

A day in court

How the juvenile justice system works: will you be locked up if you get arrested? It depends

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After spending a day as a reporter in juvenile court, I realized that even if teens get in trouble, they can change their lives if they get help. I was surprised to learn that this help could come from the court's punishment. I had thought the harsh punishments were meant to keep "bad teens" off the streets, but it turned out that the court was guiding the teens, and the judge and lawyers did their best to help.

As I walked down the noisy hall of Eastlake Juvenile Court, I knew immediately that the court wouldn't be what I expected. Instead of the wooden benches and echoing gavels I'd imagined, the courtroom was like a busy office. It was small—about the size of a classroom—and full of desks, people dressed in suits, papers and computers. Judge Cynthia Loo was an Asian woman with a desk full of stacked folders but a calm, reassuring face, not an old, stone-faced judge.

My editor Amanda and I took our seats in the chairs for family along the back of the room. A thin boy who looked 14 or 15 years old was slouched in his chair. He was charged with attempted murder for allegedly aiming a gun at police. A defense attorney was trying to convince the judge that this boy hadn't had a gun pointed at the police, but had instead been running from the police. He said the police had used excessive force when arresting him and falsified the police reports. The two assistant district attorneys were pressing for the case to be sent from juvenile court to adult court due to the seriousness of the charge of attempted murder.

When the hearing was over, Judge Loo invited us into her office to get acquainted. She had given me permission to write this story about her courtroom to help teens understand more about the court process. She explained that the case was serious because the accounts of the boy and the police were very different, and if the boy was tried as an adult, that would mean the possibility of a longer sentence. (The next day she decided to send him to adult court.) After talking for a few more minutes, she had to return to court—30 teens were going to be in her courtroom that day. We took our seats.

It wasn't what I expected

I had expected teenagers dressed in baggy clothes, yelling at the judge and slamming the table. My ideas of criminals came from TV shows like COPS, but I didn't see that violent behavior. Instead, the teens in juvenile court were like any other group of kids—all different. Some shot daring looks at the judge or slouched, but there were also teens dressed in ties and button-up shirts, sitting up straight with nervous respect, addressing the judge as "ma'am." Even though the teens seemed less violent than I had expected, their charges surprised me. I couldn't believe that a 12-year-old could be charged with a sex offense, or that a gang member would tattoo his gang symbol on the back of his head.

All the teens were Hispanic or black, but that may have been because the court was located just east of downtown. Only two of the cases involved girls. Judge Loo told us that boys are most often charged with gang-related crimes such as weapon and drug possession, stealing cars, robbery and assault, but girls were increasingly committing crimes as well. Girls typically were charged with prostitution and drug possession and tended to get into trouble after they got involved with boys in gangs.

Another thing I had expected to see was trials, and I was a little disappointed when I didn't. Instead, the hearings were about many specific things, like teens being told what they were being charged with or the court closing cases. The hearings were all so different and fast-paced that I was confused sometimes about what was going on. These are some of the cases Judge Loo handled that day (I'm not using the teens' names to protect their identities because they are minors.)

10:15 a.m.: a 12-year-old boy charged with a sex offense walked in confidently, but after he sat down, he swung his legs nervously. I stared at the 4-foot-tall boy in disbelief as the defense attorney asked to reschedule the hearing so that a child psychologist could determine if the boy was dangerous. I wished I knew the details. The first thing I thought was that he was a pervert, but then I thought he could have been blamed for some sexual experimentation that was consensual. The hearing lasted only about three minutes—it was the first of a series of brief check-up hearings.

Seeing so many troubled teens, one after the other, was overwhelming. A teen would make me hopeful, but then the next teen would shoot down my hope by showing that they weren't interested in changing their life. The extreme emotions of certain teens stuck in my mind after I left—I remembered the glare of one girl, the eager voice of one boy. Some teens seemed to smile at me, and I thought that they could've been my friends, but then when their charges were read, I was shocked by the things they'd allegedly done. I was used to hearing about teens getting in trouble for chewing gum in class or cussing at the teacher, so sex offenses and armed robberies seemed unreal.

11:10 a.m.: Judge Loo left for a break while a young man entered from the left door wearing the blue L.A. County Jail jumpsuit, handcuffed and escorted by the bailiff. While everyone waited for Judge Loo to return, I was surprised that he talked openly about himself to the attorneys. He said he had been on probation since he was 11 but now wanted to change his life. "I'm exhausted of this," he said. "I want to go to SMC [Santa Monica College], try to do something with myself before it's too late."

When Judge Loo returned, the prosecuting attorneys said that he had shown an effort to change. He pleaded guilty to a drug charge, was granted three years of probation and had to participate in a drug program. He left the courtroom and the district attorney said, "He sounds like he wants to do the right thing. But he's got a drug addiction." I wondered how much hope there was for this young man.

