

Volume 6 • Number 1

# CASELOAD HIGHLIGHTS

EXAMINING THE WORK OF STATE COURTS

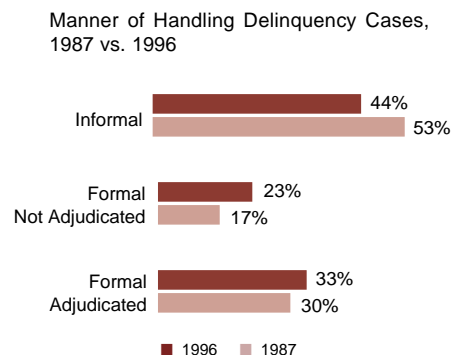
## Trends in Juvenile Violent Crime

The juvenile court celebrates its centennial anniversary in 1999 as many debate the viability of this uniquely American invention. High profile incidents of juvenile violence have led many states to experiment with sentencing reforms that blur the traditional boundaries between the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. The juvenile court is clearly at a crossroads, struggling to balance its historical emphasis on individualized sentencing in an informal court environment against calls for increased accountability and punishment by the court's critics. Delinquency filings presently comprise about two-thirds of the juvenile court's caseload and have been rising throughout the decade. Will the number of delinquent filings continue to grow? Is there evidence that violent juvenile crime is on the rise? How are delinquency cases handled in the courts? How safe are our schools? Answering such questions requires a closer look at the changing nature of delinquency in historical context. This issue of *Caseload Highlights* brings data together from a variety of sources to examine recent trends in delinquency and patterns of juvenile violence.

### State Court Delinquency Caseloads and Dispositions

After a juvenile complaint has been filed, the court must decide whether the case will be petitioned. If petitioned, the case may be handled informally or made the subject of more formal processing by the juvenile court, including trial, adjudication, and sentencing.

As shown in the bar chart, juvenile courts have moved more toward handling delinquency cases formally as opposed to informally. In 1987, 53 percent of delinquency cases were handled informally, as compared to 44 percent in 1996. But formal processing does not necessarily mean that the case will end up being adjudicated. In fact, the proportion of cases formally adjudicated in 1996 (33 percent) has increased little since 1987 (30 percent).



Data Source: Snyder, H., Finnegan, T., Stahl, A., and Poole, R. Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics: 1987-1996. Pittsburgh, PA: National Center for Juvenile Justice [producer]. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [distributor], 1998.

The trend lines on the following panel show the types of delinquency cases being handled in state juvenile courts. There were 381,500 crimes against the person cases filed in 1996. The last decade has seen a doubling of these serious cases filed in state courts so that they now make up 22 percent of the delinquency caseload as compared to 16 percent in 1987. Drug cases have also increased substantially, rising from 72,100 cases in 1987 to 176,300 cases in 1996. Property cases still comprise the largest share of state court dockets, making

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# Juvenile Caseloads and Dispositions

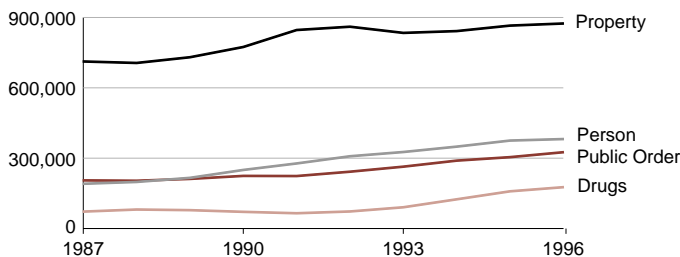
## State Court Delinquency Caseloads and Dispositions continued

up half of the delinquency caseload in 1996, and the number of public order offenses grew 58 percent between 1987 and 1996.

The most frequent juvenile court disposition is probation. In 1996, there were 306,900 juveniles placed on probation, representing over half of all adjudications for delinquency cases. Dismissal of the charges is relatively rare (4 percent of the cases),

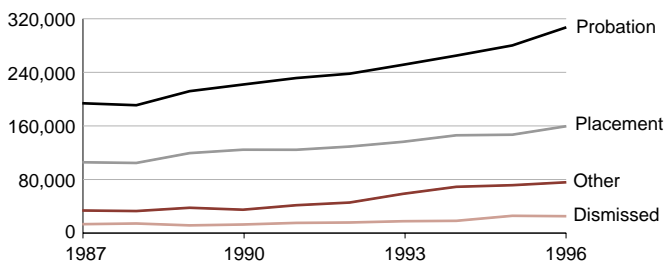
and can be contingent on the juvenile successfully completing a court-ordered program. Of those adjudicated delinquent in 1996, 28 percent received a residential placement. The less traditional "other" (or alternative) dispositions, including fines, restitution, community service, and various types of referrals to treatment or social service providers, have shown the greatest proportionate increase since 1990.

