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Juvenile racial disparities subject of conference

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August 14, 2009

By Andy Grimm, Post-Tribune staff writer

Black youths in Lake County are twice as likely to be arrested than whites -- a rate that actually trails most counties in the state. Minorities also are more likely to be expelled from school, held in jail or placed in foster care, but local officials are looking to erase those imbalances.

A delegation of judges, attorneys, police and educators will meet in Indianapolis on Aug. 26 for a summit on racial disparities in the juvenile justice system, hosted by the state bar association.

The Maryland-based Annie E. Casey Foundation also will fund additional research in Northwest Indiana to be used to keep teens out of jail,

"A certain segment of the population is not getting the services it needs from the system," said Lake County Superior Court Judge Lorenzo Arredondo on Thursday.

Arredondo and Juvenile Court Judge Mary Beth Bonaventura are helping organize the meeting, which hopes to address disturbing gaps between minorities and white youths in Indiana schools and juvenile courts.

In Lake County, one of seven counties surveyed in 2005 for the state report, blacks are arrested at twice the rate of youths of other groups -- a figure that leads the survey. Black youths are arrested four times more often than other groups in Tippecanoe County and three times more often in Marion County.

But that relatively good news shouldn't satisfy local officials, said Bonaventura.

"The whole purpose of all this is we can do better," Bonaventura said.

The Aug. 26 summit will include presentations by juvenile authorities acknowledged as leaders in their fields, including Georgia juvenile court judge Steven Teske and New Mexico mental health expert Nicol Moreland-Torres.

Legislators created the state Commission on Disproportionality in Youth Services in 2007, after Indiana ranked near the bottom among all states in a variety of criteria dealing with troubled minority youths. The Commission will create a series of steps for improving arrest rates and outcomes for children who enter the juvenile justice system, JauNae Hanger of the Indiana Bar Association said.

Bonaventura foresees a local commission made up of law enforcement officers, school officials, legislators and attorneys who would try to implement changes in Northwest Indiana.

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