

Letter to the editor: Sheriff says stats are being 'manipulated' by critics

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Editorials and **advocacy group comments** in The Des Moines Register have recently criticized the juvenile justice system in Polk County. These articles at different times have accused law enforcement officers, youth services and prosecutors of being racist and heavy-handed in their handling of juvenile cases.

It is easy to try to blame the problem of juvenile crime on officials and the system. This approach fails to accurately identify the complexity of the problems of keeping our community safe from the criminal actions of a very few youth. Of those who violate the law, most were diverted through the informal actions of school resource officers and other law enforcement officers.

Many first time or minor crime violators were referred straight to their parents or to a diversion program. If an officer decides to refer a case for further action, the case is sent to Juvenile Court Services for their review. State court employees review and assess the risk of harm and attempt to meet with the juvenile and his/her family.

During 2012, 2,800 youth were referred to juvenile court authorities. Of those, nearly 70 percent were diverted from formal juvenile court actions.

The 30 percent of the offenders who were referred for further action were reviewed by the Polk County Attorney's Office. The office reviews each of the cases and makes a decision whether to file formal charges in court. In 2012, about 500 youth were determined to need more attention than Juvenile Court Services could provide informally. This included youth between the ages of 10 and 17 years old who committed violent crimes, crimes while on probation and repeat offenders or others in desperate need of help.

Although there are historic questions of disproportionate representation of minority youth in the criminal justice system, I have worked with the Polk County Attorney's Office for 44 years and have never seen or heard of a case where charges were filed or a person was detained because of their race.

Polk County Attorney John Sarcone is a recognized leader in our community who has developed, initiated and sustained programs that have helped people of all ages. Focusing on the racial composition of detention as only one aspect of a complex social system betrays the efforts of many to provide safe communities in central Iowa. Ameliorating the historic impact of the effects of racism in the criminal justice system in our community can happen but will not occur by manipulating statistics or falsely accusing the Polk County attorney of charging based on race.

— Bill McCarthy, Polk County sheriff, Des Moines