Delinquency Cases by Offense, 1987-1996



Data Source: Snyder, H., Finnegan, T., Stahl, A., and Poole, R. Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics: 1987-1996. Pittsburgh, PA: National Center for Juvenile Justice [producer]. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [distributor], 1998.

Adjudicated Delinquency Cases by Disposition, 1987-1996



Note: Cases are categorized according to their most severe disposition.

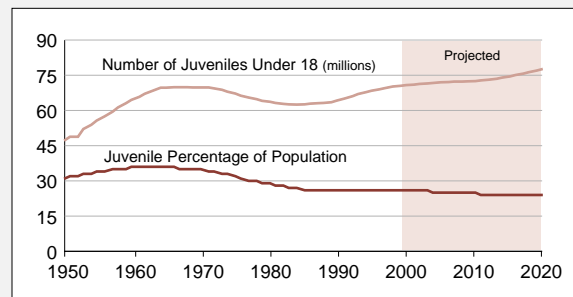
Data Source: Snyder, H., Finnegan, T., Stahl, A., and Poole, R. Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics: 1987-1996. Pittsburgh, PA: National Center for Juvenile Justice [producer]. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [distributor], 1998.

## Juvenile Population 1950-2020

The number of juveniles under age 18 reached a high of 69.9 million during 1966-1968, a level not exceeded until 1998 (70.2 million). Forecasts indicate that the number of juveniles will increase to 77.6 million by 2020. Some speculate that juvenile crime rates will increase dramatically during the next decade, fueled not only by the growing numbers of juveniles, but also by a growing number of youth with a high propensity toward crime and violence (called "temporary sociopaths" by James Fox and "superpredators" by John DiIulio). Other scholars such as Howard Snyder, Michael Tonry, and Franklin Zimring seriously dispute these conclusions and view them as "alarmist."

While the number of people under 18 is increasing, juveniles as a share of total population are actually declining. The percentage of juveniles in the population increased from 31 percent in 1950 to a high of 36 percent in the early 60s, before declining to a new low of 26 percent in 1998. This downward trend is expected to continue through 2020, when only 24 percent of the population will be under 18 years of age. In contrast, adults 65 and older have increased as a percentage of the total population from 8 percent in 1950 to 13 percent in 1998. By 2020, older Americans are projected to comprise 16 percent of the total population. Therefore, while the number of juveniles will increase through 2020, their share of total population will decline, tempering speculation about looming juvenile crime waves.

Juvenile Population and Percentage of Total Population, 1950-1998, and Projected 1999-2020



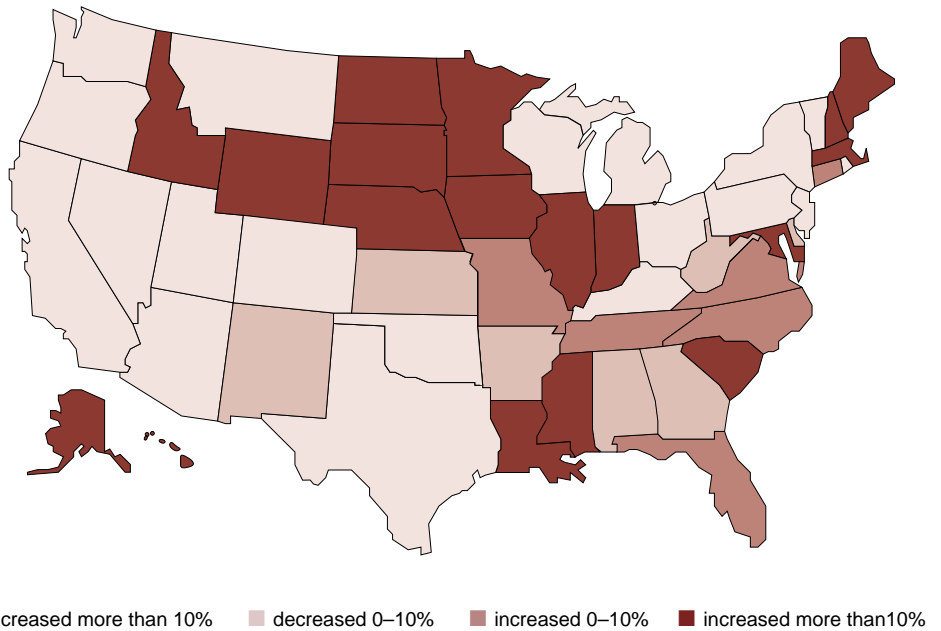
Data Source: Poe-Yamagata, Eileen. "The Number of Youth Under Age 18 and Their Proportion of the Population, 1950-2020." Adapted from Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. America's Children: Key Indicators of Well-Being, 1998. Washington, D.C.: OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates and Projections.

