



GLENN R. MCGLOUGHIN

“The young ones basically just do the same silly stuff they see the older ones do, but the younger ones are more wild ... they will shoot you.”

—Antonio Childs, Atlanta resident and crime victim

PART THREE IN A SERIES: GANGS, JUVENILES AND CRIME

GROWING UP THE HARD WAY

More serious offenses, too many offenders and too few mentors mark Georgia's juvenile courts

BY STEPHANIE RAMAGE

It was about 10:30 p.m., in the southern tip of the Atlanta Police Department's Zone 3, a zone that includes the stately renovated bungalows of Grant Park and the hip hangouts of East Atlanta Village. But Antonio Childs was miles away from the bungalows and bars.

He was delivering pizza for Papa John's in the neighborhood where he grew up, the same neighborhood where he still lives, near Mount Zion Road. The 24-year-old

was working to support his three children. He'd gotten out of prison a couple of years before, having served a year for a minor offense.

“I made a stupid decision,” he says of the theft that landed him in jail. “I was working a job and I wanted more money. I did something stupid.”

And he did the time.

“All it took was that one time,” he says. “That was enough for me.”

He doesn't blame his upbringing or any lack of opportunities for the crime he

committed. He says he was raised decently and with care by his grandmother, who is a Fulton County deputy, and his mother.

“They tried to make sure I had the things I needed and the things I wanted, because they didn't want me to steal,” he says. “They may have spoiled me a little. But I always worked. Even when I got in trouble, I was working.”

When he got out of jail, he immediately looked for a job, and got one delivering pizza.

On that cold night in early December 2008, Childs was having car trouble, so he borrowed his girlfriend's car, and she came along.

When he arrived at an apartment complex with a stack of pizzas, the first thing he noticed was that the breezeway he'd have to walk through was very dark. Nonetheless, he grabbed the pizzas and started toward it. Suddenly, three males emerged from the shadows wearing ski masks. The one who seemed to be the leader was carrying a shotgun. The other two were wielding handguns. The leader said, “Where's your shit? Give me your money.”

Childs gave them his wallet and they ordered him to lie down on the ground with his head under a parked car.

Then they walked to his girlfriend's car, where the leader pointed the gun at her and ordered her to give him the keys and her cell phone. They also took a Blackberry and Childs' cell phone before running away, on foot, from the scene. Childs was able to give a description of the leader, who lifted his ski mask for a while during the robbery, and the police later nabbed him. The robber remains incarcerated.

Childs had seen him around the neighborhood before. The night he robbed Childs, he'd just turned 18. The other two looked, judging by their builds, he says, like they were probably younger.

Childs was back at work the next day. He still works for Papa John's, but has gotten a bit of a promotion. He only drives when the store's short on drivers. He plans to stick with it and has no interest in getting caught up in crime again.

“I have this job,” he says, adding that he hopes to advance up the Papa John's cor-

porate ladder, “and I have three children. I have too much to lose.”

Other drivers have been robbed in the same area since last December. It's always been a rough place, but Childs says there has been a worrisome change among his neighborhood's young people.

“The young ones basically just do the same silly stuff they see the older ones do, but the younger ones are more wild,” he says. “When I was growing up, we got into fights, but they will shoot you.”

LETTING THEM GO

Belinda E. Edwards has been chief judge of Fulton County Juvenile Court for about eight months. She was appointed last September after working as one of the court's six judges since 2005.

When The Sunday Paper quoted former Fulton County senior child advocate attorney Antavious Weems in its April 26 edition as saying that the point system, which assigns a certain numerical value to infractions by juveniles as a way of determining whether they should be detained, is a disservice to both juvenile offenders and their victims, Edwards begged to differ.

“People forget that the purpose of juvenile court is not punitive,” she says. “It is rehabilitative. I want to transform the lives of these children.”

She goes through the mechanics of the court: Any juvenile—anyone under the age of 17—who is arrested must have a probable cause hearing within 48 hours. The hearing is to determine whether there is reason to keep the kid locked up. Reasons include the likelihood that he will hurt someone or that he will flee. He may be detained for up to 12 days, and if he is, says Edwards, he will probably be held back for a year in school, starting yet another dangerous cycle.

“If a student misses that many days and then he's, for example, a 14-year-old in seventh grade, well, how do you think he feels? Do you want that 14-year-old in seventh grade?” she asks.

So there are some crimes for which, she admits, a child is let go.

“It might be a curfew violation,” she says. “If that's all it is, and the child has no criminal history, then the child might be released to the parents, if you can identify the parent.”

The court's intake line, she says, is staffed by probation officers, who have a set list (part of which has been reproduced in the chart with this article) of offenses and their points. One must, however, understand the realities of the space available in which to incarcerate juveniles.

“Probably about 90 percent of the

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beds in the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice facilities are filled by SB 440 offenders. Another 5 percent or so might be made up of designated felony offenders," Edwards says. "There is not much room left for any other offenses."

Steve Hayes, a spokesman for the DJJ, corroborates this.

There are, he says, 1,260 beds on the state's Youth Development Campuses, and 1,287 in the state's Regional Youth Detention Centers.

"On any given day, we are at or near capacity," he says. "If someone new comes into the system in, for example, DeKalb County, and there isn't room there, we will make a call and see if there is room at the facility in Marietta."

He says two new facilities are scheduled to open in Rockdale County and southwest Fulton County in 2011.

In addition to the total 2,547 juvenile offenders who are incarcerated, the DJJ also supervises thousands more who have been released to their parents or live in group homes.

BETTER THAN MONEY

State Senate Bill 440 allows children to be charged as adults when they commit any one of the "seven deadly sins": murder, voluntary manslaughter, rape, aggravated sodomy, aggravated child molestation, aggravated sexual battery, or armed robbery with a firearm.

Designated felonies, on the other hand, include kidnapping, attempted murder, carjacking, drug trafficking and other similar acts.

When it comes to something like burglary, which only merits eight points on the DJJ point system, the offense still has to meet a number of requirements to end in what's known in juvenile land as an "adjudication"—"We don't say 'conviction,'" Edwards says.

Once such a case is adjudicated, though, a judge like Edwards finds herself with few options.

"It used to be that we had the option of sending them to boot camp for 90 days," she says, "but while I've been on the bench, that has been reduced to 60 days. And in the last legislative session, Gov. Perdue signed a measure into law that it would now be 30 days. Short of that, boot camp for 30 days—what are my options?"

A massive chunk of Edwards' time is spent on child neglect cases, referred to as "deprivation" cases.

"The deprivation cases grow up to be delinquent children, then delinquent adults, then delinquent parents who have deprived children," she says. "Older judges have seen two generations or more come

A SAMPLE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE JUSTICE'S POINT SYSTEM

The highest point score possible is 15.

OFFENSE	POINT VALUE
Bullying	2 pts
Cruelty to animals	4 pts
Advocating the overthrow of the government	6 pts
Bigamy	6 pts
Possession of marijuana for sale	10 pts
Aggravated assault with intent to rape or rob	12 pts
Aggravated child molestation	15 pts

through the court." The answer, she says, is a lot harder to come by than money. The court desperately needs people to volunteer to be mentors. She says local Big Brother and Big Sister organizations have too few volunteers trying to help far too many kids. Just a couple of hours of undivided attention each week would make more of a difference to juveniles than a stack of money. "I took some of them to see 'The Great Debaters,'" she says. "They complained and griped that they didn't want to go, they weren't interested in that. But we got there and those kids, you should have seen them once they started watching that movie. It was like a whole other world had opened to them. I just wish you could have seen them." **SP**

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

For information about becoming a volunteer mentor with the Fulton County Juvenile Court, please call the Juvenile Justice Fund at 404-224-4477.