Crimes come back to haunt young offenders in Florida

Panelists who had early scraps with the law say juvenile record isn’t wiped out; it stays with them as they try to build better lives.

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For Veronica Limia, the first arrest came when she was 12 years old. At 17, Limia found herself being charged as an adult with two felonies for burglary and grand larceny.

More than a decade later, the 29-year-old Limia has gone on to earn a college degree and recently graduated from law school. But the former West Palm Beach resident, who now lives in Miami, said she still lives daily with the consequences of her checkered past.

"People don't realize the implications (of having a juvenile record)," Limia said. "It has the potential to destroy your life."

Last week, she was among a group of panelists discussing the consequences of juvenile records. Before a moderate-sized audience of invited guests and community members at Palm Beach Lakes High School, the panelists hammered away at a harsh reality: a criminal record can affect juvenile offenders even after they become adults.

"There's the myth, and it's serious, because many do think that when you're a juvenile, you're in delinquency court and everything is secret and nobody is going to find out," Palm Beach County Chief Assistant Public Defender Barbara White said. "That is the furthest thing from the truth."

According to the state Department of Juvenile Justice, which tracks its data by fiscal year, there were 5,482 juvenile offenses in Palm Beach County from July 1, 2010, to June 30, 2011. Ten of those cases were for murder, manslaughter or attempted murder during that same period. And 211 youths were tried as adults during that time.

Contrary to popular belief, juvenile records are not automatically cleared when an offender turns 18, and some records can be accessed by the public, according to John P. Booth, assistant general counsel for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

He told panelists and audience members that the FDLE is required to disclose criminal history records, including juvenile delinquency, unless the records have been sealed or expunged.

If the offender meets certain conditions, the records are automatically expunged when the offender reaches either the age of 24 or 26, Booth said.
Limia said that because she was charged as an adult at age 17, her offenses will remain on her record. And because of her record, tasks most take for granted - such as trying to rent an apartment - can be a challenge.

"When I moved to Miami, I had to move to an apartment in Little Havana for two or three months in a bad neighborhood because, down in Miami, it's all condo associations," she said. "Because they're strict about criminal (records), once they see that burglary, forget it."

Christina Spudeas, Florida Atlantic University professor and executive director of Florida's Children First, said that high unemployment among teens overall has made finding a job even more challenging for those with criminal histories - even for lower-paying jobs.

"They're competing (for work) with people they would have never competed with before," she said.

Veronica Vaughn, 20, knows that she will likely have to explain a checkered juvenile history of her own.

The West Palm Beach resident, whose future goals are to study criminal justice at Palm Beach State College and join the U.S. Navy, spent much of her childhood living in and out of group and foster homes because her mother died when she was very young.

"I had a lot of ups and downs," Vaughn said. "I started getting in trouble a lot when I was real young."

As a juvenile, Vaughn racked up charges that included battery on a school employee, grand theft auto, and fleeing and eluding.

But shortly after turning 18, she was released from the custody of the state Department of Juvenile Justice and started going back to school last year. She is scheduled to graduate in June from Mavericks High School, a charter school program with a Palm Beach County location in Palm Springs.

Vaughn said she knows enrolling at PBSC and then joining the Navy won't be a given. But she said she is prepared to meet future obstacles.

"Everybody has points in their lives where everything doesn't go good," Vaughn said. "(There were) times where I felt like I was never going to accomplish anything. I felt like I was never going to be able to come out of that mentality.

"But I just feel like everybody: If you put your mind to it, you can overcome anything," she said.