



# Study: Overworked lawyers make juvenile justice problematic

**AP** Associated Press

October 31, 2007 (CHICAGO) - Indigent children that enter an overburdened Illinois juvenile justice system are put at a disadvantage by the system's reliance on overworked attorneys with little time to consult with their clients.

A report by the Children and Family Justice Center at Northwestern University and the National Juvenile Defender Center contends the lack of time, support and resources juvenile defenders have is undermining their ability to effectively represent indigent children in Juvenile Court cases.

"There are a range of issues and it has a tremendous, long-term impact on a child and their family," Patricia Puritz, executive director of the National Juvenile Defender Center and co-writer of the report, told the Chicago Tribune. "Juvenile Court is not kiddie court. It does not all go away anymore."

The report, released Wednesday, found that more than 70 percent of all juvenile cases in Illinois are resolved by plea bargains. Because many of those are entered at the child's first court appearance, lawyers have little opportunity to investigate or confer with the clients about the case.

Attorneys for children are usually appointed at the child's first court appearance, meaning there is no communication between the child and his or her lawyer prior to going before the judge.

The report says few juvenile defenders have access to investigators, social workers and administrative staff to help in the representation of the children. Most have limited access to computers, research accounts or regular training, the report said.

The report recommends the appointment of counsel before the first court appearance, for children's lawyers to provide zealous advocacy at all court proceedings and to develop ways of having regular contact with clients and to use language that children can understand. It also calls on the Illinois legislature to provide funding for the Illinois Juvenile Defender Resource Center.

Benjamin Wolf, associate legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois said he agrees there is a need for stronger advocacy at juvenile hearings.

"There is not enough attention paid by counsel and judges and others to the horrible disruption the child faces when he is detained. It is stigmatizing and puts pressure on them to plea so they can get out of jail," Wolf said.

Factors such as race and heavy caseloads contribute to more children being detained than there should be, Wolf added.

Linda Uttal, acting chief of the juvenile justice division in the Cook County public defender's office, said she could not comment because she had not seen the report. John Gorman, a spokesman for the Cook County state's attorney's office, said he also could not comment because he had not seen the report.

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