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OUR VIEW

Cutting juvenile crime takes adults

Mentors can help kids get needed help

Early next year a new \$50 million juvenile court complex will open in downtown Dayton. There will be space to lock up 144 juveniles, and if last year is a good guide, more than 7,500 cases will be handled there in the first year.

Juvenile crime is decreasing nationally, a positive trend that is playing out locally, too. In 1995, there were 8,732 new charges brought against children. The number climbed to more than 9,000 in 1998 and again in 1999, but has since fallen to 7,595 last year. The drop is across the board, for almost all crimes, including the most violent offenses.

People say they don't sense the decline, and part of the explanation may be that high-profile cases stick with you.

Kids who kill? Who can imagine?

Those who work with juvenile offenders are heartened by the statistics. But they're also overwhelmed by the severity of many of the kids' problems. Repeat and serious offenders have drug and alcohol addictions, mental and learning disabilities. They often have been sexually or physically abused.

The new court building, adjacent to the jail on Second Street, is designed to better serve children and their families by concentrating services in one place. But it's *how* — not where — offenders are treated that matters most.

Four years ago, Montgomery County and nine other communities each won \$250,000 grants from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which were to be used to try different or intensive approaches to helping young offenders, especially those who hadn't gotten too deeply into trouble. The grants could be renewed for up to five years.

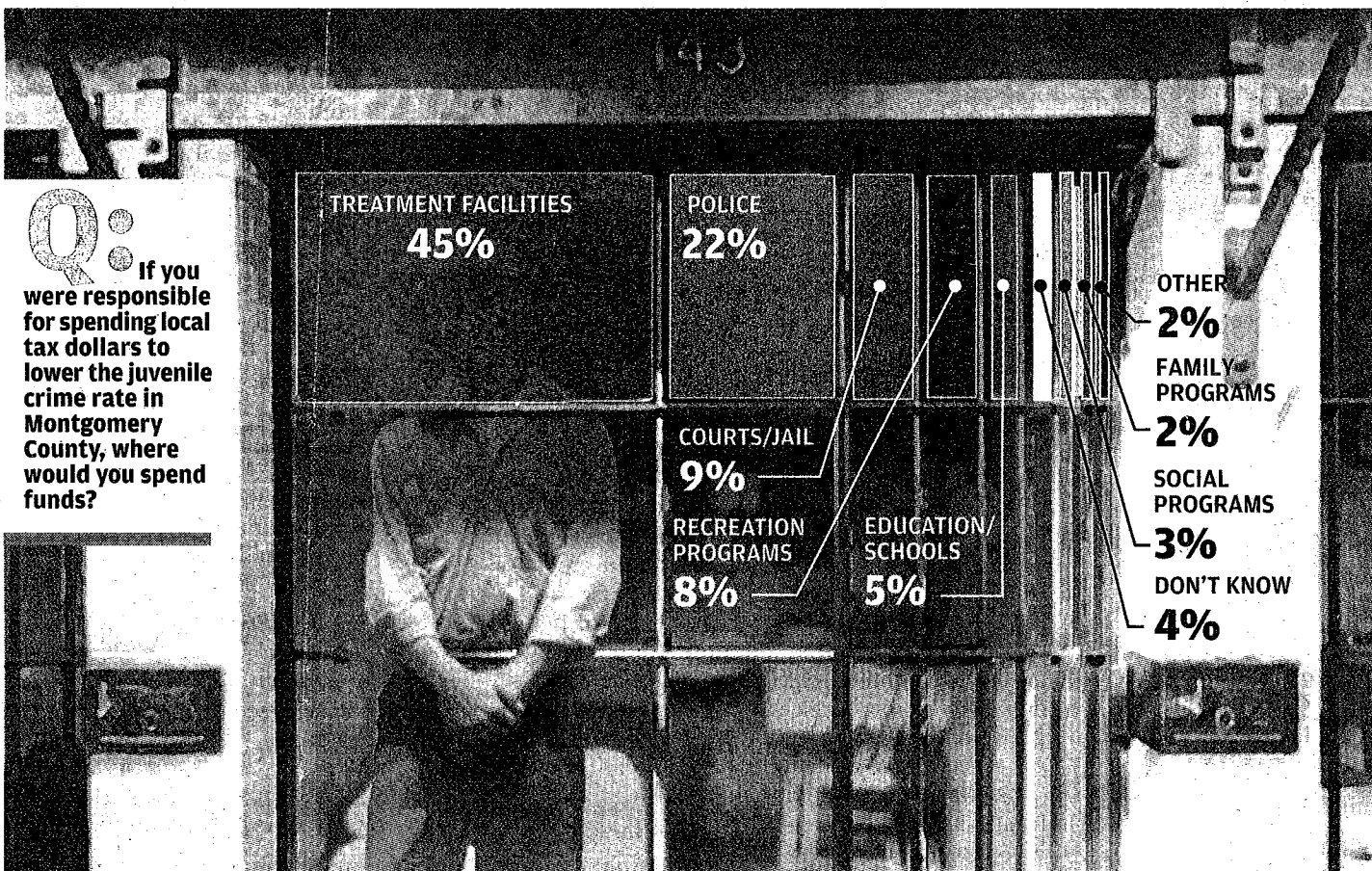
Initially, Montgomery County received poor grades from the foundation's evaluators. But going into the last year of the program, there's a sense that things finally are coming together.

