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## Trends in At-Risk Behaviors of Youth in Washington

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 1994 Washington Legislature passed Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 2319, a wide-ranging Act whose purposes are to achieve measurable, cost-effective, reductions in criminal violence and other “at-risk” behaviors of youth. The Act adopted a number of policies designed to reduce eight specific behaviors or outcomes:

1. Violent criminal acts
2. Teen substance abuse
3. Teen pregnancy and male parentage
4. Teen suicide attempts
5. Dropping out of school
6. Child abuse or neglect
7. Domestic violence
8. State-funded out-of-home placements

The Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to evaluate whether these policies achieve a measurable reduction in violence and the rate of at-risk youth in Washington. This report highlights the “big picture” trends in six of the eight at-risk behaviors identified by the Legislature.<sup>1</sup> These data help establish part of the **long-run, baseline information** necessary to assess statewide progress in achieving the goals of the Act.

This report does **not** evaluate whether the Act’s policies are achieving its goals—it is too early to make that assessment. Rather, the information provides a long-term perspective on the at-risk behaviors identified in the Act. Data in this report are current through 1994, the latest year data are available. The Institute will update this information as 1995 data are released.

### Findings

The juvenile population in Washington is growing rapidly in the 1990s. After declining during the last two decades, the 10- to 17-year-old population has grown by 105,000—or 20 percent—in the first half of the 1990s. It is expected to increase by another 75,000 by the turn of the century. This fact alone will mean a larger volume of at-risk behaviors of youth compared to earlier years.

This report, however, focuses on the rate at which juveniles today—versus those in previous years—are involved in at-risk behaviors. Data show that the rates of some of the problem behaviors have worsened, some have improved, and some have changed little.

These two factors—the growth in the number of juveniles and the rate at which some problem behaviors have worsened and some have improved—combine to determine the total magnitude of the juvenile at-risk behaviors facing Washington State.

The following page summarizes the more detailed statistics presented in the report.

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<sup>1</sup> Long-term trends in two of the eight at-risk behaviors—child abuse or neglect, and out-of-home placements of youth—are not covered in this report. They will be the subject of a forthcoming report by the Institute.

## Summary of Trends in Rates of At-Risk Behaviors in Washington

### **Criminal Violence: Increasing for Juveniles, Stabilizing for Adults**

- The rate of juvenile violence in Washington increased substantially over the last decade. From 1983 to 1994, the arrest rate of youth for violent offenses increased 165 percent. In 1983, there were 1.9 arrests per thousand 10- to 17-year-old juveniles. That rate increased to 5.2 arrests for violent offenses for every thousand youths in 1994.
- The rate of adult criminal violence also increased, but at a slower rate. For adults, the violence arrest rate increased by 42 percent between 1983 and 1994. There were 1.9 arrests for every thousand adults in 1983 and 2.7 arrests for violent offenses in 1994.
- Unlike the rising rate of juvenile *violence*, the rate at which juveniles were arrested for *property* offenses (burglary, theft) has not increased since 1983.

### **Teen Substance Abuse: Decreasing or No Clear Long-Run Trend**

- The juvenile arrest rate for *liquor law* violations and for *driving under the influence* violations declined, respectively, 30 and 38 percent between 1983 and 1994.
- No clear long-run trend appears in the juvenile arrest rate for *drug law* violations. The arrest rate in 1993 was about the same as it was ten years earlier in 1983. The rate for 1994, however, increased and was 43 percent higher than the level in 1983.

### **Teen Birth Rates: Stable; Unmarried Percentage Increasing**

- For 15- to 17-year-old females in Washington, the birthrate in 1994 was about the same as it was 35 years earlier in 1960. There were 32 births per thousand females 15- to 17-years old in 1960, and 30 births per thousand in 1994. The lowest birthrate for this group occurred in 1984 at 23 births per thousand. From 1992 to 1994, the birthrate dropped 10 percent.
- The major demographic shift has been a sharp increase in the percentage of births to unmarried women. In 1960, 18 percent of 15- to 17-year-old females giving birth were unmarried; by 1994, 87 percent of females in this age group were unmarried when giving birth.

### **Teen Suicides: Stable**

- In 1994, 61 teen-age deaths were recorded as suicides—about one every six days. The average number of teen suicides has leveled off in the last decade. The number of teen suicides averaged 46 per year during the 1980s and 47 per year from 1990 to 1994.

### **Dropping Out of School: Stable**

- About 20 to 25 percent of 17- and 18-year olds fail to complete their high school education in their teen years. That percentage has changed very little in the last 35 years, after falling steadily from 1920 to 1960.

### **Domestic Violence: Increasing**

From 1985 to 1994, the arrest rate for domestic violence incidents increased 140 percent. This trend could be measuring an increased likelihood of people to report offenses or an actual increase in the prevalence of domestic violence itself—or some combination of the two.