LOOKINGDEEPER

A Report on the
Visibility and Invisibility of Youth, Policy and Race in the San Jose Mercury News

YOUTH MEDIA COUNCIL • MAY 2005

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Study Design by the Youth Media Council
Research Conducted by Allen Almendarez, Dewayne Colbert, Jerome Elzie and Rochelle Johnson of the Youth Justice Project, with support from Oshen Turman, Robert Trujillo and Leconté Dill
Report Produced by Jen Soriano, Youth Media Council
Design by Amy Sonnie

LOOKING DEEPER

Visibility and Invisibility of Youth, Youth Policy and Race in the San Jose Mercury News

May 20, 2005

INTRODUCTION

News coverage of youth shapes public attitudes and decisions about young people. Over the last 10 years, California has incarcerated more and more young people, while continuing to cut social services and close schools.[1] This trend is true in every part of California, including San Jose, California. San Jose is home both to Silicon Valley — one of the most lucrative technology industries in the nation — and a large working-class, multi-racial non-white citizen and immigrant population. San Jose is comprised of both San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, where youth and young adults make up nearly one-third of the population,[2] and youth of color from Native, Asian, Latino, and Black communities comprise approximately 50 percent of the total youth population. Economic disparity, racial diversity and structural racism are part of the character of this region and pose a complex story to tell, particularly when the characters are young, poor, and considered neither a key consumer base or an influential audience.

The *San Jose Mercury News* is the leading newspaper for the San Jose region affecting public opinion and policy throughout the Bay Area. With such potential impact on the political decisions of a region, particularly one with such extreme disparity and diversity, stories about youth and youth policy must be balanced and fair, offering accurate portrayals not only of incidents and individuals, but of systems, trends and polices. The *San Jose Mercury News* is charged with telling the complex story of a region, reflecting the electricity of conflict and the momentum of change. Taking this challenge seriously, the *Mercury News* asked the Youth Media Council to support a closer look at their coverage of youth and youth policy. The Youth Media Council applauds the *San Jose Mercury News* for taking time, energy and using their resources to examine and improve their media content.

What We Did

Between May 1-7, 2005, the YOUTH MEDIA COUNCIL (YMC) — an Oakland-based youth membership-organization dedicated to improving news coverage of youth and youth policy — and the YOUTH JUSTICE PROJECT (YJP) — a YMC member organization dedicated to developing formerly incarcerated youth into advocates for social change — monitored the *San Jose Mercury News* to see if stories about youth measure up to the standards of fair, accurate and balanced journalism.

Previous studies of news content have documented that racially biased content and images pervade news coverage about young people. These studies have also shown a disproportionate focus on youth crime, during periods when juvenile crime is actually declining, and have noted the exclusion of coverage on important indicators of youth well being such as education and youth poverty.[3] In addition, the same studies found that white adults, especially police and prosecutors, are the primary sources in stories about youth, while young people's voices are missing. Given that two-thirds of the public make important policy decisions based on information they receive from news media, imbalanced news media creates a dangerous climate for youth.

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[1] National Council on Crime and Deliqiency, www.nccd-crc.org; *MotherJones* magazine (2001). *Debt to Society: Special Report*. http://www.motherjones.com/news/special_reports/prisons/atlas.html

[2] US Census Bureau, *California QuickFacts*. http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/o6/06085.html

[3] Youth Media Council (2001). *Speaking for Ourselves*; Dorfman, Lori & Vincent Schiraldi (2001). *Off Balance: Youth, Race & Crime in the News*. See www.buildingblocksforyouth.org/media; Children Now (2001). *The Local Television News Media's Picture of Children.*

Following these trends, YMC staff and YJP youth leaders, sought answers to the following questions: *Is the San Jose Mercury News covering youth policy developments in juvenile justice, education, and child welfare? In coverage of youth, who gets to speak and who doesn't? How is race/racism discussed in youth policy stories? What, if any, loaded language or images are found in stories about youth and youth policy?*

We are proud to share our findings and recommendations with the *San Jose Mercury News* and thank the paper's diversity committee for inviting us to participate in their community input process.