Lots of energy is being put into finding mentors for children who have not totally lost

SURVEY ON JUVENILE CRIME

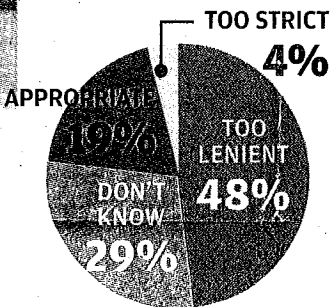
The much-delayed Montgomery County Juvenile Justice Center is scheduled to open in April, 2007. The \$50-million complex will include a 144-bed detention facility as well as courtrooms and offices. These are questions

from a public opinion survey of 400 Montgomery County voters that was conducted earlier this year. The poll's margin of error is plus or minus 5 percent.

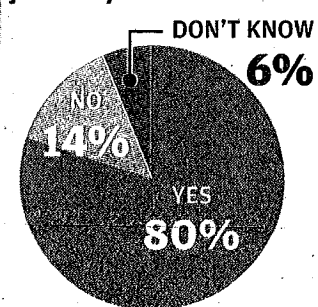


Q: If you were responsible for spending local tax dollars to lower the juvenile crime rate in Montgomery County, where would you spend funds?

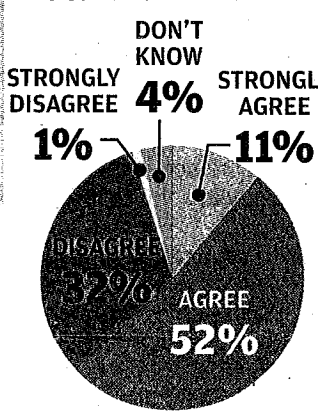
Q: When young people commit crimes in Montgomery County, do you think the sentences they receive are appropriate for the crimes, too strict or too lenient?



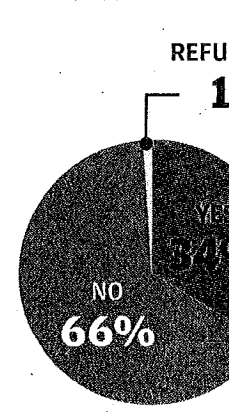
Q: Do you think taxpayer dollars should be spent to offer treatment to young people who have drug or alcohol problems while they are in the juvenile justice system?



Q: Society is too quick to give up on young people who commit crimes.



Q: Are you currently acting as a volunteer?



Source: Survey by Strategic Visioning, Inc.

STAFF GRAPHIC/ JOHN HANCOCK

their way. Among the goals for the mentors is to make sure the kids follow up with treatment.

If no one is making sure a child participates in support groups, attends counseling sessions and takes his medicine, the court's authority is being wasted, and so is a chance at saving a child. Probation officers can't be everywhere, everyday.

Recruiting mentors for kids — or "natural helpers," as the court calls them — is a struggle. Why that's so was driven home

in a recent public opinion survey about juvenile crime.

There's tremendous support for getting young offenders treatment. But successful treatment depends on adults taking an ongoing interest in the child, following his progress.

Yet, people say they are most likely to only volunteer to help troubled children from their neighborhood. They're most willing to help if they're asked by a relative, friend or religious figure.

The push is on to have clergy make appeals for volunteers to help at the court, and also to find out from the kids themselves — soon after they are arrested — who's important to them.

Even if just 500 of the young people had mentors, that's a huge group to screen, train and watch over. That challenge can't be underestimated.

Still, with so many people saying that they believe children in trouble with the law deserve

treatment, it would be helpful if more stepped in to help the kids get that assistance and to be a positive presence for them.

What you can do

To volunteer to be a juvenile court mentor, call Charlotte McGuire at 496-6884. E-mail her at mcguirec@mcoho.org.