

# METRO

## State chided for treatment of teens

■ A child advocacy group says Oregon lacks services for the majority of youths who are not poor, mentally ill or criminals

By KATE TAYLOR  
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In the past few years, images of troubled youths have flooded Oregon households. A skinny 15-year-old accused of opening fire on a crowd of classmates. A drunken 17-year-old driver plowing off a road and dying along with three teen-age friends. A freckled 14-year-old boy hanging from a shoestring noose at Hillcrest Youth Facility.

At the same time, statistics of juvenile arrests, teen substance abuse and teen suicide attempts have jumped.

Today, a watchdog group for Oregon children and families will issue the state a grade of "F" in the area of help for teens as part of a weak report card.

Children First for Oregon, a child advocacy group, has tracked Oregon's treatment of children and families for eight years in an attempt to improve services for all children. Each year, the group studies data and grades the state on areas such as childhood poverty, prenatal care and child abuse and neglect.

This year, the group gave the state B's in education and early childhood, C's for investment in families and child safety, and an F in dealing with teens.

### Adults turn away

Pam Patton, director of government relations at Morrison Center Child and Families Services, a child and family organization, said adults turn away from teens in trouble out of fear and ignorance.

"We see teen-agers as aggressive and violent," she said. "We don't help them, and they get worse and worse until all we want to do is lock them up."

Teens who don't come under the jurisdiction of the state's child welfare agency, don't have serious mental illness and have not committed a crime are blocked from the help they need, Patton said. Most agencies serve only dangerous or immediately endangered youths. Organizations that serve all youths are swamped and serve about 20 percent of those who need help.

Steve Olsen, supervisor of Harry's Mother, a Southeast Portland shelter, spent Wednesday scrambling to help a mother whose daughter was

halfway through private treatment for drug and emotional problems when the family's insurance ran out. The mother called all kinds of programs to see whether they would help her daughter. Olsen scheduled an interview at a 10-bed shelter, but there are no guarantees.

"Parents come in with a kid who began tearing up the house at age 10, and now the kid's 15, and they say, 'God, I've been trying to get services for five years,'" Olsen said.

By keeping youths away from services, "we're doing a real disservice not only to kids but to our communities," Charlotte Cook said. She serves on a citizen board that reviews cases that go through the Oregon Youth Authority.

During the past 50 years, Cook has watched families fracture, drugs spread, and gangs knot youth communities. In the cases she follows, she sees ranks of crack babies hitting puberty, as well as increased violence, she said.

### Lowest priority

Paul Bellatty, an analyst with Portland State University's Child Welfare Partnership, said older youths are the lowest priority for the State Office for Services to Children and Families.

Youths ages 13 to 17 who are troubled make up 8 percent of the agency's caseload. Most are "chronic acting-out types," and about half of those have committed some kind of delinquent act.

Yet the state's financing is more effective aimed at the youngest children, said Senate Majority Leader Gene Derfler, R-Salem.

"I still think we're spending too much money on late teen-agers," he said. "If you don't address the problem early on, the dollars you spend are not effective. If a teen-ager is stealing cars and beating people up, I'm not sure you'll be able to turn him around for the rest of his life. It's very difficult to turn that kid around at that age."

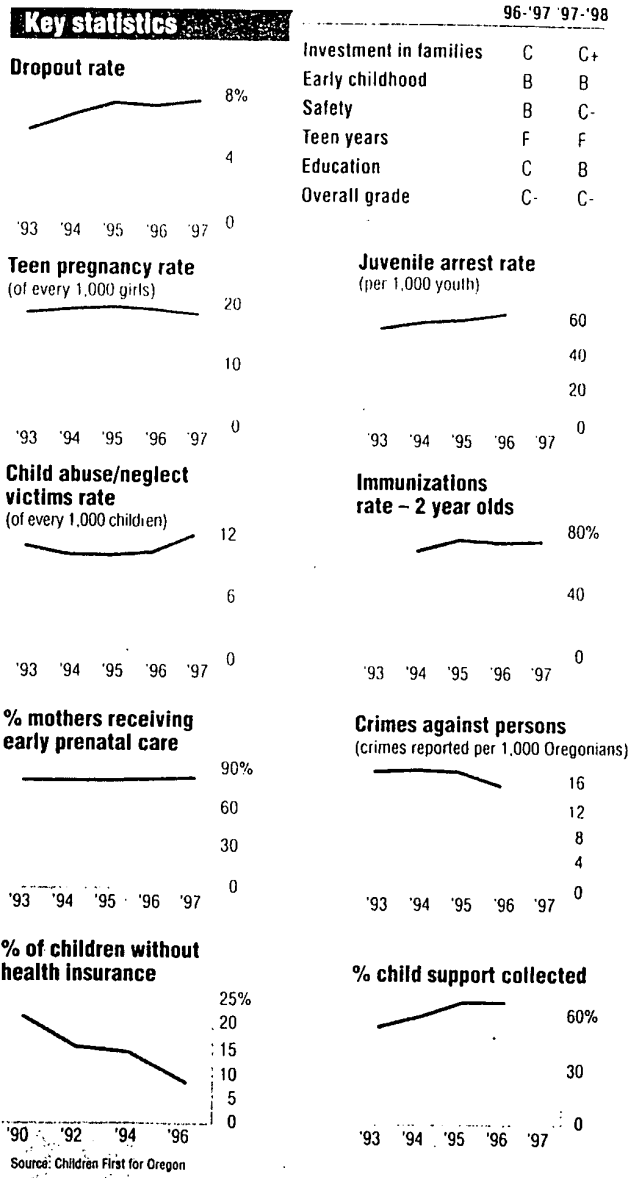
But Cook said the state ought to adequately finance programs for children of all ages.

"I don't think the choice we have to make is between X service and Y service," she said. "The question is, are we willing to pay for X and Y because they are necessary for children?"

Patton, of the Morrison Center, said, "There's a belief that there is nothing you can do to turn young people around, that their patterns of behavior are too inbred. That's not true. And we can't just give up on

### Caring for children

Oregon earned generally weak grades in caring for children in a report card released today by a child welfare agency. Children First used many of the indicators below to compile its grades.



them because they have become adolescents and have started behaving in ways that are confusing to us."

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