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# UNH Study Examines Disabilities And Delinquency

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**Editors: Michael Skibbie, policy specialist with the Disabilities Rights Center, is available at 603-228-0432 ext. 27 and Jan Nisbet, director of the Institute on Disability, can be reached at 603-862-4320.**

DURHAM, N.H. – The Institute on Disability and Justiceworks at the University of New Hampshire released a new research report today addressing the experience of children with disabilities within the state’s juvenile justice system.

The report is a product of the year-long study of court and commitment records of New Hampshire youth. The Division for Juvenile Justice Services of the Department of Health and Human Services commissioned the study. Funding was provided by the State Advisory Group on Juvenile Justice, which oversees the distribution of federal funds for juvenile justice programs in New Hampshire, and UNH’s Institute on Disability.

Michael Skibbie, the project’s lead researcher, suggested that the state should pay special attention to the ways in which formal commitment is used to address problematic behavior among disabled youth.

“Children who engage in disvalued behavior largely because of their disability may be handled more harshly by the juvenile justice system than their peers without disabilities,” said Skibbie adding that his research indicated that disabled children in custody are committed for charges that are less serious than children without disabilities.

Other research findings of the UNH study indicate that a higher proportion of girls as compared to boys are court-involved and committed to correctional facilities than in the nation at-large. Moreover, children of both genders who have disabilities are more likely to be incarcerated and to serve more time before they are released.

Regardless of disability status, children are most likely to be committed to the Youth Development Center during the ninth and tenth grade, suggesting that the transition from middle to high school is a critical time for at-risk youth. The study focused on children involved in court or committed to YDC during the year 2001.

“The obvious question raised by this study,” said Jan Nisbet, director of the Institute on Disability, “is whether or not we as a state are criminalizing behaviors that flow from disabilities among children. It would appear that we are, yet we know from other research that a treatment

oriented approach to their behavior is the wiser course for them, and for us.”