# Serious Violent Juvenile Crime

Juvenile delinquency arrest rates—particularly for violent crime—have important implications for the workload of the juvenile court and the adult courts as well. The adjacent map shows how juvenile violent crime arrest rates changed between 1992 and 1997 (violent crime includes murder/non-negligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault). About half the states experienced increases while the other half showed decreases. The average decrease for those states experiencing a decline was -25.5 percent; the average change for those states with increases was +24.7 percent. Decreases of more than 10 percent were found in four of the five most populous states.

After peaking in 1994 at 528 arrests per 100,000 juveniles, arrests for total violent crime dropped 23 percent, ending at an arrest rate of 407 in 1997. Juvenile arrest rates for violent crime show a somewhat different pattern from the trend in juvenile court “person” filings, as displayed in the previous chart *Delinquency Cases by Offense, 1987-1996*. This is largely attributable to the large proportion of simple assaults included in the delinquency filings data. However, when the focus narrows to the most violent juvenile crime—murder,

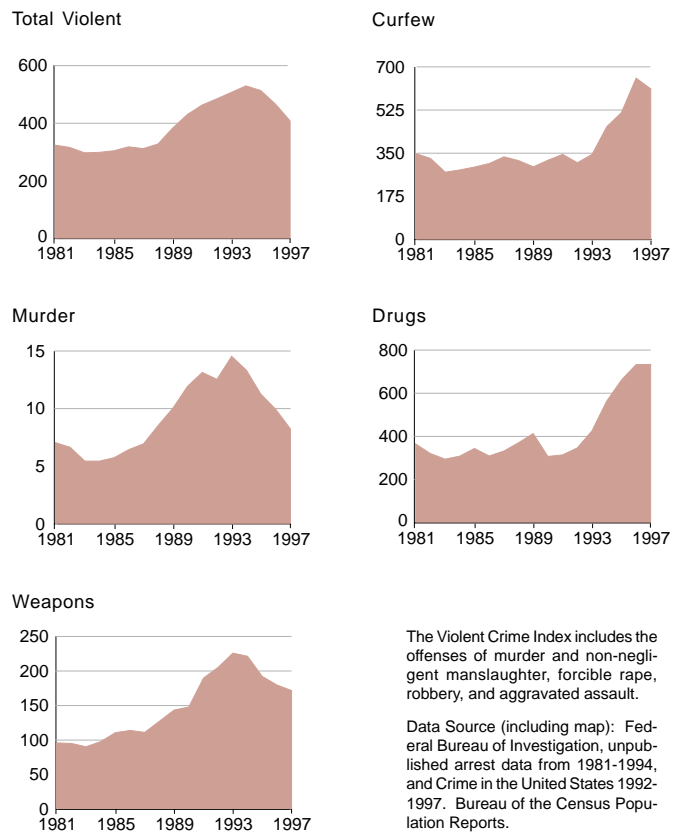
Changes in Juvenile Violent Crime Arrest Rates, 1992-1997



rape, robbery, and aggravated assault—the arrest data show a significant downward trend. Moreover, murder arrest rates have decreased even more sharply than total violent crime. Arrests involving weapons offenses have also decreased since the early 1990s.

In comparison, the country is now experiencing dramatic increases in juvenile arrest rates for certain nonviolent offenses. For example, arrests for curfew and drug violations have doubled since the late 1980s. Unlike violent crimes, arrests for nonviolent offenses are more sensitive to changes in police policies or shifts in resources. Recent increases may reflect the current focus on low-level offenses targeted by commu-

Juvenile Arrest Rates, 1981-1997 (per 100,000 persons ages 10 to 17)



The Violent Crime Index includes the offenses of murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.  
Data Source (including map): Federal Bureau of Investigation, unpublished arrest data from 1981-1994, and Crime in the United States 1992-1997. Bureau of the Census Population Reports.

