

County addresses high Latino jail rate

Figures show Santa Cruz is ahead of rest of nation in dealing with problem

Francisco Garcia, 17, speaks of his dependence on drugs and how he got help from the Si Se Puede program.



Terro Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

By KATHRYN GILLICK
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The bad news is that Latino youth are still arrested and incarcerated at a higher rate than white youth. The good news is that Santa Cruz County is ahead of the rest of the country in fighting this inequality.

According to a recent report by the Building Blocks for Youth Initiative, a national program to promote equal treatment in the juvenile justice system, Latino youth make up 39 percent of the state's youth, but make up 46.2 percent of the youth in residential juvenile facilities. They are confined in de-

vention facilities at a rate of 69 percent more than white youth, the study showed. In Santa Cruz County, Latinos make up 35 percent of the youth population while for the month of July, 52 percent of incarcerated youth in the county were Latino. In June, 60 percent of the incarcerated youth were Latino.

"In our community we've taken steps, but as long as our people are being incarcerated, we need to take even more to make real change," said Daniel Alejandro, executive director of Barrios Unidos.

John Rhoads, chief probation officer for the county, said that al-

though the county is ahead of the rest of the country, it is always striving to work with families and communities to keep rates down.

"This is a never-ending process," Rhoads said. "We're trying to keep people in the community where they come from rather than putting them in an institution."

The probation department works with numerous community organizations and rehabilitation programs as well as creating its own programs, like the neighborhood accountability board, to promote "restorative justice," or a justice system in which the harm done to victims is restored, Rhoads said.

The recent study, called *Donde Esta La Justicia*, or, *Where is the Justice*, is the first nationwide look at Latino youth incarceration. But according to Raquel Mariscal, executive director of the Criminal Justice Council in Santa Cruz County, the problem came to the organization's attention three years ago. A multi-agency task force was formed to explore ways of tackling the issue.

"It's multiple systems that impact the incarceration of Latino youths," she said, emphasizing that the Probation Department



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Daniel Alejandro, executive director for Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos, offers his ideas about how to reduce youth incarceration Monday at Barrios Unidos, 1817 Soquel Ave. in Santa Cruz.

took the lead on the issue. "They (the Probation Department) accomplished this without compromising public safety ... it's not an encumbrance to do this."

A big step in preventing high incarceration rates among Latino youth is addressing substance abuse and mental health problems, said attorney Jon Minsloff with the public defender's office. At least 70 percent of his caseload, adult and juvenile cases, have drug or alcohol overtones, he said.

Mary Lou Alejo, whose son was in and out of juvenile hall, agreed. She said her son, like many others, did not get the help he needed.

"A lot of kids get stereotyped," she said. "We need to find out what's going on with the kids."

Francisco Garcia can say that from first hand experience.

"All this time that I've been using and been in and out of juvenile hall ... if I'd had the help the first time, I probably would have stayed clean, but they kept recycling me out," the 17-year-old said.

Garcia is now part of the Si Se Puede program and has been sober for five months. He is partnered up with a mentor and former drug addict from the Si Se Puede adult residential program.

Dania Torres-Wong, president of La Raza Lawyers, whose organization was also involved in the issue early on, said other organizations and areas throughout the country were not as eager to address the issue.

"They were afraid. They were afraid to take it on," she said. "But this community took it on."

She also warned about the dangers of getting too comfortable with the progress the county has already made.

"This is an issue that doesn't go away with one report," she said. "It doesn't go away with one set of statistics that say we're doing better than everyone else. It goes away when we don't have a majority of our Latino youth in the criminal justice system."

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