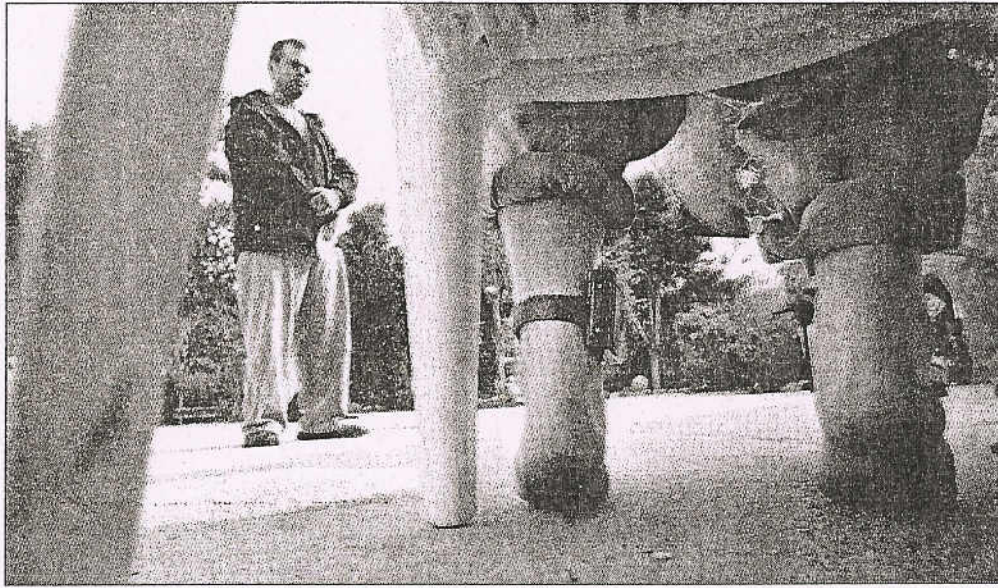


'Government does a lousy job of raising other people's kids.'

John Salazar, Santa Cruz judge



ROBERT DURELL *Los Angeles Times*

SERVING TIME AT HOME: Frankie Vultaggio, a 13-year-old Santa Cruz offender, must wear an ankle monitor at home. He talks with Javier Chavez, a county probation aide.

Jobs, Not Juvenile Hall

Instead of getting tough on young offenders, Santa Cruz County puts most under house arrest. The data show the approach is working.

By ERIC BAILEY
Times Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — These are get-tough times for juvenile crime. All over the nation, youth detention centers are full to brimming. But jailers in this beach town with a liberal bent think they've found a cheaper and better way.

They're sending home all but the worst kids.

Instead of languishing in juvenile hall, budding criminals in Santa Cruz County are placed under house arrest, made to deal with

their parents — and face their victims. They're given a job, tutoring and counseling. They're kept busy, not behind bars.

So instead of getting scared straight, Nick Jackson got into cooking.

On one recent evening, the 17-year-old aspiring chef stood rapt amid glistening pots and pans, learning to whip up wok-seared salmon. Jackson, who started shoplifting at 8 and had graduated to grand-theft auto by his teens, said he has traded crime for a commercial kitchen.

"It was getting to the point in life where I didn't know what to do," he admitted, gingerly flipping a fish filet under the watchful eye of his tutor, a local executive chef. "I fell in love with this."

What skeptics label a soft-headed experiment with potentially dangerous results is called a success in Santa Cruz — just as it had in Chicago; Port- [See *Juveniles*, Page A11]

Santa Cruz County Opts for Jobs, Not Jail

[Juveniles, from Page A1]
land, Ore.; and several cities before.

Instead of sliding back into crime, law-breaking teenagers sent home here have mostly avoided trouble. In the seven years since Santa Cruz County altered its approach to juvenile troublemakers, just 2% have committed new offenses while awaiting resolution of their cases.

At the same time, youth crime in the county fell 30%, the juvenile hall's daily population declined 47% and the length of stay there dropped to about a third of the state average.

With fewer youths behind bars, Santa Cruz also spends far less on juvenile incarceration. Home detention is less than half the cost of housing youths in juvenile hall.

"Forget the liberal, I-want-to-take-care-of-the-kids stuff," said Vincent Schiraldi of the Justice Policy Institute. "This makes fiscal good sense."

But the United States is largely heading in the opposite direction. Although juvenile crime is declining nationwide, the U.S. juvenile detention population grew 74% from 1985 to 1995. Operating costs soared 139%, bringing the average annual detention cost per child to \$36,000 — about the same as a year at Harvard University.

The Coalition for Juvenile Justice, a Washington nonprofit, contends in a national report to be released in early January that "nothing short of a lock-up boom exists in the United States."