KEY FINDINGS

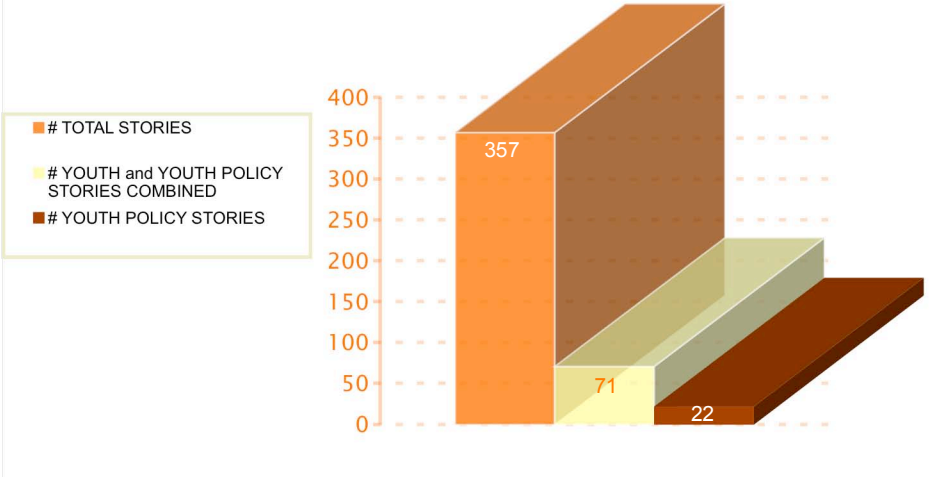
▣ YOUTH NOT BRANDED BY LOADED LANGAUGE OR IMAGES

Mercury News content was free of language and images that brand youth as gangsters, violent, or out-of-control. Zero out of 71 youth and youth policy stories contained language that labeled youth as gangsters, gang-bangers, violent, or out-of-control, and no stories showed images of youth in the street, in courtrooms, handcuffed or behind bars.

▣ FOCUS IS ON INCIDENTS AND INDIVIDUALS, NOT YOUTH POLICY

While the *Mercury News* is above average in its coverage of youth and young adult recreation, it fails to cover important developments in youth policy. Of 357 total *San Jose Mercury News Stories*, 71 were about youth and only 22 specifically addressed youth policy issues. Eighteen stories looked at education policy, only four looked at child welfare policy, and none discussed juvenile justice policy. In comparison, 121 stories were devoted to crime or corporations.

CHART: Comparison of Youth Policy Stories to Total Number of Stories, May 1-7, 2005



Education

Of 18 stories about education policy, only one focused on the impacts of President Bush's No Child Left Behind law. Other education policy stories focused on local and state issues such as teacher tenure and merit pay, but did not discuss policy impacts on students.

Child Welfare & Poverty

There were only four stories on child welfare policy, despite important developments in this area such as overhauls in state and federal processes for evaluating child welfare systems.

