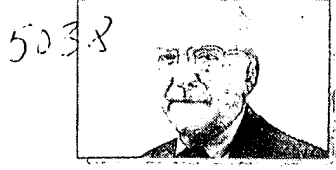


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Youth crime on ebb tide in Oregon

Youth homicides could bring tears to a glass eye. Yet Portland's August violence gives only a peephole view. Look at Oregon through a broader window.

Arrest data back to 1991 for serious crimes by juveniles against people and against property show little change, says Barbara McGuire. She is assistant director of the program office of the Oregon Youth Authority. It takes charge after young people have gotten into big trouble with the law.

The only "F" in *Children First for Oregon's* 1997-98 report card went to the subject area of teen years, says Janna Loper, community relations manager. She worries that the juvenile arrest rate has risen by one-third since 1990.

Still, more than half of those arrests are victimless behavior crimes (running away, curfew violations, minor in possession), cautions Tonia Hunt, senior public policy associate of Children First for Oregon. "Many are not about violence or greed. Many are about lack of supervision, poor judgment and lack of positive alternatives for kids."

A change of priorities in some counties probably accounts for extra arrests. For example, Baker County's rate of arrests is 83 percent higher than the state average of 58.4 per 1,000 youths. Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties' rates range from 27 percent to 35 percent under the average.

Baker County kids simply are not that much worse. The real issues involve resource commitment. In fact, Baker's high arrest rate could be a positive, showing resolve to get involved early, before minor infractions become serious life-changing patterns.

More arrests overall mask encouraging shifts in serious-crime arrests. Collars of juveniles statewide for property crimes have been falling since 1994 and dropped 6.8 percent in 1996-97. Arrests for crimes against individuals dropped 7.6 percent the same year.

Oregon's principals clearly work at keeping our schools safe. Oregon expelled 135 students for bringing weapons to school last year and trailed only South Dakota in weapons-related expulsion rate. Washington's rate was fifth.

Sixty-two percent of U.S. expulsions were for bringing a handgun to school (40 percent in Oregon). Seven percent were for bringing a rifle or shotgun to school (5.93 percent in Oregon), and 31 percent (54.07 percent in Oregon) were for other weapons (bombs, starter pistols, knives, brass knuckles).

Forty-three percent of the expelled students nationally were referred to alternative learning programs instead of just being left to hang out on the street. Oregon's 56 percent was somewhat better. Neighboring Washington, though, was up at 90 percent, trailing only Nebraska at 91 percent.

In heavily populated Multnomah County, offenses against people by juveniles dipped 12 percent from 1993 through 1998, and property offenses declined 32 percent, says Joanne Fuller, deputy director for the county's Department of Community Justice.

During those six years, the number of juvenile offenders in the county fell 15 percent, the number of criminal referrals, 17 percent and the number of weapons offenses, 33 percent.

Juvenile recidivists are particularly unsettling because many commit crimes the way other teen-agers collect baseball hats. The number of juvenile repeaters shrank 12 percent, from 1,600 in 1993 to 1,409 in 1997.

Drug offenses rose a shocking 80 percent over six years. This might be due more to enforcement in drug-free zones, to Operation Lightning and to a federal North Star grant to address drug crime in Portland's Old Town than to a "real" spike in drug behavior.

My mind keeps returning to one set of heartening statistics from Multnomah County. The 10-to-17-year-old population grew 11.1 percent during the last six years. The portion who became youthful offenders dropped from 8 percent to 6.1 percent at the same time. The trend is as regular as the tides, not the result of distorting bulges during one or two years.

The evidence mounts that we have found tools that help to prevent juvenile crime, not just react to it.

Next: A look at those tools

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