March 12) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-03-juvenile-justice-minority-youths-parents.html>

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