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## Problems in Juvenile Justice System

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Mississippi's youth court system needs help, fast. That's according to a new report by the Mississippi Youth Justice Project and National Juvenile Defender Center. The report found children are not receiving quality representation.

When 18 year old Anthony Barbour of Jackson was falsely accused of a crime two years ago, his public defender was there by his side. He says, "She came everyday to check on me, make sure I was ok."

That was not the case for 14 year old Marquae Watson of Laurel. His public defender never asked for his side of the story or returned phone calls from his family. He says, "She ain't represent me or nothing." Watson got a new attorney and his case was dismissed.

"Children's access to counsel is a right not a privelege." Jennifer Riley Collins with the Mississippi Youth Justice pProject says their new report shows this is a persisting problem inside the state's youth court system.

"We also consistently found that children lack zealous counsel at critical stages, that they lack zealous advocacy from those appointed to provide them representation."

A team of local attorneys and national experts visited youth courts in 15 counties across the state. After eight months of research they discovered the youth court system is under-resourced and defense attorneys have excessive case loads.

"Without zealous advocacy, children and the communities which they live suffer life long consequences."

The report also makes recommendations. The main changes: increase resources for juvenile defenders. Fund community based alternatives to incarceration.

Representative George Flagg, the chairman of the Juvenile Justice Committee says he will help make it happen. "I am here today to reaffirm the commitment to the youth court system and pledge to you to help in the 2008 legislature."

Mississippi Youth Justice Orojct leaders want to put the new report in the hands of state law makers, judges, and teachers.



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