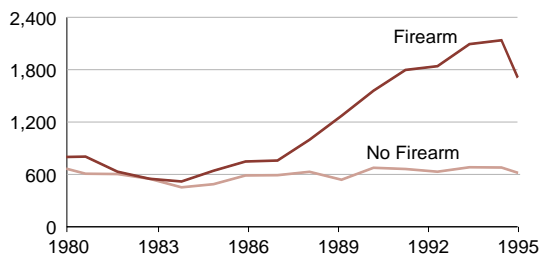
nity justice and several other delinquency prevention initiatives (e.g., Weed and Seed, Youth Violence Interdiction, etc.). Some feel that the decline in juvenile violent crime is due in part to the success of these new community-based justice programs, a healthy economy, and reduced gang violence in “crack” cocaine markets.

The greatest potential for serious juvenile violence occurs when firearms are used during the commission of a crime. In 1983, half of juvenile homicide offenders used a firearm in the commission of their crime. The graph below shows the number of juvenile homicide offenders increased during the late 1980s and early 1990s with the proportion of homicides involving firearms in-

creasing sharply to a high of 76 percent in 1994 before dropping in 1995. The number of juvenile homicide offenders not using a firearm has remained remarkably constant over the 16-year period shown.

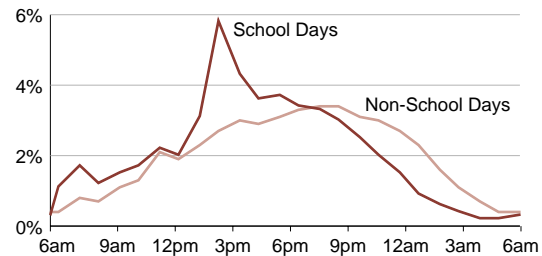
Policies and prevention strategies that target youth violence will be most effective if they can anticipate where and at what time violent incidents will occur. For example, a community’s response to juvenile crime can involve setting curfews or developing after school programs to provide children with a structured and safe environment. When should curfews be in effect? At what time of day should after school programs start and how long should they last? The answers to these questions also have

Known Juvenile Homicide Offenders by Weapon Type, 1980-1995



Data Source: Snyder, Howard. “Known Juvenile Homicide Offenders by Weapon Type, 1980-1995,” September 1998. FBI’s Supplementary Homicide Reports 1980-1995.

Time of Day Juveniles are Most Likely to Commit Serious Violent Crime



Note: Serious violent crimes include murder, violent sex assaults, robbery, and aggravated assault.

Data Source: Snyder, Howard. “Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report.” FBI’s National Incident Based Reporting for 12 States: Alabama, Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Dakota, South Carolina, Utah, Vermont, and Virginia.

clear implications for the workload of the juvenile courts—expanded curfews may translate into more juvenile apprehensions, and the lack of after school programs can mean more idle time for children.

The National Center for Juvenile Justice recently examined the time of day juveniles were most likely to commit serious violent crime. The analysis uses the FBI’s National Incident Based Reporting data (1991-1996) from 12 states (Alabama, Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Dakota, South Carolina, Utah, Vermont, and Virginia).

The graphic above shows the percentage of serious violent offenses committed by young people each hour of the day.

Violent crimes committed on school days peak at 3:00 PM and remain high between the hours of 4:00 PM and 7:00 PM. For non-school days, there is no clear peak period of violence. Instead, offenses tend to occur during both day and nighttime hours—from roughly 12:00 PM to 2:00 AM. With respect to preventing juvenile violent crime on school days, the analysis suggests that programs and prevention strategies may be best targeted for the hours immediately after school.

# School Violence

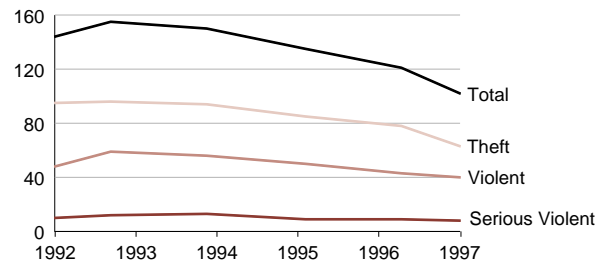
The good news about the drop in juvenile violent crime has been overshadowed by several recent incidents of school violence. How prevalent is serious school violence and is it on the rise? The table below shows that 10 percent of public schools reported at least one incident of a serious violent crime during 1996-1997, while 43 percent did not report any crimes at all to the police during this period.

