

Course

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These prisoners aren't hardened criminals atoning for a life of bad decisions. Instead, these inmates are called students and they're mostly school aged.

"Our youngest inmate is 14," Public Information Officer Natalie Walker said. "Our oldest student is currently 19."

Walker said the average sentence length is six to nine months and the majority of crimes committed are non-violent.

"We don't see too many violent crimes, but we do currently have a murderer housed here," Walker said. "Most of the

students housed here have committed drug related crimes, theft and battery."

She said there's also a high number of those who have violated parole living behind the barbed wire fences.

Opened in July 2000, the facility has an average daily population of about 300. The students housed here come from all over the state, and Walker said there is no stereotypical student.

"These kids come from all kinds of homes," Walker said. "Some have perfect family lives and some don't."

Walker did add that she personally saw a trend of students coming from broken homes.

"Some of these boys really lack positive male role models," Walker said. "And sometimes they come from homes with past incarceration history."

Walker said the facility keeps

those things in mind when scheduling student daily activities.

"We program these kids so that they're ready for the real world," Walker said.

In addition to a school schedule where inmates can prepare for college and qualify for their GED, students can take part in anger management classes, drug rehabilitation courses, PLUS (Purposeful Living Units Serve), the Future Soldiers Program and Venture Scouts.

The Future Solider program is one that Walker said has had very positive results with students.

"If they (students) come from these programs when they're released, we see a lower re-offending rate than general population," Walker said.

"I do believe these programs work. They help change negative behavior."

The Future Soldiers, along with the Venture Scouts and PLUS, are all housed together in separate specialty units, away from the general population.

Founded in 2006, the Future Soldiers take their new found roles very seriously, Walker said. They stand to attention when a superior walks into a room, respond with hearty "yes, ma'ams" and "no, sirs" and eat, sleep and stand in a strict military style. But that demanding structure is exactly what 19-year-old Lance said he needed in his life.

(Editor's note: Prison officials would not release juvenile offenders' last names for publication.)

"This had motivated me to do better and stop arguing with people," Lance said. "I was really

slacking before this, and now it's helped change my life."

Lance is one of 30 boys currently signed up in the program. He and the others had to complete a vigorous application process before being accepted. Students must have a good track record within the facility, as well as complete mental and physical tests to make sure their placement within the program is appropriate.

Housed in Pendleton since February, Lance will be released in less than 30 days for a parole violation after driving without a license.

He's currently been in the Future Soldiers program for about a month.

"As soon as I get out, I'll be going into the National Guard," Lance said.

He said he plans to use the military's education programs to attend college. He will be the first in his family to attend.

"This has given me the self motivation I need to better myself," Lance said.

Instructor Gerald MacMurray, an Army Specialist who served two tours in Iraq, said seeing his students succeed is a great feelings.

"It means a lot to me," MacMurray said. "A few (students) have done really well once they've been released. It's important to me to see them succeed."

He also said students leaving the program have a lower re-offend rate.

"This program absolutely works, that's why I'm here," MacMurray said. "Less of our kids are coming back. All these things we're teaching them helps them be successful when they leave."

Eighteen-year-old Zachary, who is one of three squad lead-

ers within the unit, also said he believes this program helped change the course of his life.

"It keeps you motivated and in shape," Zachary said. "It helps you feel better about yourself, too. This program helps remind me that even though I've made mistakes, that each day is a new day. Each day is a new start to try and redeem your old ways."

After committing a parole violation for assault, Zachary will be released July 23 after six months inside. He said that he's looking into joining the Marines after three months in the program.

"It means a lot to have that responsibility," Zachary said. "It gives you self worth, like your life is worth something."

He will also be applying to Ivy Tech State College once released. "I do believe I won't re-offend in the future," Zachary said. "This program is the reason why."

Across the hallway from the Future Soldiers, but housed in a different unit, are the facilities Venture Scouts, who are associated with the Boy Scouts of America.

Drawn to the program by the promise of out-of-unit camping trips complete with bonfires and more activity time, students within the Venture Scout program learn valuable life skills by earning merit badges, journaling, and completing safety and nutritional classes.

One of 15 students currently housed in the program, 17-year-old David has been housed at PJCF for seven and half months. While he has no release date set, he originally was entered into the system with a Criminal Mischief charge.

A member of the Venture Scouts for almost a month, David

says the program has helped his attitude and his self esteem.

"It sounded like a good program to get into, so I decided to give it a shot," David said. "It really has helped. This program gives you things to do."

David took time from his extensive journaling, which is required for the physical fitness, cooking and health badges he's earning, to discuss how the program helped get him on the right path.

"This program is giving me the skills I need to succeed," David said. "It's even helped me with my substance abuse issues."

David added that he completed his GED while housed in the facility and the program has even helped him look to the future.

"I've been accepted into IVY Tech now," David said. "I wouldn't have even considered college without this program. This helps keep my mind right, focused on the right path. The people here are so positive and really help stop the negative influence. Moving into this unit has really helped me."

Scout Leader Mark Stephenson said comments like those from David are what keep him motivated during the day.

"I think this program helps give these students a different view and helps change their perspective on what they were used to," Stephenson said. "I can honestly say that very few of our students have made their way back into the system. We're not perfect by any means, but we're trying. We're trying to show them good positive values, reinforce their self esteem and give them confidence. They need to know that there are other opportunities out there other than a life of crime."

Lap

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