

UNH JusticeWorks Tracks Rise in Juvenile Crime in Northern New England

By [Tracy Manforte](#)
UNH News Bureau

DURHAM, N.H. -- A new report by "JusticeWorks: A Northern New England Consortium for the Study of the Prevention and Control of Crime" shows that while overall crime rates are down in northern New England, a greater proportion of those crimes are being committed by children under the age of 18.

According to the latest edition of "Benchmarks and Blueprints," a publication of JusticeWorks based at the University of New Hampshire, the disturbing trend in Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine was tracked between 1982 and 1996. Data was collected from a variety of sources, including the U.S. Department of Justice, the U.S. Census Bureau and the Centers for Disease Control. The full report with statistical breakdown is available online at www.justiceworks.unh.edu. (Click on the "research" option.) Among the general findings are:

- Children as a proportion of the northern New England population decreased from 1970 to 1990, with a continuing decline projected through 2025.
- The social context of children has improved from 1985 to 1996 (fewer are dropping out of school, living in poverty, having babies, etc.) with two exceptions: The proportion of children living in single-parent families has increased, and the percentage of high school students using alcohol and marijuana has increased.
- Juveniles account for a greater proportion of violent and property crime arrests in 1996 than in 1982.
- The increase in the proportion of juveniles among all arrests is a stark contrast to the decline in overall crime rates in Northern New England.

"Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine have among the lowest crime rates in the nation. The social context for children in northern New England appears to be improving," says JusticeWorks Director Ted Kirkpatrick. "In the face of these trends, the fact that juveniles account for a greater share of all arrests should concentrate our efforts on finding out why that is and what we might do about it."

Kirkpatrick, a UNH criminologist, says what's more troubling is that the statistics tell only part of the story. "Other than asking juveniles themselves, the only measure of juvenile crime is arrests. When you consider that many juvenile and adult offenses may not result in arrests, it is obvious that the number of arrests is only a fraction of the true crime rate."

Another interpretation may be that police are cracking down on juvenile offenders more than they have in the past, causing arrest rates to rise. Whatever the case, Kirkpatrick says district court officials in Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine are looking for ways to address the situation.

"There is no comprehensive, uniform plan for sentencing juveniles," he says. "Mentoring programs, the zero tolerance approach, incarceration and community service are among the options, but sentencing is discretionary. Many district court judges throughout northern New England are concerned by the volume of juvenile cases."

Kirkpatrick says the next step is to look at programs that may serve as models for cities and towns looking to address juvenile crime. Adult/teen mentoring, anti-bullying and big brother/big sister programs will be among those highlighted in a future issue of Benchmarks and Blueprints.

Based at the UNH Institute for Policy and Social Science Research, JusticeWorks combines the expertise of university professors, researchers, police, judges, corrections officials and others throughout the region to serve a three-part mission:

- Provide timely and affordable evaluations of state and local programs aimed at minimizing crime and delinquency;

- Provide useful and current information about crime and crime control strategies to planners, policy makers and those with an interest in the field of criminal justice;
- Develop and provide new training opportunities in criminal justice to various audiences within the regional justice system, including victim advocates, school resource officers, and defense and prosecuting attorneys.

EDITORS and NEWS DIRECTORS: Printed copies of Benchmarks and Blueprints Volume II will be available next week. Contact Joe Pace at 603-862-1957. For immediate access to the report, visit the JusticeWorks website at www.justiceworks.unh.edu.

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