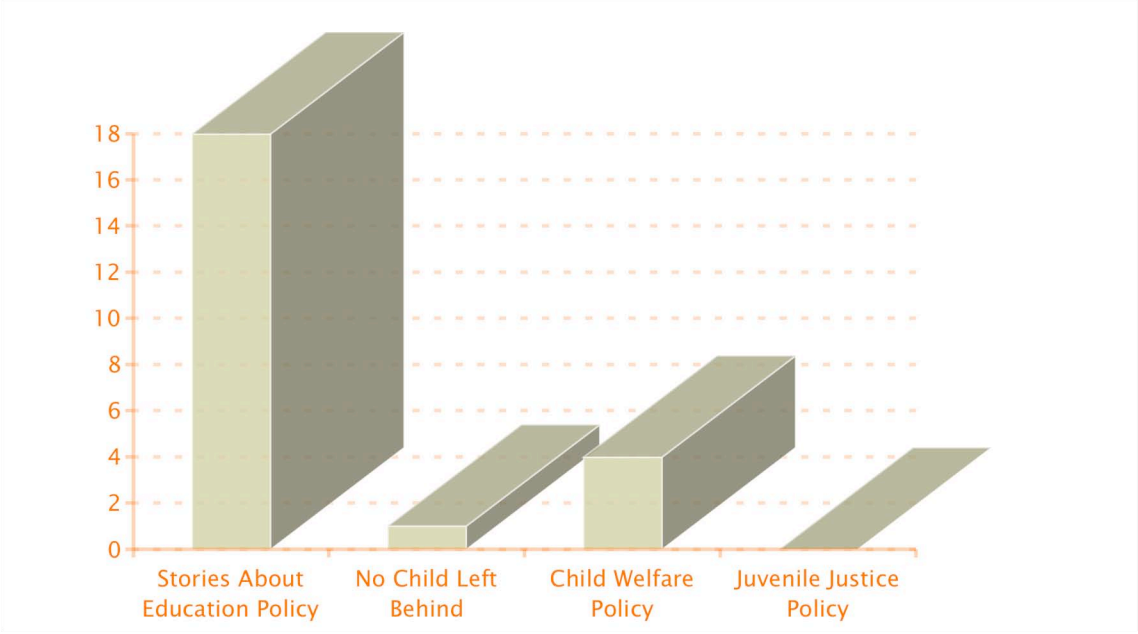
Juvenile Justice

While the *San Jose Mercury News* bucks the industry trend of focusing on youth perpetrators of crime disproportionate to the rates at which youth actually commit crimes, the *Mercury News* failed to mention juvenile justice policy in any of its crime stories or any other stories about youth policy.[4] While there were 18 stories about youth and crime, there were zero stories about juvenile justice policy.

There are currently significant policy developments in the field, including Governor Schwarzenegger's proposal to overhaul the California Youth Authority. There was additionally no mention of the anniversary of Proposition 21, passed 5 years ago this Spring — an anniversary that merits critical investigation into the impacts of the policy on young people and youth detention rates, particularly young people of color and their communities statewide.

There are dozens of groups throughout the Bay Area working on juvenile justice reform. Covering crime without providing context about a system that is undergoing significant reforms, generates episodic stories that promote fear instead of offering in-depth information readers can use to make important civic decisions.

CHART: Number of Youth Policy Stories by Policy Area



▣ YOUTH VOICES MISSING

Adults speak three times more often than youth and young adults in stories about youth and youth policy. Youth appeared as sources in only six of 22 stories about youth policy, and are quoted in recreational stories three times as often as they are quoted in policy stories.

On the positive side, the adults who do speak are more often youth advocates than police, prosecutors or politicians — a commendable break in the industry trend of sourcing law enforcement officials rather than allowing youth and youth advocates to speak for themselves.

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[4] Dorfman, Lori & Vincent Schiraldi (2001). *Off Balance: Youth, Race & Crime in the News.* See www.buildingblocksforyouth.org/media.

INVISIBLE DIVERSITY AND MISSING RACIAL IMPACTS

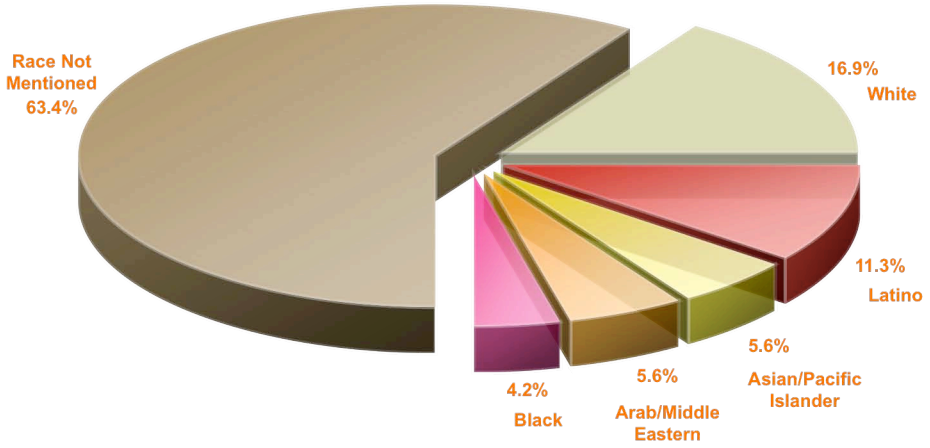
Race is mentioned in about one-third of all youth and youth policy articles. However, in almost 50 percent of the stories in which race is mentioned or shown, the subjects and sources are white.

Only eight out of 71 youth and policy stories mention or show Latino/as (11.2%); four mention or show Asians or Pacific Islanders (5.6%); four mention or show Arabs or Middle Eastern people (5.6%); three stories mention or show Black people (4.2%); and only one story mentions or shows South Asians (1.4%). This is in stark contrast to the population of these ethnic groups, which combined make up more than half of the population in both San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

In addition, the four stories that mention Arabs or Middle Easterners were about war in the Middle East, not about local Arab/Middle Eastern communities and their concerns.

The racial impact of policies around juvenile justice, education and child welfare is mentioned in only one article, which discusses international students visiting from China and India.

