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KIDS BEHIND BARS

Teen inmates can be easy prey for older prisoners

► *One 15-year-old boy repeatedly was raped and beaten by his older cellmate. Critics say it shows the state cannot protect juvenile prisoners; a corrections official says the difference in age was irrelevant.*

THIRD IN A SERIES

By Ken Kolker
The Grand Rapids Press

The skinny 15-year-old boy was in tears.

At his sentencing, the teen with boyish good looks and close-cropped hair apologized to the elderly couple for breaking into their lakefront home in northern Michigan.

The judge had just ordered him to spend two to 15 years in a state prison, despite the victims' pleas for mercy.

Less than three weeks later, on Oct.

22, 1999, the teen-ager begged a prison guard to move him from his cell at Riverside Correctional Facility in Ionia.

He had been raped for three straight nights by his 20-year-old cellmate, a violent criminal serving time for robbing and beating a man nearly to death in the Detroit area, according to prison documents obtained by The Press through the Freedom of Information Act.

While state prison officials say kids rarely are targeted by adults in prison, the rapes raise questions about whether the state prison system can protect juveniles, The Press found in a five-month investigation into the treatment of

youths in state prisons.

Judges are sending teens as young as 14 to state prisons under get-tough-on-jvenile-crime laws enacted in 1997.

The state Department of Corrections, which operates the state's 41 prisons, has no policy requiring it to separate juveniles from adults. It is not unusual for juveniles to share cells with adult inmates, The Press found.

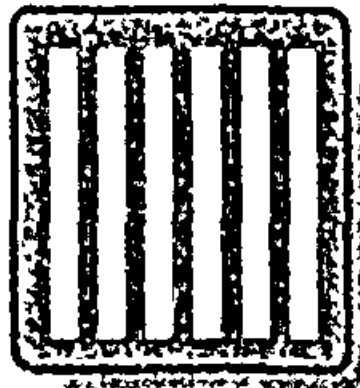
The judge who sentenced the boy said he was surprised the state locked him in a cell with an older inmate. The boy had spent four months in the Otsego County Jail before going to prison.

"From pre-sentence to sentencing, he was a model inmate in our jail," Otsego County Juvenile Court Judge Richard J. Liedel said. "I'm not a bleeding heart by a long shot, but this kid was led astray. He really fell under the spell of a couple of really bad boys in our area.

"Even though he failed me in the juvenile system, by far he was not a hardened juvenile delinquent."

WHERE THEY ARE

Most juveniles in prison as of late last year were at the new Michigan Youth Correctional Facility near Baldwin, a prison for youths under age 20.



Youth Correctional Facility: 36

Michigan Training Unit in Ionia: 3

Ionia Temporary Facility: 1

Michigan Reformatory in Ionia: 3

Riverside Correctional Facility in Ionia: 5

Baraga Maximum Facility in the UP: 1

Cotton Correctional Facility in Jackson: 1

Cassidy Lake: 1

Scott Correctional Facility (for women): 3

State Department of Corrections officials said they don't keep track of how many juveniles have been assaulted by adult prisoners.

SERIES AT A GLANCE

SUNDAY: The new Michigan Youth Correctional Facility near Baldwin is more violent than the state's six adult maximum-security prisons.

MONDAY: Guards fear for their lives in the youth prison. They say understaffing leaves some shifts open and makes 70-hour work weeks common.

TODAY: A 15-year-old boy shares a cell with a 20-year-old robber, and he's raped. The state has no policy requiring it to separate juveniles from adult inmates.

WEDNESDAY: Nearly three-quarters of the juveniles in prison are minorities. Some cry racism.

THURSDAY: Two teen-age killers need help. But are they getting it?

"It's a myth that younger offenders are the prey," said state Department of

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