

KIDS BEHIND BARS



Minority kids' inmate total 'disturbing'

► *Three-quarters of the juveniles in Michigan prisons are minorities — including all six from Kent County.*

FOURTH IN A SERIES

By Ken Kolker

The Grand Rapids Press

The Kent County judge sent 16-year-old Randall Dodson straight to a state prison for his first offense, but not because he's black, the teen's attorney said.

Circuit Judge David Soet locked him up in October because Dodson fired a .22-caliber handgun into the air while robbing a man of \$150 worth of stereo equipment, said attorney Richard E. Zambon.

Dodson, of Wyoming, was among the six Kent County juveniles — ages 16 and under — serving time in state prisons at the end of last year.

All are minorities — four blacks and two Hispanics. Most were at the Michigan Youth Correctional Facility near Baldwin.

"When you tell me all six of the juveniles in prison are minorities, that's disturbing to me," said Charlie Clapp, a Grand Rapids defense lawyer who

has represented juveniles for 18 years. "I can't give you an explanation. Obviously, that's very out of proportion."

In fact, nearly three-quarters of the 54 juvenile inmates in Michigan prisons at the end of last year were minorities, according to prison records obtained by The Press through the Freedom of Information Act.

Two-thirds were black, while 5.5 percent were Hispanic. About a quarter of the inmates were white.

The Press obtained the records as part of a five-month investigation into the treatment of juveniles in the state prison system.

The percentage of minorities among young inmates is higher than the state's adult prison population. Fifty-two percent of the adults are black, 41 percent are white, and the rest are Hispanic, American Indian and Asian.

"The statistic is alarming," said the Rev. David May, coordinator of the Racial Justice Institute of the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism and pastor of Mount Moriah Baptist Worship Center. "I'm even more concerned because of the privatization of the prison system."

The kids, he said, have become commodities, worth \$67.50 a day to Wackenhut Corrections Corp. of Florida, which runs the youth prison near Baldwin under a contract with the

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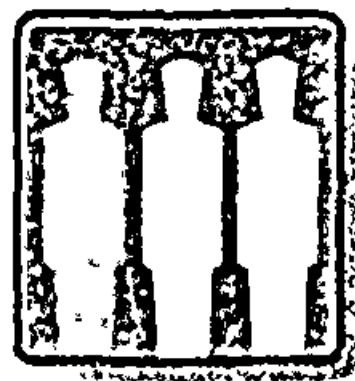
YOUNG AND MINORITY

Of the 54 juvenile inmates in the state prison system late last year, 72 percent were minorities. Here's a racial breakdown:

Blacks:
36 (66.7 percent)

Whites:
15 (27.8 percent)

Other minorities:
3 (5.5 percent)

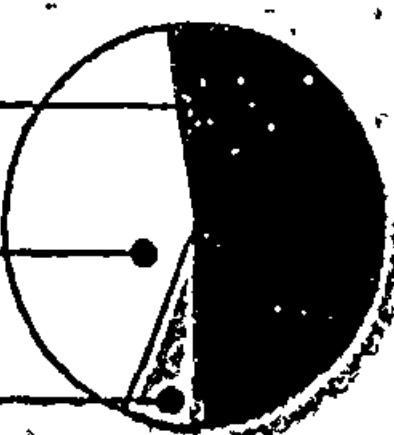


Rest of state adult prison population:

Blacks:
52.5 percent

Whites:
41.4 percent

Other minorities:
6.1 percent



Source: Press analysis of state Department of Corrections records

INSIDE: SERIES AT A GLANCE

■ A look at the six Kent County juveniles serving prison time. A4

■ Three girls are in the state prison system, locked up with adults. A4

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.

TUESDAY: 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.

TODAY: Nearly three-quarters of the juveniles in prison are minorities. Some blame racism in the criminal justice system and society at large.

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