

Juvenile crime down, detentions up

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JUNEAU—More kids than ever before are being locked up in Alaska, despite the fact that juvenile crime is neither increasing nor becoming more violent.

According to a report on Alaska's juvenile justice system, the average daily population of state juvenile detention centers increased 58 percent between 1978 and 1984, causing dangerous overcrowding.

Paradoxically, the number of youths arrested during that same period declined by about six percent.

"We know for a fact that some kids who shouldn't have been detained, were detained," says Russ Webb, a state social service programs coordinator who worked on the report.

But Webb says that changes are being made to ensure that the rate

of detention doesn't continue climbing unnecessarily.

The report, by the state Division of Family and Youth Services, shows that in one year — 1982 — nearly 50 percent of all youths arrested were held in detention.

Out of 6,272 juveniles arrested for allegedly breaking the law that year, 3,087 were locked up. Most of those juveniles, the report says, were suspected of committing non-violent crimes.

"It is clear that the rate of detention is unjustified by the types of offense being committed and the level of danger presented by the youth," says the report.

The rate of detention is not only unjustified, the report says, it is also dangerous.

Juvenile detention facilities in Anchorage and Fairbanks are "dangerously overcrowded," and planned expansion will not meet projected needs for space if

the rate of detention continues.

Under state law, youths may not be detained unless their release threatens the safety of the community or the child.

Ideally, Webb says, the decision to hold a child or send him or her home in the custody of a parent should be made by someone specially trained to screen juvenile delinquency cases. But, says Webb, there isn't the money to place such a person in every Alaska community.

Within the last six months, trained screening officers have been assigned to Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai and Palmer. Webb says the difference has been astounding.

"Where before every child brought in by the police in Anchorage for detention was detained, we're now screening out some 44 percent of the kids," he says.