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# Fewer youths confined in Ohio

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By Ashley Luthern

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## HIGHLAND HILLS

“James” was a 13-year-old teenager in Youngstown in 2007.

He was charged that year with attempted murder, accused of shooting a newspaper delivery man in the arm during a robbery.

He was committed to an Ohio Department of Youth Services facility until he was 21 — the maximum sentence for youth offenders in Ohio.

“I came up with juvie life,” said James, now 18, during a July interview at Cuyahoga Hills Juvenile Correctional Facility in Highland Hills, outside of Cleveland. To protect the youth’s identity, The Vindicator is using a fictitious name.

He said he’s changed a lot in the past five years — and in that time, so has DYS. In 2008, soon after James was sentenced, a landmark lawsuit brought against the department was settled.

The lawsuit, filed in 2004, alleged that DYS facilities created a culture of violence and that youths were deprived of adequate mental and medical care and lacked information about their cases, including their release.

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As recently as 2005, Ohio housed about 1,700 youths in DYS institutions. Now, that number is about 650 and only 49 are girls.

In 2012, 578 youths were committed to DYS on a felony-level offense. The census estimates that in 2011 there were about 2.7 million children under age 18 in Ohio.

As the population shrinks, so do facilities. Three DYS facilities have been shuttered, the most recent being Ohio River Valley Juvenile Correctional Facility one year ago.

“We worked really hard to make the four remaining DYS facilities full-service facilities that really can meet the needs of diverse youthful offenders. Whether they need substance abuse treatment or sex offender treatment, they can get it regardless of where they are,” said Kim Parsell, DYS spokeswoman.

Those four are Circleville JCF, Cuyahoga Hills JCF, Indian River JCF and Scioto JCF, which houses boys and girls. There are other contract placements, as well, used by the state.

James spent three years at the now-closed Ohio River Valley before coming to Cuyahoga.

“Here there’s more programs, and I feel like there are more people who care up here,” James said.

For instance, Cuyahoga Hills’ superintendent, Katie Needham, hires a youth as her assistant through the work program. James said that never would have happened at Ohio River Valley.

Another difference: At Cuyahoga Hills, youths sleep in an open dormitory with rows of bunk beds. At Ohio River Valley, James had his own room and he said staff “would hold the rooms against us and we would stay in the rooms all day.”

In Cuyahoga Hills, he said staff members interact with the kids more and will come up with activities and a schedule for youths so “we are kept busy during the day and everything goes smooth.”

The atmosphere could get tense at Ohio River Valley, he said.

“There were more fights down there than here. It’s a different type of environment up here. I think the youth down there was a little rougher than the ones up here,” he said.

James said he has never identified with a gang at home or at DYS. But it’s widely acknowledged that at youth and adult detention facilities, gang recruitment is a problem.

“Ohio, like other states throughout the country, faces the challenge of youth gangs. Many of the youth in our care admit to being involved in gangs,” Parsell said.

Each DYS facility has a Security Threat Group coordinator who collects intelligence and leads a team to address security and treatment needs, she said. The department also has worked with experts in youth gangs to better understand the gang mindset, getting through to youth and helping kids leave

gangs.

In February, two youths who tried to escape from Indian River told officials they did so to avoid joining a gang. One, a 16-year-old from Youngstown, did make it outside the facility's fences. Both teens were transferred to the Scioto in Columbus, which houses the most high-security youths.

Cuyahoga Hills, where The Vindicator visited, is minimum to medium security, which means youths have more privileges and that helps keep any violence, including that related to gang affiliations, low, said superintendent Needham.

"I don't think gangs are an overblown concern. I think it's a reality on the streets of Youngstown. It's a reality in juvenile corrections as well as adult corrections," Needham said.

"I think they still have their gang associations from the streets as well as if they have one from another facility, but they're just not actively involved while they're here," she continued.

Cuyahoga Hills has mandatory hour-long behavior therapy sessions for youths four times a week.

"We also try to get the families involved. Unfortunately with the juveniles, sometimes their parents or older siblings are in gangs," Needham said.

As Ohio has closed facilities and shifted funding to keeping youths close to home, only those found delinquent of serious crimes are sent to DYS; the average age of youths in DYS is now 18.

Last fall, DYS implemented "Operation Safety First" after increases in acts of violence. Twelve youths identified as gang leaders at Circleville were moved to a special unit at Scioto. Seven additional youths identified as gang leaders at Scioto were moved to the same special unit, according to the 2011 Correctional Institution Inspection Committee report.

In September 2011, those 19 youths were responsible for 79 injuries to other youths and 102 injuries to staff, Parsell said.

"Of those 19, there's only been one that has not earned his way off the unit. ...Some youth who earned their way off unit have returned for violent behavior. It's fair to say that over the last year, that acts of violence have been trending downward," she said.

Mahoning County Juvenile Court Magistrate Anthony D'Apolito, said the influence of gangs and other youths who commit serious crimes has to be taken into account before committing someone to DYS.

"A part of me thinks we're protecting the public by sending violent offenders to [DYS]. Another part knows they're coming back. That's the hesitation for sending them down there as a juvenile," he said.

But public safety comes first and if a violent offense is committed, then the youth will be sent to the state, D'Apolito said.

Needham said DYS strives for rehabilitation and, sometimes, it's simply a matter of watching a youth grow up.

“I have a young man committed at 14. He’s 19 now. He’ll be here until he’s 21. At 14 versus 21, think of about where you were at 14 and you went through high school and started college. They completely grow and mature,” she said.

If they’re out of their community for six or seven years, the people they were hanging out with are gone — often moved or in prison — creating a totally different situation when they return, she said.

“Our idea is to expose them to as many normal things as they would be exposed to and sometimes it saves their life,” Needham said.

James, who was dealt a juvenile life sentence, said he has matured while at DYS.

“I changed a lot now. I think I matured a lot. I don’t do some of the stuff I used to do when I first got in here. I used to fight a lot,” he said.

James has earned his diploma from Luther E. Ball High School, which is part of Buckeye United Schools, the district that serves all DYS facilities. He said he was accepted to Cleveland State University and Cuyahoga Community College, where he’s interested in studying culinary arts.

James said even though he’s made strides at DYS, he never forgets where he is and why.

“After having a little experience, I think if I had known about it, I wouldn’t have done what I’d done. I’d have been thinking about my family and thinking about the time,” James said.

**Ashley Luthern** is a reporter for The Vindicator and a 2012 John Jay College Juvenile Justice Reporting Fellow.

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