CHART: Proportion of Youth Stories in which Race is Visible and Invisible



RECOMMENDATIONS TO REPORTERS & EDITORS

➢ FOCUS ON YOUTH POLICY

Given the controversy over impacts of state and federal education policies like No Child Left Behind and Governor Schwarzenegger's de-funding of Proposition 98; given the disproportionately harsh penalties facing youth, especially youth of color, and the significant reforms communities are demanding from California's juvenile justice system; and given cuts to child welfare funding and significant gaps in California's foster care system, the *Mercury News* has a responsibility to cover developments in these issues in an accurate, fair and balanced way.

The *Mercury News* should increase the number of youth policy stories in coverage, specifically around juvenile justice and child welfare, and should prioritize the voices of youth and young adults in these stories.

To make this possible, we recommend that the *Mercury News* re-instate the youth beat that was once a temporary staff position, and deepen the role of this position so that full-time hours can be devoted to exploring the impacts of youth policy and to cultivating relationships between the *Mercury News* and youth sources working on these issues.

➢ EXPOSE STRUCTURAL RACISM IN YOUTH POLICY

Youth policy stories should address the impact of structural racism and poverty, and discuss disproportionate impact of social policies on youth of color and their families. Issues like state takeovers of school districts made up primarily of youth of color, the negative impacts of testing on students of color, and harsher sentences for youth of color compared to white youth convicted of similar crimes are issues that merit deeper investigation to inform readers about the shortcomings of policies that affect youth most.

There is a wealth of well-researched reports about structural racism and its impacts on youth policy. The *Mercury News* should use these reports to give context to policy stories. Reporters and editors can use the list of resources on page 10 of this report to find some of this data on how policies impact diverse populations.

➢ HIGHLIGHT YOUTH VOICES

The *Mercury News* should prioritize the voices of youth spokespeople, especially in stories about issues that impact them most. Young people are more than a human-interest story. There are hundreds of groups in and around the South Bay with young people working to make change. These young people have critical perspectives on important news issues.

The *Mercury News* should make their community input process a series of annual events open to more community members, especially from marginalized communities. In addition to its teen page, the *Mercury News* could create a "Two Cents" column similar to the *San Francisco Chronicle's*, but specifically for youth. And like the *Washington Post* does with the Heritage Foundation, we urge the *San Jose Mercury News* to work with local policy groups who have access to often-marginalized perspectives on important policy issues — such the Youth Media Council, Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, and the Applied Research Center. Reporters can use the attached list of Policy Sources to deepen their relationships with youth and youth advocates working in the youth policy arena.

CONCLUSIONS

The *San Jose Mercury News* is raising the bar for unbiased coverage of youth and should be commended for avoiding language and images that criminalize youth of color. However, the *Mercury News* falls short in covering youth as sources and subjects impacted by policy change, and is silent on problems of structural racism in the institutions that affect youth most: government, schools, and the juvenile justice system.

While the *Mercury News* mentions youth and young adults in a significant number of lifestyle stories focusing on the achievements of outstanding youth, there is a lack of news stories that explore the impacts of policies on young people and their communities. This imbalance can lead to uninformed decision-making by politicians and other civic officials. Episodic stories paint a fraction of the picture necessary for readers to understand the landscape in which we live. Thematic stories that highlight youth and young people as subjects, include their perspectives, and explore the institutional roots of current problems can lead to sound policies that address the real lived conditions of youth from marginalized communities.

We encourage the *Mercury News* to take a deeper look at the young people who make up more than one-third of their market population. Youth are more than human-interest subjects and vulnerable victims, they are vibrant change-makers and civic actors who deserve to be represented and engaged in *Mercury News* coverage. Youth in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties also represent a wide array of racial groups who bear the brunt of many important political issues that must be reflected and explored in coverage.

Given this, we hope the *San Jose Mercury News* will follow two key recommendations from the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics:

- "Tell the story of diversity and magnitude of human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so," and
- "Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid."[5]

By exposing the unpopular truth about structural racism and its effects on young people, and by including youth perspectives on the decisions that impact them most, the *San Jose Mercury News* would set an example for all print media seeking to maintain integrity and deepen civic participation at a time of increasing market pressures to produce tabloid news.

We thank the *San Jose Mercury News* for its efforts and hope that the editors and reporters will continue to work with youth organizing groups and policy groups to put these recommendations into practice.

[5] Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, http://spj.org/ethics_code.asp

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POLICY SOURCES

ART & CULTURE

COLORED INK ● Javier Reyes ● 415.641.7657 x 9 ● coloredink@brava.org
2781 24th Street
San Francisco, CA 94110
Colored Ink, a project of the Brava Theater, is a youth hip-hop theater group that produces shows about juvenile justice, police brutality, and other issues important to youth of color.

