

THE VERDICT IS FRUSTRATION

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The public address system beckons and yet another huddled group of reluctant travelers leaves **the** waiting area to be ushered through a locked courtroom door for one more leg on their passage through Wayne County's juvenile justice system.

The physical and emotional journey of delinquents and their families through **the** James H. Lincoln Hall of Juvenile Justice in Detroit takes them into courtrooms that are closed to **the** public, shielding a childhood gone awry.

The private, personal anguish of **the** families clustered in **the** waiting areas outside **the** court and hearing rooms provides a glimpse of **the** larger tortured mural of a county beset by young delinquents.

"You've got them shooting each other, stabbing each other, raping each other, mutilating each other and it's all done in secret," said visiting Juvenile Judge Paul Mahinske in allowing **the** Free Press to observe a juvenile's murder trial this summer.

Parole violators, thieves and killers -- none older than 16 -- fill and strain **the** system.

From **the** intake desk of **the** Wayne County Youth Home to **the** navy blue and kelly green courtrooms of Lincoln Hall, only **the** participants' age separates **the** nature of **the** criminal cases from those handled in **the** adult Wayne County Jail and Recorder's and Wayne County Circuit courts.

Here, childhood **is** not baseball cards and Barbie dolls, first dates and **the** senior prom. Rather, as demonstrated during a rare glimpse of **the** court cases by outsiders, childhood **is** a time of theft, strong-arm assault, drugs and armed robbery.

Shards of broken glass litter **the** steps of **the** courthouse along **the** Chrysler Freeway at East Forest. Gang members -- 7 Mile Nutty Boys, 8 Mile Smurfs, Popeye, Frog and M\$M-Money Mark -- have burned and gouged their nicknames and affiliations on rest room walls and ceilings.

"We have created a generation of children without conscience, without value, so they have no concern about people's lives," said Presiding Juvenile Judge Y. Gladys Barsamian.

"Life **is** very cheap to them. So I don't wonder that what's happening in **the** streets today **is** happening. And it's going to get worse if we don't do something about saving our children."

For each youngster wide-eyed with apprehension about **the** power of **the** court, a casual observer can spot another -- draped in golden chains and scuffing along in unlaced \$100 sneakers -- snarling orders to a cowed parent.

Yet all **the** families tend to cluster, each giving **the** appearance of a separate solar system swirling around a core of distress.

The family groups studiously ignore each other until **the** public address system hails them into one of **the** closed courts.

Some groups warily circle each other. Feuds are not left at **the** courthouse door.

"We're living on borrowed time in terms of something happening here at **the** court because these people -- we've got all kinds of people here -- and there **is** just not adequate security," Barsamian said.

Although **the** same type of crimes are tried at Lincoln Hall as at **the** Frank Murphy Hall of Justice, there are no metal detectors at **the** juvenile court door screening for knives and guns.

BARSAMIAN SAID she and **the** other officials are under assembly line pressure to move **the** cases through **the** system.

A juvenile in custody, under court rules, must be tried within 42 days, though that deadline **is** often missed and **the** cases stretch on, diluting **the** impact of timely consequences for misdeeds, Barsamian said.

Earlier this year, Chief Recorder's Court Judge Samuel Gardner ordered cases there to be tried within 60 days, a move that prompted criticism from some judges and attorneys that justice was being sacrificed for speed.

With an even shorter time limit for juvenile cases, "We are literally like a mass production operation here," Barsamian said.

Meeting **the** 42-day limit "prevents us from really dealing with **the** case in depth because we just are constantly trying to meet those times."

The juvenile system **is** cloaked by rules of confidentiality and closed to scrutiny by **the** public. But Barsamian allowed **the** Free Press to observe each stage of **the** procedure recently -- from youth home admission through hearings to trial -- providing **the** names of **the** youths were not revealed.

The handcuffed ride to **the** Wayne County Youth Home **is** **the** start of **the** journey.

The intake office screens police inquiries, determines which children will be admitted and, of those, which will have their cases forwarded to **the** Wayne County Prosecutor's Office to be considered for a petition, essentially a juvenile arrest warrant.

Certain offenses require admission: homicides, armed robberies, firearms violations, sexual assaults, other serious assaults, drug charges, arson and kidnapping.

