DURHAM -- Arrests for possession of opium and cocaine in Durham County -- which in the 1990s had been more than three times the state average -- have declined by 60 percent, according to data organized by a Duke University researcher.

Elizabeth Gifford, a research scientist with Duke's Center for Child and Family Policy, has compiled information from a variety of sources and put them into a new Web site that examines the nature of substance abuse problems in every county in North Carolina.

The site -- "Substance Abuse Among North Carolina Adolescents," http://substanceabuse.ssri.duke.edu/ -- is designed to provide policymakers and social service and other practitioners with information to help plan prevention strategies, determine community service needs and evaluate the benefits of alternative programs and policies.

"The goal of this Web site was to simplify the process of assessing community need," Gifford said. "Community groups seemed to be spending so much time trying to understand what their needs were around substance use. [But] if the information is more readily available, communities can dedicate their time to having 'the next conversation' -- that is, what are the top priorities and strategies for serving their community."

The site gathers data initially compiled by the State Bureau of Investigation, NC Detect, a Youth Risk Behavior Survey and a Youth Tobacco Survey. It offers both hard numbers -- such as citations for driving while intoxicated by county by year and arrests for selling opiates -- as well as more subjective, self-reported figures, such as what percentage of young people have sniffed glue or tried marijuana before the age of 13. Those numbers, too, are county by county.

While the Web site is focused on substance abuse among youth, it offers data by total population as well. The data covers the period from 1995 through
2007 and perhaps the site's most interesting feature is in the section called "Change Over Time."

There, for instance, you can see that Durham County had, per 100,000 people in 1996, 408.35 arrests for possession of opium or cocaine. The state rate at that time was 131.4.

While the state rate stayed almost the same more than a decade later, the county's rate had decreased significantly, to 156.7 per 100,000 people.

Meanwhile, the data from the SBI also showed that arrests for possession of marijuana for all ages in Durham County generally rose during the period, from 85 per 100,000 in 1995 to 183.8 in 2007. That however, was still below the state mark of 261.4 in 2007.

But Gifford cautioned against focusing on what she calls any particular data point.

"You need to get a richer sense of the data than that," she said. "You shouldn't look at any one piece of information in a vacuum.

"Putting it all in a richer context needs to be done, and what I've tried to do is provide this data so instead of wondering what are the numbers, we can move on to the next step -- what can we do about them?"