EAST SIDE ARTS ALLIANCE ● Favianna Rodriguez ● 510.532.8267 ● favianna@tumis.com
P.O. Box 17008
Oakland, CA 94601
http://www.eastsideartsalliance.com/news/index.php
A Fruitvale-based organization dedicated to community development through popular art like graffiti, music and dance. Sponsors of the annual Malcolm X Jazz Festival, they will be opening a cultural center this summer.

CHILD WELFARE POLICY

COLEMAN ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH ● N'Tanya Lee, Director ●
415.239.0161 x 813 ● nlee@colemanadvocates.org
459 Vienna Street
San Francisco, CA 94112
www.colemanadvocates.org
One of the oldest child advocacy organizations in the country, Coleman runs parent and youth councils to advocate for comprehensive childcare programs, increased city funding for child development, and successful initiatives like universal health care for children.

EDUCATION POLICY

CALIFORNIANS FOR JUSTICE ● Lisa Castellanos ● 408.272.0236 ● lisa@caljustice.org
1971 Las Plumas Ave
San Jose, CA 95133
www.caljustice.org
Californians for Justice San Jose works on youth-led racial justice reforms in the East Side Union High School District, as well as on statewide education issues through offices in Long Beach and Oakland.

GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE NETWORK ● Carolyn Laub, Director ● 415.552.4229 ●
carolyn@gsanetwork.org
160 14th Street
San Francisco, CA 94110
www.gsanetwork.org
GSA Network supports GSA groups in schools throughout the state. These groups work on anti-discrimination campaigns for gender-neutral bathrooms, slur-free curriculum, and other issues in support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth.

KIDS FIRST ● Julie Iny, Associate Director ● 510.452.2043 x304 ● julie@kidsfirstoakland.org
1625 Broadway Street
Oakland, CA 94612
www.kidsfirstoakland.org

Kids First runs a youth culture program and a youth organizer program for Oakland students. They are currently conducting a campaign against AC Transit for affordable bus passes and a campaign to institute student counselors in Oakland high schools.

YELL PROJECT ● Natasha Marsh ● 510.879.8051 ● info@yellitout.com
McClymond's High School
2607 Myrtle Avenue, Room 128
Oakland, CA 94607
www.gardnercenter.stanford.edu/support_community/yell.html
The Yell Project is a youth leadership development group currently conducting a campaign to bring student voice into the hiring process for school security guards.

YOUTH TOGETHER ● Kimberly Aceves, Director ● 510.645.9207 ●
kaceves@youthtogether.net
1611 Telegraph Ave #203
Oakland, CA 94612
www.youthtogether.net
Youth Together is a student-led organization for reform in East Bay Schools. With school sites across the East Bay and student centers that bring together youth from different schools, YT is a leader in building student power to effect local, regional and state-level education policy change.

YOUTH MAKING A CHANGE ● Jose Luis Pavón ● 415.239.0161 x 820 ●
jlpavon@colemanadvocates.org
459 Vienna Street
San Francisco, CA 94112
www.colemanadvocates.org/ymac/about_ymac/history.html
YMAC is a project of Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth. YMAC conducts campaigns to improve school bathroom conditions and is researching avenues for increasing job training and job availability for youth in San Francisco.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE POLICY

PODER ● Teresa Almaguer ● 415.431.4210 ● poder@igc.org
474 Valencia St. #125
San Francisco, CA 94103
PODER runs a youth program called Common Roots in conjunction with the Chinese Progressive Association. PODER youth have run healthy food campaigns for low-income residents of color in the Mission, Bayview, and Excelsior Districts in San Francisco.

SILICON VALLEY TOXICS COALITION ● Neelam Pathikonda ● 408.287.6707 ●
svtc@svtc.org
760 N. First Street
San Jose, CA 95112
www.svtc.org
SVTC is an environmental justice organization currently focused on responsible handling of electronic waste. SVTC is conducting a campaign targeting Apple for their e-waste pollution practices. SVTC is also conducting a campaign to abolish the use of prison labor in dismantling electronics.

YOUTH UNITED FOR COMMUNITY ACTION ● Oscar Flores, Director ● 650.322.9165 ●
info@youthunited.net
1848 Bay Road
East Palo Alto, Ca 94303
www.youthunited.net
YUCA works with East Palo Alto youth ages 13-19 to work on environmental justice an anti-gentrification issues in their community.

