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HEADLINE: Panel Hears Plea to Aid Black Males;
Jobs, Social Programs Needed, Witnesses Say

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BODY:

Gerald Jackson Sr., who at the age of 12 earned \$ 4,000 a day selling drugs on the streets of Baltimore, stared at the panel of politicians and concerned citizens and announced his idea for steering young black males from the path of crime and drugs.

"The easiest way for young black teens, from 12 to 21, to not be on the streets, is to give them a job," Jackson told the five members of a subcommittee of Gov. William Donald Schaefer's Commission on Black Males.

"Give the kids something they can survive off," said Jackson, 19, who was dressed in cutoff jeans and a lime-green jacket.

Jackson was among a dozen witnesses at the subcommittee on criminal justice's hearing Monday to discuss Maryland's criminal justice system and its effect on black males. According to the statewide commission, which was created two years ago by Schaefer and the General Assembly, 75 percent of the state's 19,000 prisoners are black men. Black residents make up 24.9 percent of the state's population, according to the Maryland Office of Planning.

"We are losing our soul -- our husbands, brothers, fathers and sons behind bars," said Devon Brown, a member of the criminal justice subcommittee and an official with the state Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services.

Monday's hearing in Rockville was the first public meeting of the criminal justice subcommittee, which plans to hold several community forums across the state. About 90 people attended this week's meeting, including Montgomery County Executive Neal Potter (D), Montgomery County Police Chief Clarence Edwards and Montgomery County Council members Isiah Leggett (D-At-Large) and Bruce T. Adams (D-At-Large). Claire-Terese Moore, the subcommittee's chairman, said a hearing is being planned in Prince George's County for later this summer.

Maryland is one of three jurisdictions nationally that has established a special commission to address the plight of black males. The District and Ohio have created similar panels.

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"What we are trying to do is seize the moment," said Del. Elijah E. Cummings (D-Baltimore), who sponsored the legislation in the General Assembly to establish the commission. "We want to say to America, black males do have significant problems and they are not just their problems, but the entire society's"

Cummings, chairman of the commission, said the group plans to submit a final report to Schaefer and the legislature by Nov. 1. Cummings said many of the commission's recommendations would not cost the state additional money, but would require a shifting of funds.

Cummings, who attended the hearing, said Jackson's statements demonstrate the need for more personal involvement. "We need to replace the drug dealers and those who would lead our boys to negative activities. We have to start young, by saying to a boy on the street, 'Let me help you.' You have to adopt the boy, ask him how he's doing on his report card, take him on a trip. Just make him feel like family."

Jackson said he began dealing drugs at 12 because he lacked a stable family environment. After the birth of his son 10 months ago, he said, he decided to abandon the drug culture. "Most of my friends are dead or in jail," he said.

Jackson, a high school graduate who works part time at a restaurant in Baltimore's Inner Harbor and aspires to be a singer and musician, said young black males become involved in drugs to survive economically and to have a sense of belonging. "It feels like a family," he said.

A corrections official in Montgomery County, where black male inmates represent more than 60 percent of the jail population, said the majority of inmates are high school dropouts and drug abusers.

Claire Gunster-Kirby, spokeswoman for the Department of Correction and Rehabilitation, said the county provides several education and treatment programs for inmates.

Hanley Norment, president of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP, said the commission must recommend positive programs that reach boys between the ages of 1 and 8. Otherwise, he said, "we will find ourselves back before another commission 20 years hence, when the proportion of black males in prison will be even more appalling."

GRAPHIC: CHART, COUNTY DETENTION CENTER INMATE POPULATION: