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Report says young offenders poorly represented in court La. juvenile system called 'plea mill'

BATON ROUGE -- A disturbingly high number of youth offenders in Louisiana are shoved through the legal system with little or no understanding of how the process works and what effect it will have on them, according to a report released Friday by the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana and the American Bar Association.

"This report is an indictment of a juvenile justice system that is failing to insure that young people have real legal representation," said Gabriella Celeste, a staff attorney with the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana, a watchdog group monitoring youth prison conditions. "As a result, kids wind up in facilities with little or no rehabilitation and families and communities bear the burden of youth returning home with no skills or hope for a future."

According to the 111-page report, entitled "The Children Left Behind," the state's indigent defense system is underfinanced and unable to handle a large volume of cases. Juvenile offenders often don't speak with a lawyer before getting to court and plead guilty without considering their alternatives, it said.

The report examined the public defenders' systems in eight parishes, including Orleans and St. John the Baptist. Since all of that data was cobbled together for the report, no information about the situations in each parish was available.

In some rural parishes, however, the study found that as many as 95 percent of youth cases are resolved by uncontested guilty pleas.

"Louisiana is like a plea mill," said Patricia Puritz, executive director of the ABA's Juvenile Justice Center. "The detection hearing, the adjudication and the disposition are rolled into a three-minute period."

The report also said there are not enough programs to treat children with the drug, family or behavioral problems that got them in trouble, compounding the problem.

"You're dealing with a system with very few alternatives," said Sid Rosteet, a child advocate and lawyer in Lake Charles. "It is a conveyor belt."

Despite the report's gloomy outlook, officials said some promising action is being taken.

The Legislature has approved House Concurrent Resolution 94, which sets up a commission to study a restructuring of the state's juvenile justice system.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.