

## Opinion

# Today's 'Dead End Kids': Minority youth trapped in the juvenile justice pipeline

By SEAN M. BYRNE

*Acting Commissioner, NYS  
Division of Criminal Justice  
Services*

In the 1938 film classic "Angels with Dirty Faces," two Irish boys from the wrong side of the tracks rob a railroad car. One of them, played by Pat O'Brien, escapes and eventually becomes a priest. The other, played by James Cagney, couldn't run as fast as his friend and gets caught and sent to a juvenile detention center, a precursor to a life of crime that ultimately ends in the electric chair.

Tragically, it seems a similar fate awaits youth today who can't escape New York's juvenile justice system, especially minorities. Consider these daunting facts:

Minority youth account for 44 percent of New York State's juvenile population, 61 percent of juvenile arrests and 88 percent of juvenile secure detentions.

Minority youths are arrested twice as frequently as white juveniles and securely detained five times as often.

While African-American youth represent just under 18 percent of the state's juvenile population, they account for 39 percent of juvenile arrests and nearly 59 percent of secure juvenile detentions. Black youth are arrested about three times more often than white youth and securely detained about five times more often.

Hispanic youth make up about 20 percent of the state's juvenile

population and account for roughly 20 percent of juvenile arrests and 23 percent of juvenile secure detentions. Hispanic juveniles are arrested about one and half times as often as white youths and securely detained four times as often.

Far from being a vehicle for rehabilitation of juveniles, New York's ridiculously expensive juvenile justice system is unfortunately a predictor of adult criminal justice involvement, particularly for minority youth. In return for the \$200,000 per child annual investment in youth sent to secure juvenile placement facilities, New York taxpayers have a system where 89 percent of boys and 81 percent of girls are re-arrested by age 28; 83 percent of boys and 63 percent of the girls are arrested on felony-level charges; and of the 57 percent boys who were not re-arrested, 12 to 21 percent are dead.

This is nothing short of a disgrace. It is entirely reasonable for taxpayers to demand to know why we are not rehabilitating these youths while we have them under our control. The reasons are as complicated as the solutions are obscure, made even more so by socioeconomic and demographic factors.

We know that in any given year, up to 9 percent of children and teenagers have emotional disturbances that impair their ability to function at home, in school and in the community.

We know that abuse and neglect by adults often precipitate juvenile crime.

Further, we know there are over a half-million children and youth in our foster care system—many of them victims of abuse, neglect or abandonment. A third of them enter the system at age 13 or older, and thousands of them will "age-out" before a permanent home is found. And for all too many, the problem of the Family Court becomes the problem of the Juvenile Court becomes the problem of the Criminal Court.

Clearly, we cannot arrest our way out of this problem. And that is why early intervention and solid reentry strategies are so important. We have to protect our youth before we can empower them. And if we don't protect them, they may well find power behind the barrel of a gun—and probably an illegal gun.

We need to do more than, as Father Jerry (Pat O'Brien's character) famously beseeches the "Dead End Kids" at the end of the film, "say a prayer for a boy who couldn't run as fast as I could." We need to completely revamp not only our juvenile justice system, but the way we think about juvenile justice and the way it impacts our communities. We need to break the cradle-to-prison pipeline that entraps so many of our youth, especially those of color. The future of our youth, and our nation, hangs in the balance.