Victimization surveys indicate that both the number and rates of crimes occurring at school have declined in recent years (1992-1997).

The adjacent graph shows that since its peak of 155 crimes per 1,000 students in 1993, the total juvenile crime rate in schools has declined by 34 percent to its lowest recorded level of 102 per 1,000 students in 1997. Serious violent crime rates at schools have fallen by 38 percent from 13 per 1,000 students in 1994 to a new low of eight per 1,000 students in 1997. Likewise, theft and violent crime rates are also down substantially in schools.

Serious violence in schools is primarily an urban phenomenon, being almost nonexistent

Crimes Against Students Ages 12-18 at School or Going to or from School per 1,000 Students by Type of Crime, 1992-1997



Data Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 1992 to 1997.

ent in rural schools. A serious violent crime is 1.5 times more likely to happen to an urban than to a suburban student, and six times more likely to happen to an urban than a rural student. In addition, Hispanic students are more likely to become a

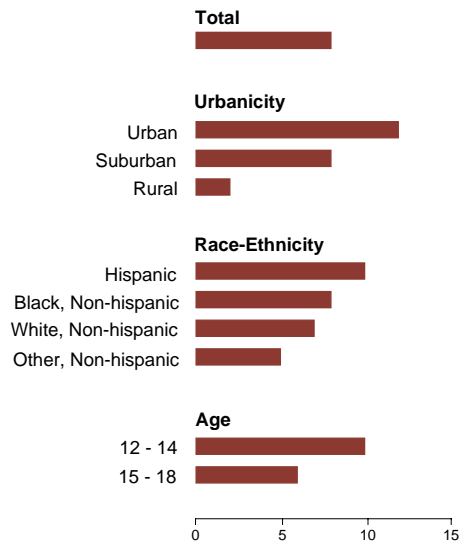
victim of serious violent crime than black or white students. Finally, younger students are more likely to become victims as compared to older students—those ages 12-14 were 1.67 times more likely to be a victim than those ages 15-18.

Type of Crime	Percentage of Public Schools Reporting
None .....	43%
Less serious or nonviolent crime, but no serious violent crime .....	47%
Serious Violent .....	10%

Note: Serious violent crimes include murder, rape, or other type of sexual battery, suicide, physical attack or fight with a weapon, or robbery. Less serious or nonviolent crimes include physical attack or fight without a weapon, theft/larceny, and vandalism. Schools were asked to report crimes that took place in school buildings, on school buses, on school grounds, and at places holding school-sponsored events.

Data Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System, "Principal/School Disciplinarian Survey on School Violence," FRSS 63, 1997.

Nonfatal Serious Violent Crimes Against Students Ages 12-18 at School or Going to or from School per 1,000 Students by Selected Characteristics, 1997



Data Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 1992 to 1997.

## Conclusion

There is no reason to believe that the nation's juvenile violent crime problem is worsening. Our most reliable data sources indicate that juvenile arrest rates for violent crime have been decreasing since 1994, although the rates have not returned to the lower level of the early and mid-1980s.

Victimization surveys find that both total and serious violent crime in schools has also declined in recent years.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to link recent changes in arrest rates to juvenile court caseloads, since the most reliable juvenile court caseload data lag arrest data by

two to three years. We do know, however, that through 1996, the nation's state juvenile courts continued to experience increases in the four major delinquency categories—person, property, drug, and public order caseloads. The last decade has seen a doubling of person offense filings, with these

cases now comprising 22 percent of the delinquency caseload as compared to 16 percent in 1987. We must wait for juvenile court data to become available for the 1997-1999 period to assess the impact of changing arrest rates on the juvenile courts.

### The Court Statistics Project (CSP)

In existence since 1975, the CSP is administered by the National Center for State Courts, with generous support by the State Justice Institute (Grant SJI-91-N-007-O99-1) and the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The CSP receives general policy direction from the Conference of State Court Administrators

through its Court Statistics Project Advisory Committee. Those wishing a more comprehensive review and analysis of the business of state trial and appellate courts are invited to read the CSP's latest publication, *Examining the Work of State Courts*, 1998.



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