



Juvenile Arrests and Correctional Practices: National Trends

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Introduction

Juvenile's criminal justice involvement often has serious consequences for their future prospects. For example, justice-involved juveniles in the United States (U.S.) are less likely to graduate from high school, leading to fewer job opportunities as they enter adulthood, and increased risks for participation in further criminal activity (Miller, Therrien, & Romig, 2019).

In an effort to better understand juvenile's involvement with the criminal justice system, this Research in Brief examines the prevalence of juvenile arrests across the U.S. and the type of crimes most often committed by them, demographic differences in their arrest profile, and delinquency case outcomes. Examples of the most effective programs for treatment of juvenile offenders are also discussed.

Juvenile Arrest Trends

Various national data sources are available to track trends over time in juvenile arrests. These include data collected and compiled by the FBI's Uniform Crime Report (UCR), the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), and the Council of Criminal Justice (CCJ). Using data from the CCJ, national arrest trends for juveniles and adults from 1980 to 2020 are shown in Figure 1.

Several trends are revealed from the data in Figure 1. First, the rate of juvenile arrests per 100,000 population is generally higher than the arrest rate for adults. Second, juvenile arrest

rates increased more abruptly from 1980 to 1996 than is found for adults. Third, the decline in juvenile arrest rates since the mid-1990s to 2020



adult arrest rates. In sheer volume, the number of juvenile arrests from 1996 to 2020 dropped from about 2.6 million to 500,000.

Several explanations have been offered to account for these changes in juvenile arrest trends over time. For example, the dominant explanations for the “crime drop” since the mid-1990s include (a) an increase in the use of incarceration as a response to criminal behavior, (b) the limiting of access to guns via an influx of gun control policies, and (c) the implementation of new policing strategies such as order-maintenance (Blumstein & Wallman, 2006). It is also important to note that a potential reason for the steep decline in arrests during 2020 is the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1

Source Council on Criminal Justice, 2023

Juvenile Offense Trends

National data also provides insight into the types of crimes that lead to juvenile arrests. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the offense trends of juvenile arrestees for violent, drug, property, and “other” offenses (“other” offenses include such behaviors as vandalism, curfew, and running away) (National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2022).

As shown in Figure 2, juveniles are predominately arrested for the category of “other” offenses and property crimes. Juvenile arrests for violent and drug offenses are far

less common. The rates of juvenile arrests have decreased since the mid-1990s for each of these four offense categories

Figure 2

Source Council on Criminal Justice, 2023

Demographic Profile of Juvenile Arrestees

Similar to research on adult arrest statistics (CCJ, 2023), there are major socio-demographic differences in the profile of juvenile arrestees. Table 1 reveals the nature of the differences in juvenile arrest rates based on the type of offense and the offender’s gender and age.

Table 1



older juveniles (i.e., 15- to 17-year-olds) have substantially higher rates of arrest for both violent and property crimes than their younger counterparts. Although gender differences in arrest rates are large, the magnitude of these age differences in juvenile arrests among each crime category are even more pronounced. The primary explanations for the gender differences in juvenile arrests focus on traditional gender-role socialization (Shover, Norland, James, & Thornton, 1979). The age differences in juvenile arrests are often attributed to the connections to parental/family relationships and peer relationships as juveniles age (Hirschi, 1969; Laub & Sampson, 1993).

Similar to gender and age differences in juvenile arrest rates, there are also major racial/ethnic differences in juvenile arrest rates over time. Figure 3 shows the differences in racial distribution of juvenile arrest rates.

Figure 3

Source: Council on Criminal Justice, 2023

As research suggests, minority populations, particularly Black individuals, are arrested at rates that far exceed those of White, Native American, or Asian juveniles, respectively. Additionally, although a far smaller proportion of the population than White juveniles, Black youth account for the highest proportion of juvenile arrestees for each time period (see Figure 3). Potential reasons for the racial disparities in juvenile arrests include: (a)

differential offending (youth of certain races commit more crime than others), (b) differential treatment (minority youth receive harsher treatment than White youth), and (c) differential processing (a contributing factor to differential treatment referring to decision criteria being inconsistently implemented across juvenile cases) (Developmental Services Group, Inc., 2022).

Juvenile Case Outcomes Over Time

After a juvenile has been arrested by police, there are several potential arrest outcomes that the arrest can result in. Figure 4 highl



that, in general, disposed delinquency cases have consistently declined since 2000.

Juvenile Offender's Treatment and Best Practices

As mentioned at the beginning of this brief, becoming justice involved as a juvenile can have a lasting impact on the prosocial outcomes of one's future (Miller et al., 2019). Additionally, research shows that many juveniles are justice involved as a result of committing minor offenses, and/or have other co-occurring situations that have the potential to impact their behavior, like mental health disorders or struggles at home (Youth.gov). As such, it is important to address intervention and treatment approaches for justice-involved juveniles.

The concept of diversion refers to minimizing official justice involvement as much as possible. Diversion can take place at any point within the juvenile justice system, and usually results in participation in a community-based program. Research has shown that juveniles that participate in diversion programs are less likely to participate in future delinquent behaviors compared to juveniles that are detained (Youth.gov).

There are a variety of diversion programs available to justice-involved youth, and the creation of diversion programs begins with goals that are generally the same: addressing and reducing/eliminating the continuation of delinquent behavior (Youth.gov). In general, there are four leading benefits of diversion programs that have been supported by research: reduced serious involvement with the delinquency system, reduced out-of-home placements, continued community connections and involvement, and reduced costs (Youth.gov).

References

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