California has become one of the country's most aggressive youth jailers, with an incarceration rate 39% higher than the national average. Despite unrelenting budget pressures, the state is on a path to add about 3,200 juvenile hall beds by 2006, boosting capacity 30%. If all the beds are filled, reformers fear, juvenile hall will gobble money intended for crime prevention programs.



LIMITED: Miguel Lozoya stands in the backyard of his father's home, which is as far as he can roam with his ankle monitor.

"We're better off sending a lot of these youths back home," said Judge John Salazar of Santa Cruz. "Government does a lousy job of raising other people's kids."

State officials say juvenile halls, for decades stiffed at the funding trough, are playing catch-up. Construction is needed, they say, to renovate aging, crowded and unsafe detention centers.

They're skeptical about a one-size-fits-all approach. Santa Cruz County — just over the hill from Silicon Valley — has higher household incomes, lower poverty and fewer single-parent families than the state as a whole. Skeptics say detention reforms have a better chance in such a sunny socioeconomic climate.

Stalwarts in the juvenile justice system contend the pendulum shouldn't swing too far. Jail, they say, is the best spot for many teenage offenders.

Larry Price, president of Chief Probation Officers of California, admits to an "uncomfortable feeling" that reformers in places such as Santa Cruz, despite commendable intentions,

sometimes fail to make public safety a high enough priority. Price said "they need to bring it back to a middle point."

Harsher critics say reformers want to coddle natural-born criminals. The nation's get-tough stand, they contend, has played a role in stemming youth crime, proving that we should stay the course.

But California's fiscal dilemma is nudging counties to look anew at experiments like the one underway in Santa Cruz.

"Maybe this is the golden moment for the reform movement," said Sue Burrell of San Francisco's Youth Law Center. "Arnold Schwarzenegger and anyone else in charge of public funds should be looking for effective

ways to save taxpayer dollars."

High costs and crowded conditions drove Santa Cruz toward change. The county's 42-bed juvenile hall was sometimes running at 150% of capacity, sparking friction among staff members and youths.

Instead of expanding, the county turned to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a Baltimore-based nonprofit. In the early 1990s, the foundation began

pouring money and expertise into selected communities in hopes of reversing the detention trend sweeping America.

Even in Santa Cruz, where a progressive spirit seems part of the civic constitution, bureaucratic inertia had to be overcome. Some police and prosecutors needed to set aside the notion that juvenile hall is the best way to handle errant kids.

Reformers say plenty of children don't fit the profile of a societal menace. Nearly four of five incarcerated youths are accused of nonviolent offenses.

In juvenile hall, new arrivals can receive lessons on delinquency from more veteran criminals. Putting first-timers behind a locked door "stigmatizes them, undercuts any desire to do well," said Nancy Gannon, deputy executive director of the Coalition for Juvenile Justice. "They figure adults have given up on them."

In Santa Cruz, the most serious risks to society or of fleeing are weeded out. Offenders who use a loaded gun or commit a violent crime are likely to land behind bars. "There are kids who need to be locked up," said Judith Cox, the county's chief probation officer. "But for the rest, there are better alternatives."

The less serious cases are funneled into home detention and a variety of programs — job training, victim reconciliation and even a soccer league that puts rival gang members on the same team. Drug treatment and counseling are provided.

"The challenge for the system is to create productive futures for these kids," said Scott MacDonald, the county's juvenile probation director.

Parents — long blamed by the system as part of the problem — have a new role, working as partners in rehabilitating their wayward youngsters. In meetings with trained mediators, families develop strategies to prevent slip-ups and promote success.

"We can't just brush them off as being a bad parent because their kid is in the system," MacDonald said.

Victim restitution can take a creative turn. One bike thief wrote a heartfelt letter of apology to his victim, a teacher. The letter was moving, MacDonald recalled, but the grammar was appalling. For restitution, the teacher asked to tutor the boy.

House arrest is nothing new in the juvenile justice system, but Santa Cruz applies it more frequently and monitors it more aggressively than most counties.

Among those keeping watch is Javier Chavez.

He roams the county with three other probation aides, pay-

ing daily visits to the homes of youth offenders. Friendly and wiry, Chavez deploys diplomatic skills learned as the oldest of five brothers. He performs random drug tests, works the phones and combs the streets to ensure that his charges are on the up and up.

One recent afternoon, he found Miguel Lozoya right where the teenager belonged: at home with his dad.

Lozoya has seen rocky years, diving into a life of drugs and graffiti. Now turning 18, he has been in and out of juvenile hall.

After his latest arrest, Lozoya was ordered by a judge to serve two months of home detention with an electronic monitoring bracelet strapped on his ankle.

Lozoya worries about returning to his old ways when the device comes off, but intends to keep working and stay clear of drugs. He still hopes to earn his high school diploma.

