

## Juvenile crime trends down, recidivism up

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By JOHN P. HUSTON [jhuston@pioneerlocal.com](mailto:jhuston@pioneerlocal.com)

Though there's a commonly-held belief that teenage criminals are an escalating problem, statistics don't bear that out.

In the western suburbs, juvenile arrests account for a small fraction of each town's police work.

Most towns average fewer than one juvenile arrest every other month, according to data collected annually by the Illinois State Police. The State Police compiles juvenile arrests in three categories: Domestic violence, crimes against other juveniles and attacks against school personnel. Other juvenile arrests are not collected.

Attendance at the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center shows the number of inmates to be slightly down over the past five years.

In 2006, the most recent year the State Police has juvenile arrest statistics, Bellwood led the western suburbs with 11 -- fewer than one per month.

Hillside had eight, Berkeley and Oak Park reported six, Elmwood Park had four and Melrose Park and River Grove had two. Northlake and River Forest each had one juvenile arrest. Broadview, Franklin Park, Maywood and Stone Park did not report supplemental data, which includes juvenile breakdowns, required by the Illinois Uniform Crime Reporting program.

Stone Park police officials, however, said the department didn't file supplemental juvenile reports because there were no juvenile arrests in the three mandated categories from 2002-06.

The number of detainees cycling through the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center has decreased from 4,893 in 2002 to 4,473 last year.

Nationally, Illinois had the highest juvenile violent crime arrest rate in the country in 2006, with 1,029 arrests for every 100,000 juveniles. The national rate was 315, according to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Just like with adults, juvenile crime fluctuates year-to-year. But the key difference is the approach to justice.

Juvenile courts were treated as "mini-adult court," said Tom Bilyk, supervisor at the Cook County State's Attorney's juvenile justice bureau.

Bilyk has a unique perspective, having worked for the State's Attorney's Juvenile Justice Bureau in the 1980s, before taking a 20-year hiatus and returning in spring 2007.

A significant shift in philosophy has taken place in the way juvenile crime is handled, he said.

"Justice is measured not by how much punishment is meted out, but by how much harm is repaired in the community," Bilyk said. "There's a lot more open-mindedness when you're dealing with juveniles. There's more hope.

"People in the community are more willing to give juveniles programs instead of harsh punishments."

That means more programs to prevent juveniles from heading down a criminal path, as well as programs after crimes have been committed to keep cases out of the courts.

"I was shocked when I came over here a year ago April - the innovation, the new thinking, the enthusiasm that's going on," Bilyk said. "Because all you read about when you're not over here is how messed up the juvenile detention center is."

But a Chicago Metropolis 2020 crime report shows that while both the juvenile population in the detention center and juvenile crime rates are trending downward, recidivism is growing. Illinois juvenile recidivism moved from 32.7 percent in 1999 to 48 percent in 2005, the report said.

Elmwood Park Mayor and Cook County Commissioner Pete Silvestri, R-9th, said the appearance that youth crime is always on the rise is an illusion.

"I don't think kids today are any more bad than when I was a kid or my parents were kids," said Silvestri, vice-chair of the county's Law Enforcement committee. "I think the perception that kids are worse today is based on the way they dress and the way they talk, not on fact."