IMMIGRATION POLICY

ASIAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN ADVOCATES ● Lily Wang ● 510.208.7288 x 3 ●
lilywang@aiwa.org
310 Eighth St., #301
Oakland, CA 94607
AIWA runs a youth program called Youth Build Immigrant Power that has successfully fought for bilingual education support in Oakland schools. AIWA and YBIP are currently conducting a health care campaign to secure benefits for immigrant workers.

AYPAL ● John Fong, Director ● 510.869.6062● johnf@acmhs.org
310 Eighth St., #201
Oakland, CA 94607
AYPAL is a multi-ethnic 6-site youth organizing group dedicated to using art and culture to create change. They are supporting the Book Not Bars Campaign to close California Youth Authority Facilities and have an ongoing campaign to reform deportation laws.

JUVENILE JUSTICE POLICY

CENTER FOR YOUNG WOMEN'S DEVLOPMENT ● Marlene Sanchez, Director ● 415.703.8801 ●
marlene@cywd.org
1550 Bryant St. #700
San Francisco, CA 94103
www.cywd.org
CYWD works with young girls who have been in the juvenile justice system to help them get out, stay out, and reform the juvenile justice system. The Center has won a room in juvenile hall for young mothers to see their children and is now working on a bill of rights for these young mothers.

HOMEY ● Rene Quinonez, Director ● 415.861.1600 ● rene@homeysf.org
1337 Mission Street
San Francisco, CA 94103
HOMEY conducts workshops in continuation high schools to develop the leadership of at-risk youth. HOMEY focuses its work on addressing the impacts of anti-gang legislation.

LET'S GET FREE ● David Kahn ● 510.428.3939 x243 ● david@ellabakercenter.org
344 40th Street
Oakland, CA 94609
www.ellabakercenter.org/lgf
A project of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Let's Get Free has been a leading force in the campaign to shut down the California Youth Authority.

YOUTH JUSTICE PROJECT ● Leconté Dill ● 415.239.0161 x 824 ●
Ldill@colemanadvocates.org
459 Vienna Street
San Francisco, CA 94112
www.colemanadvocates.org/take_action/strategies/juvenile_justice.html
The Youth Justice Project is a leadership development and advocacy program for youth who have been detained in juvenile hall. YJP youth are currently creating a video about the first year of the program and researching ways to improve aftercare in San Francisco.

YOUTH MEDIA COUNCIL
RESOURCES FOR DEEPENING CONTEXT ON RACE & PUBLIC POLICY

8 Pathways to Juvenile Detention Reform; Reducing Racial Disparities. Eleanor Hinton Hoytt, Vincent Schiraldi, Brenda V. Smith, and Jason Ziedenberg, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore MD: 2002. www.aecf.org

California's New Majority: 2004 Legislative Report Card on Race. Applied Research Center, Oakland CA: February 2005. *http://www.arc.org/Pages/ArcPub.html#jump*

Children Left Behind: The Disproportionate Impact of School Discipline on Students of Color. Russ Skiba, Open Society Institute Forum, Baltimore MD: November 2003.

The Color of Justice: An Analysis of Juvenile Adult Court Transfers in California. Mike Males and Dan Macallair, Justice Policy Institute, San Francisco CA: January 2000.

Falling Through the Cracks: How California's CalWORKS Keeps Families Poor. Applied Research Center, Oakland CA: July 2003. http://www.arc.org/welfare/pr030714.html

Report Card on the San Jose Mercury News. Grade the News, Palo Alto, CA: 2004. http://www.gradethenews.org/feat/recentgrades/newsrooms2004.htm#mercurynews

Keeping Youth Safe: A Report on Violence Prevention in the Bay Area. United Way of the Bay Area, San Francisco CA: 2004.

The Public's Truth - Santa Clara: Stories of Racial Profiling and the Attack on Civil Liberties. Applied Research Center, Oakland CA: July 2003. http://www.arc.org/jump/santaclarapublicstruth.html

Race and Recession. Applied Research Center, Oakland CA: June 2002. http://www.arc.org/welfare/pr020620.html

Reporting on Race, Education & No Child Left Behind: A Guide for Journalists. Applied Research Center, Oakland CA: 2003. http://www.arc.org/welfare/pr030714.html

Reporting on Violence: New Ideas for Television, Print and Web. Jane Ellen Stevens, Berkeley Media Studies Group, Berkeley CA: 2001.

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www.colemanadvocates.org
Ldill@colemanadvocates.org
415-239-0161 x 824

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