

Teen arrests, suicide attempts climb



Key county rates on juvenile arrests and suicide attempts in 1996

Juvenile arrests

■ Three counties that fared far better than the statewide juvenile crime rate of 62.0 per 1,000 juveniles:
Wheeler, 0; Harney, 19.8; Klamath, 30

■ Three counties that fared far worse:
Baker, 135.2; Linn, 111.9; Coos, 105.3

■ Metro-area counties:
Clackamas, 40.3; Multnomah, 47.1; Washington, 33.9

Suicide attempts

■ Three counties that fared far better than the statewide suicide attempt rate of 217.7 per 100,000 children age 10 to 17*:
Curry, 48.3; Columbia, 79.3; Polk, 90.5

■ Three counties that fared far worse:
Marion, 364.9; Josephine, 293.9; Lane, 265.6

■ Metro-area counties:
Clackamas, 125.5; Multnomah, 231.7; Washington, 206.7

* Five counties — Gilliam, Morrow, Sherman, Wallowa and Wheeler — had no suicide attempts in 1996

Source: Children First for Oregon's Status of Oregon's Children, 1997 County Database

■ A report by Children First For Oregon, an awareness and advocacy group, points to some disturbing trends in recent years

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Oregon's teens are being arrested and attempting suicide at greater rates, according to a new report to be released today.

That shows a lack of support they and their parents need to succeed, said officials with Children First For Oregon, a public awareness and advocacy group that authored the report.

According to the report, juvenile arrests were up 6 percent and suicide attempts were up 2 percent in 1996.

The group compiled data in a variety of areas for an overall picture of the state of children in Oregon and in each county.

The report measured child well-being in four main areas: teen data on juvenile arrest, teen pregnancy and suicide attempt rates; school data on high school dropout and eighth-grade math and reading proficiency rates; safety data on child abuse and neglect, crimes against persons and child death rates; and early childhood data on the rates of infants born with low birth weights, infant mortality and child-care supply.

Most of the indicators showed an improvement or little change compared with the previous year and the previous five-year average. However,

juvenile arrest and suicide attempt rates increased not just over 1995 rates but also over previous five-year averages.

That worries Barbara Carranza, coordinator for juvenile justice and delinquency prevention for the Oregon Commission on Children and Families.

She notes that the rise in juvenile arrests is due to an increase in behavioral crimes such as breaking curfew, being a runaway and underage drinking. The rates of juveniles committing violent crimes, such as rape, aggravated assault and homicide, and property crimes, such as burglary and motor vehicle theft, have stayed about the same during the past five years.

"No amount of crime and no number of victims are acceptable," she said. "But to come up with the right solutions, we have to understand the real issues."

Carranza said the rise in behavioral crimes directly reflects the problems many families have in guiding their children. As more families feel isolated from their neighbors and far-flung extended families, many are grappling with weak parenting skills, drug and alcohol abuse and other challenges, she said.

She hopes the state will continue to add more family resource centers where adolescents and their families can get help such as counseling and support groups.

Getting help to prevent and intervene in serious problems also is important for teen suicide prevention, said Michael O'Shea, coordinator of youth suicide prevention in the Oregon Health Division.

"I have nothing more important to say than that adults need to be able to recognize the signs of depression in youth," he said.

Those signs include big changes in eating and sleeping habits, disposition, ability to handle stress and anger, concentration and continuing sadness or health problems.

O'Shea attributed the rise in suicide attempts to two main causes. First, youths have more stress from family breakups, sex at early ages, problems at school and abuse. Plus, families and their communities need to better confront the troubles that can lead to teen suicide. He said suicide is the second leading cause of death for Oregon youths ages 15 to 19, behind only accidental injury.

Swati Adarkar, director of public policy for Children First, hopes the report will prompt Oregonians to consider whether more tax dollars should be spent on foster care and corrections after problems occur, or on schools and other social services to prevent problems.

Children First focused on teen issues after its 1996 report showed disturbing trends. Today's report shows that little progress has been made in teen pregnancy prevention, and that the high school dropout rate is higher than the previous five-year average. Substance abuse is also on the rise, Adarkar said.

She said the point is not to shift focus away from the needs of very young and school-age children, but to emphasize the need for a comprehensive and sustained effort as children grow to adulthood.