11:45 a.m.: Before the next teen came in, Judge Loo talked to the attorneys about where to send the girl because she had been acting up at Dorothy Kirby Center, one of 19 juvenile detention camps in Los Angeles County. They talked about sending her to a

stricter camp. Loo considered the girl's report from Central Juvenile Hall, where she'd been sent after getting in trouble at Kirby, and a letter written by the girl's mom.

The girl had broken windows at Dorothy Kirby, but the probation officer said she had been doing well recently in juvenile hall. Judge Loo looked sternly at the girl, who was slumped in her chair and looking angry, and said that although the girl said she wanted to return to Kirby, she wasn't acting like it. The mother wanted the girl to go back to Kirby where counseling was provided because "at camp you're not going to get that nurturing environment." The mother admitted that her daughter was a "tough cookie," but also assured that her daughter was taught to never give up, and would show the same persistence in improving herself. It was difficult for Judge Loo to decide because, like all of her cases, she didn't get much time to spend with her. Finally, Judge Loo sent the girl back to Kirby.

At lunch she told us that the mom's speech and letter made a positive difference in the ruling. "I try to be in line with the parent," she said. I felt bad for the teens whose parents were not involved in their lives or didn't seem to understand what was happening. I thought that taking parents into consideration could be an unfair advantage to some teens. Since this girl didn't seem to care about where she went, I doubted she'd make much effort to improve.

At lunch I also learned that much of what happens in court was common sense. It benefits teenagers to let their attorneys speak for them because often teens will incriminate themselves without knowing it. In one case, a girl was being tried for prostitution and she blurted out, "I didn't charge him \$40! I only charged \$20!" leaving no doubt about her guilt.

1:45 p.m.: When a young man wearing a jail jumpsuit walked in, his grandmother covered her mouth with her hand and cried silently. The goateed grandson had initials, which I assumed was a gang reference, tattooed on the back of his bald head. In the past, he had been charged with vandalism, petty theft and marijuana possession. The current charge was more serious—using a gun in a robbery. He pleaded guilty to robbery and in exchange, the gun charge was dropped.

Since he was now 18, he was too old for camp. He was eligible for the California Youth Authority (CYA), where the most serious juvenile criminals are sent and can be held until they are 25.

Distrust of the system

But when the judge asked the grandfather if he had any questions, he demanded that his grandson be sent to an adult prison instead of the California Youth Authority. The defense attorney said he did not support the grandfather's opinion. The young man sat expressionless as his grandfather argued that "they play too many games" in the CYA, meaning that young men are sometimes injured or killed by other inmates. Everyone had become silent with surprise, but Judge Loo stayed calm. Judge Loo reassured him that the CYA has become safer recently, then sent the young man to the CYA until he was 22. This case showed that people don't understand or trust the court system. I felt for the grandfather because he didn't seem to know what was going on. It was frustrating to see that the court couldn't spend more time explaining the decision to him.

3 p.m.: Another confused and frustrated parent. A 17-year-old boy was charged with vandalism, gun possession and being in a gang. He agreed to plead guilty to vandalism and have the other charges dropped in exchange for not going to trial. The mother interrupted, explaining that he was going to college in the fall, and she didn't want him to be sent to camp for six months. She hadn't had a chance to talk with him, and she didn't know what he wanted to do. Judge Loo pointed out that since this was his third arrest, camp was a fairly lenient punishment, and if he went to trial and evidence proved he had a gun, he would be locked up for three years. The mom began to calm down.

After the hearing, I went outside and talked to the mom. The mom was reassured about the camp because the probation officer had come out and explained it to her, but she still thought that parents deserve to know more about what was going on in their children's cases.

3:50 p.m.: A young man came in with chains around his waist, handcuffed in front of his body. He had been found guilty twice before for vandalism, and although he had done well in camp, he returned to his gang after being released and was arrested again for crossing out tagging from another gang. Judge Loo gave him six months in camp. He had submitted a hand-written letter to Judge Loo, who read it and said she was impressed with how heartfelt it was. He asked if he could have counseling after he got out of camp. "The problem was my gang affiliation," he said. "I realize now that's not my future. I recognize my mistakes now." Judge Loo said, "OK, you need to show you're serious by your behavior." The boy said, "I don't mind the time, I just want to get help. I really want to change, not just for myself, for my mother, too."

The boy had accepted his punishment and wanted to change his life by taking advantage of the what the court required, like counseling. He was the perfect example of what the court tries to achieve through punishment.

Teens can change

Judge Loo told me that juvenile court is about rehabilitation and hope rather than punishment. I agreed. There are so many places for teenagers to go—camp, Kirby or home on probation. I saw that the court can change people because one of the teens that day had his case closed and was going to go to college. In my opinion, that is proof that the court tries to help teens turn their lives around instead of just punishing them, because the court determines how many rules the teen needs and where he or she can get help. However, no matter how much the court tries to help, teens need an involved family, supportive friends and hope for their future.

One day in one court isn't enough for me to understand the whole court system, but by the time we left, I had learned a lot about the mercy a judge can have. Judge Loo wasn't only fair; she was respectful, and she wanted to help teenagers live meaningful lives.