The intake desk **is** open 24 hours a day. This late afternoon, three children were processed by probation officer Douglas Allen.

One, a gawky 16-year-old Northwestern High School student, was charged with felonious assault on a Webber Middle School student.

"He's a member of **the** Gucci Crew" youth gang, said **the** police officer who had brought him in. **The** youngster shrugged, giving Allen a blank look.

Emptying his pockets, **the** youngster, all elbows and angles, seemed as bumbling as a puppy. **The** task finished, **the** childish image vanished when he fixed **the** officers with a hard, even stare.

ANOTHER YOUTH -- also 16 but huskier -- stared sullenly as Allen noted he was charged with robbing a Redford Township convenience store with a hand grenade.

There was no adolescent awkwardness, no appearance of childish vulnerability about him. He lounged with **the** easy, muscular grace of a small-college halfback as **the** court forms were filled out.

Police said **the** youth and a companion had entered **the** store, showing **the** clerk **the** grenade while announcing a holdup, police said. **The** pair fled with \$4.

"Was **the** grenade real? We assume it was," said Sgt. James Laho of **the** Redford police youth division.

Laho said **the** youth, a state ward, apparently got cold feet and turned himself in after **the** robbery. **The** other youth, who allegedly held **the** grenade, has fled **the** state, taking **the** grenade with him, Laho said.

WATCHING **THE** booking process from a locked holding room was a 16-year-old girl, her name and residence undetermined.

"At first, she wouldn't give us any name, now she's given us about a dozen," Allen said. "We're still trying to sort it all out."

Officers said she was arrested at Northland Center mall after allegedly stealing \$600 worth of blouses, and suspected heroin was found in her purse. She was turned over to authorities in her home county.

When an aunt was finally located by phone from **the** welter of names and addresses provided by **the** girl, another layer of woe was added: **The** aunt believes **the** girl is pregnant.

The girl's mother, responding to a message left during Allen's battery of calls, rings Allen to identify her daughter. **The** girl, according to **the** mother, has been running **the** streets for weeks. It's **the** aunt's fault, **the** mother says.

The three youths were added to **the** youth home pending preliminary hearings **the** next day. **The** three pushed **the** population of **the** youth home, which has an official capacity of 215, to 242 that day.

"We have to hold them," said Eleanor Austin, director of court services. "They get mattresses in **the** halls."

The youth home overpopulation means that some kids who otherwise would be detained -- some accused auto thieves or some charged with burglaries, for example -- are released to their parents or guardians pending **the** issuance of a petition and **the** preliminary hearing, Austin said.

Some at **the** youth home are released on bonds pending resolution of their cases. Others are held pending placement in state facilities.

ALLEN AND other intake workers field calls from parents wanting unruly children picked up. Other calls come from parents fearful that their children are getting involved with guns, drugs or gangs, Austin said.

"We get calls saying, 'Come get my child, I can't handle him.' We ask how old **the** child is and **the** mother says five. Five! If you can't handle a child when he or she is five, what in **the** world are you going to when that child is 10 or 15?"

Austin said that being held in **the** youth home should have some deterrent effect. Instead of being cowed by **the** prospect of being locked up, many "for **the** most part don't seem to be overly threatened by it," she said. "Some of them are so emotionally damaged that it's just another experience for them."

THE FIRST court appearance will take place **the** next day at **the** preliminary hearing before a referee, with powers roughly equivalent to those of a judge.

At **the** hearing, youths and their parents will be officially notified of **the** charges, bond will be set, an attorney appointed and a date set for **the** probable cause hearing, at which time evidence must be presented linking **the** youth to **the** alleged crime.

On a Monday morning, referee Eugene Terry presided over **the** small windowless hearing room. As with all juvenile court proceedings, it **is** closed to **the** public.

A weeping 16-year-old was led in, consoled by her mother. **The** charge was assault with intent to murder and using a firearm in **the** commission of a felony.

She shot a teenage neighbor who was allegedly assaulting her younger sister, police said.

There **is** a good possibility that it was a justified shooting by a youngster with no prior record, but special assistant prosecutor Brenda Springs, troubled by a gun being so accessible, asked for a "substantial bond."

The teenager doubled over with a scream when Terry sets a \$20,000 bond. Her mother clutched her.