His father, Fred, said the county has helped point his son in the right direction. "I worry, but he seems to be taking it seriously this time," the father said. "He definitely wants to change."

Frankie Vultaggio, 13, just wants to make it through the

day. Stroking his hair, he yawned sleepily when Chavez knocked on the door at midmorning.

The boy, soft and baby-faced, is no pushover. He has smoked marijuana since he was 10 and was arrested for hitting a child with a golf club — "but not very hard," Frankie insisted. His father is in prison. He was booted from a group home for throwing a VCR through a window. Frankie has done time in Shasta, Sacramento, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties. And he doesn't want to go back. He's trying to toe the line, but with mixed results. When Chavez saw an ash-tray in the boy's room, Frankie yelped, "It's my mom's! I ain't been smoking!"

The boy's future may appear bleak, but Chavez is hopeful: "Frankie is finally living a reasonably normal life, and he looks at it as weird. But he's starting to accept it."

Nick Jackson is further down the path to a new future.

After his latest nosedive into the justice system, a judge ordered the tall, easygoing youth to get a job. With the help of a nonprofit program, he landed work washing dishes at a cafe.

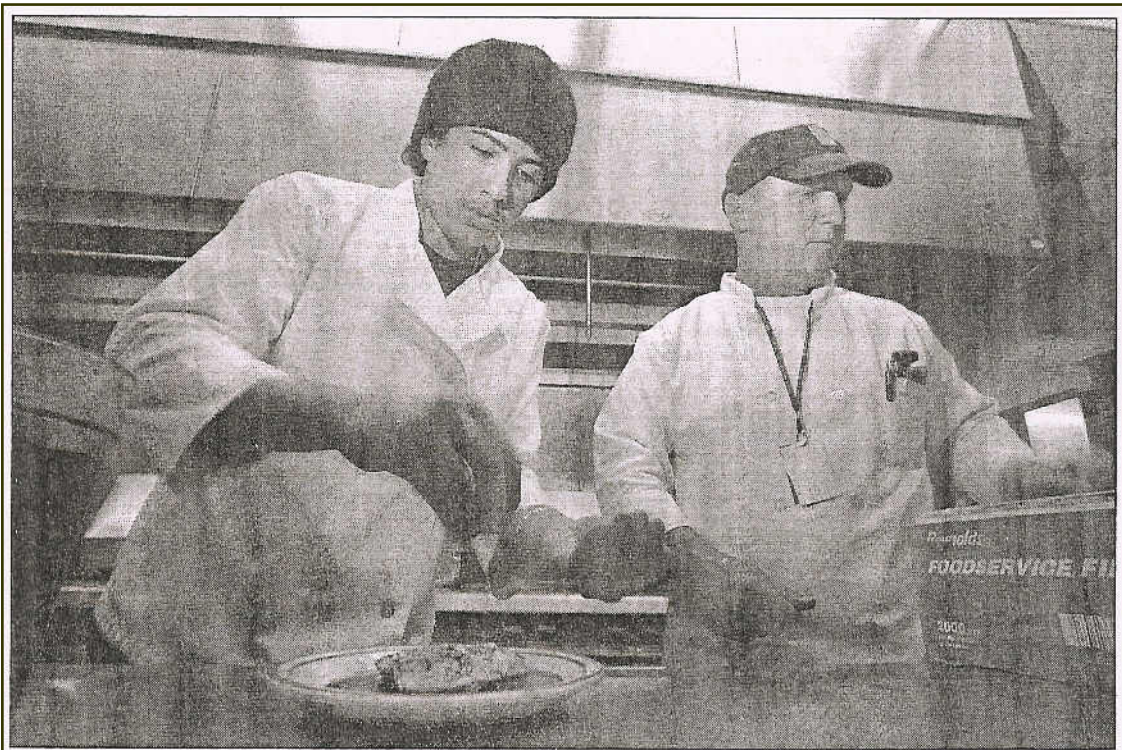
He quickly grew fascinated by the whirl of the kitchen.

Advisors steered Jackson into a culinary arts program taught by Shawn Stanchfield, the executive chef at Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz. One night a week Stanchfield tutors Jackson and other graduates of Santa Cruz's penal system in the hospital's sprawling kitchen.

A few life lessons are thrown into the mix, Stanchfield said. Things like showing up on time. Paying attention to the details of recipes and the real world.

Jackson hopes to work as an intern on Stanchfield's staff, and eventually work a ritzy restaurant.

"I like the hands-on of it," he said. "I hope I can make it."



Photographs by ROBERT DURELL *Los Angeles Times*

LEARNING: *Nick Jackson seasons a salmon fillet in the kitchen of Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz under the watchful eye of Shawn Stanchfield, the hospital's executive chef.*