

Senate committee hears tales of crime in city

By Mary Rodrigue
staff writer

Elderly crime victims and representatives of neighborhood associations braved Monday's blizzard conditions to tell a select Senate Committee on Safe Streets why their streets aren't safe.

The public hearing at Detroit's Assumption Grotto, a Catholic church and school complex in a neighborhood of old two-story brick homes on narrow lots near Six Mile and Gratiot, drew a crowd of residents who made it clear they want criminal justice reform.

Fifteen percent of criminals commit 50 percent of the crimes. We must get habitual criminals off the streets," said committee chairman Alan Cropsey, R-DeWitt, summing up the mood of the select Senate committee.

TESTIFYING WITNESSES
• A man in his 70s shot in the head and back earlier this year after leaving a neighborhood bank. He lost sight in one eye and most of his hearing.

• A retired couple victimized three times this year — the husband was beaten and robbed in his driveway in January, the house was burglarized in September, and the wife's purse was snatched in front of her house in November. Their homeowner's insurance policy was cancelled as a result.

• A great-grandmother who patrols her neighborhood near Eight Mile and Gratiot each night in her car in an effort to avert crime.

'People believe that if a person is convicted of a serious crime they go to prison. It's a myth. They go through the system and out the door.'

— Andrea Solak
assistant Wayne County prosecutor

Their impassioned pleas for action followed a virtual litany of horror stories.

The two-hour-plus session was the first of three public hearings scheduled to help the Senate committee develop legislation to strengthen criminal justice codes.

STRICTER SENTENCING guidelines will show these citizens that our state wants to get tough with criminals," said Cropsey, chairman of the bipartisan committee.

Joining him on the panel were Sens. Jack Welborn, R-Kalamazoo, and John Kelly, a Democrat whose district takes in Harper Woods, Grosse Pointe and the east side of Detroit — including the neighborhood area where the forum was held.

The total aspect is not just safe streets," Kelly said. "We're concerned about minimum prison sentences and the walkway problem, juvenile offenders and community alternatives to prison. We're looking for recommendations for changing the laws."

ANDREA SOLAK, an assistant

Wayne County prosecutor, said, "People believe that if a person is convicted of a serious crime they go to prison. It's a myth. They go through the system and out the door."

She said "the criminal on the street has learned he can commit violent crimes and get away with it."

"We must legislate mandatory prison sentences. The convicted must go to jail."

Solak said the county prosecutor's office endorses the Safe Streets pack-

age, which includes Senate Bills 169 and 170 — mandating prison sentences for convicted felons and maximum sentences for repeat offenders, respectively.

On the issue of juvenile justice, Solak said the prosecutor's office endorses the concept of automatic waiver of juveniles to adult court when charged with a violent felony.

"The purpose of the juvenile system is to capture the attention of youths and put them back on the right track," she said. "The other side of that is the juvenile under 17 who commits crimes that would be a violent felony if they were an adult."

"Automatic waiver is a concept we support. Get the bad eggs out of the system. Try them as adults. Then we will address the second body of children who can still go back on the straight path."

CROPSEY VOWED continued work on the problems within the criminal justice system.

"We will pressure the House of Representatives," he said.

Joe Palozzolo, a representative of the Michigan Association for Correctional Alternatives, said, "The current probation system doesn't work because of a total lack of supervision and services."

He asked the committee to consider local community crisis acts that would allow local supervision of convicted criminals released on parole.

Sister Bridget Klingman, chaplain for the Wayne County Youth Home, told the committee she has ministered to 90 percent of waived juveniles in the past five years.

"First offenders should be called to accountability," she said. "Pay attention to those parents. Look seriously at the financial commitments to stop

crime at the beginning. It is far safer and cheaper to stop 14-, 15- and 16-year-olds than to spend thousands of dollars to incarcerate criminals for several years."

MARIA VANDIT, representing the Southwest Detroit Crime Victims Support Group, asked for legislation that would make parents liable for juvenile behavior.

Ralph Berry of the state Appellate Public Defenders office in Detroit documented on the insanity defense in criminal appeals cases.

"We have two problems," he said. "Deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill with no after-care and the guilty but mentally ill verdict, which fools jurors into thinking that the accused will receive psychological treatment in prison. In reality they are treated no different from anyone found guilty."

Tough sentencing bills under study

By Mary Rodrigue
staff writer

Public hearings in Detroit and Jackson on Monday provided grist for the newly created state Senate Committee on Safe Streets, which hopes to develop legislation to strengthen criminal justice codes.

Minimum prison sentences for violent crimes, mandatory maximum sentences for repeat offenders, and revamping the juvenile justice system topped the list of concerns aired by the committee and officials working in the state's criminal justice system who testified.

"People believe that if a person is

convicted of a serious crime they go to prison. It's a myth," said Andrea Solak, a Wayne County assistant prosecuting attorney. "They go through the system and out the door."

BILLS UNDER consideration include:

• Senate Bill 169, introduced by state Sen. Alan Cropsey, R-DeWitt, would require mandatory prison sentences for those convicted of serious crimes, such as breaking and entering an occupied dwelling, armed robbery or rape.

• SB 170 (also by Cropsey) would mandate stiff maximum prison sentences for chronic offenders — those convicted of at least three serious crimes.

• SB 154 and 156 would require automatic waiver of juveniles accused of violent felonies. Sponsor is Sen. Kirby Holmes, R-Utica.

Under present law, a prosecutor has discretion to apply for waiver when a 15- or 16-year-old suspect is accused of a felony. Probate judges then decide whether to grant a waiver based on several factors, including whether the youth is considered beyond rehabilitation under existing juvenile programs.

Wayne County probate judges ap-

prove only 20 to 25 percent of waiver petitions.

CROPSEY AND Sens. John Kelly, Detroit, and Jack Welborn, R-Kalamazoo, held a hearing Monday in Assumption Grade School on Detroit's east side.

Cropsey chairs the committee, which is expected to make recommendations next month on the issue of trying 14- and 16-year-old juvenile offenders as adults.

Fueling the debate is a recent Michigan Supreme Court decision that forced from prison last month a convicted Detroit murderer on grounds that he was tried in adult court at age 16 in 1972.

"This type of ambiguous situation set up by the court, whereby they can waive someone in or out, is what we are addressing," said Kelly. "Automatic waiver to adult court for juveniles charged with violent felonies is what we are proposing. This will remedy the situation with the court."

Kelly has sponsored juvenile waiver legislation three times in the past five years. Each attempt passed the Senate but died in the state House, he said.

The committee plans one more public hearing next week in Lansing before it submits its full report to the Senate.



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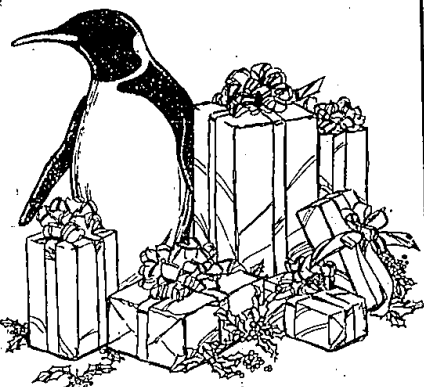
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