"My baby, my baby," **the** mother said through sobs as court security officers separated them and led **the** girl back toward **the** youth home. A final scream echoed back into **the** courtroom as **the** mother silently rocked.

The next case prompted a cynical debate among court personnel on **the** relative foolishness of **the** 14-year-old defendant, charged with assault to commit armed robbery, and his two intended victims.

The 14-year-old, spotting two youths at Fairlane Town Center wearing sheepskin jackets, allegedly showed them a pistol tucked in his waistband. When he ordered them to "give it up," **the** youths ran to a security guard.

The guard caught **the** 14-year-old and **the** pistol turned out to be a toy, police said.

Which was more foolish, went **the** debate among court employees, to run and chance a bullet in **the** back, or to go armed with a toy when your intended victim might come up with **the** real thing?

Terry's docket wrapped up with an alleged credit card thief arrested several times in **the** past three months and a 16-year-old a month shy of his 17th birthday -- which would mean graduation to Recorder's Court -- charged with robbing an 83-year-old woman of her car at gunpoint.

A slow day, **the** court employees said.

THE NEXT morning, Karen Hood, who shares an office with Springs, was before referee Regina Shapiro prosecuting a 13-year-old east-side Detroiter charged with being a carhop in a curb-side crack cocaine service.

Two police officers testified **the** youngster -- dressed in court in a conservative Sunday school suit with pocket handkerchief -- would dart up to cars at a corner known for high-volume drug traffic.

When they moved in, **the** youngster put something under a car and flopped across its hood "like he was taking a siesta," according to testimony.

Police recovered a vial of crack and arrested **the** youth.

THE YOUTH turned to his mother, shaking his head in denial of **the** testimony.

His story from **the** stand was that police swooped in after he was asked by a passing neighborhood adult to run an errand to **the** store. Crack? He didn't know anything about it. And he never saw **the** stream of cars pausing at **the** corner.

Shapiro didn't believe him. Convicted, he was allowed to remain free on bond. Shapiro ordered **the** boy to be interviewed by **the** children's psychiatric clinic and **the** probation department to help her shape her sentence.

Afterward, Shapiro and Hood reflected on **the** youngster: His clothes were neat but not **the** expensive little-league gangster apparel of a hard-core delinquent, and his mother showed concern. Adults were probably using him, Hood said wearily, putting a layer of juveniles between themselves and **the** law.

Barsamian agreed that many children are used by adults for crime. Some parents have been turning a blind eye to -- or even encouraging -- those activities when **the** youngsters start bringing home wads of cash and new merchandise, she said.

Among some police officers, **the** juvenile system is disparaged as "kiddie court," all slap-on- **the** -wrist and empty bluster wasted on sneering, mocking young hoodlums.

Speaking privately, several prosecutors and defense attorneys said police do not appear to always put forth a full effort when they know a case will remain in **the** juvenile system.

While criminal sanctions are a major part of **the** juvenile court's role, redemption, rescue and rehabilitation are duties as well.

ON **THE** SECOND floor, a parole violator before referee Marie Miller illustrated **the** system's parallel mission of trying to salvage youths.

A teenage boy and his father leaned toward each other. **The** boy, on probation for possession of LSD, had hit his father and left home. Picked up by police, he spent five days in **the** youth home before being bailed out.

Under Miller's questioning, **the** picture emerged: **The** parents had just divorced, and **the** mother has moved to Arizona.

The assault and running away was **the** aftermath of a heated father-son argument. Both seemed scared, chagrined and saddened. Tears welled in their eyes when they spoke of **the** days **the** boy spent in **the** youth home.

The father withdrew **the** assault complaint and **the** son pleaded guilty to violating his probation. Miller ordered them to enter joint counseling and **the** father hugged his son.

But such intimate tragedies are often overshadowed by **the** crush of armed criminals.

"Guns," Miller said. "It astounds me. Between drugs -- hard drugs -- and guns, it's just amazing how many are involved with them. . . . With guns, **the** attitude seems to be that they're just part of **the** costume."

CUTLINES:

"Hey check yourself" **is the** way this group from the W.J. Maxey Training School tells a member that he is following **the** rules.

Two juveniles cover their faces as they await admission into **the** Wayne County Youth Home, and a possible appearance in juvenile court.

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