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Juvenile Justice Bulletin

OJJDP Update on Statistics

John J. Wilson, Acting Administrator

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The Juvenile Court's Response to Violent Offenders: 1985-1989

by Jeffrey A. Butts, Ph.D., and D.J. Connors-Beatty, M.A.

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ACQUISITIONS

Violent youth consume a disproportionate amount of the attention and resources of juvenile courts, according to an analysis of delinquency cases handled by juvenile courts in 10 States from 1985 through 1989. Although violent juveniles represented only 7 percent of juvenile court caseloads in the States, these youth accounted for 11 percent of detentions, 12 percent of out-of-home placements, and 27 percent of transfers to criminal courts during this period.

To understand how juvenile courts handle youth charged with violent offenses and how this process may have changed during recent years, the National Center for Juvenile Justice analyzed more than 1.4 million case records

from the National Juvenile Court Data Archive.

Findings from this study include the following:

- Based upon the total number of youth at risk of juvenile court referral in the jurisdictions studied, the per capita rate of violent offense cases increased 18 percent from 1985 to 1989. The per capita rate was higher among males than females and higher among black youth than white youth or those of other races.
- Courts were more likely to file petitions in cases involving violent offenses than in other delinquency cases. In 1989, 76 percent of violent offense cases were petitioned, compared with 50 percent of

delinquency cases that did not involve violent offenses.

- Juveniles were detained in 49 percent of cases involving violent offenses in 1989, compared with 25 percent in other delinquency cases.
- In 1989 juvenile courts waived 3 percent of petitioned violent offense cases to criminal court, placed 30 percent in residential facilities, and ordered 34 percent to be placed on formal probation.

Violent juvenile offenders

For purposes of this study, violent offenses comprise homicide, violent sex offenses, aggravated assault, and rob-

From the Administrator

Although juveniles charged with violent offenses represent a relatively small portion of the Nation's juvenile court caseload, they represent a major concern to the American people. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) shares that concern.

Recognizing the public's right to safety, juvenile courts are more likely to impose serious dispositions such as out-of-home placements and transfers to adult criminal court in cases involving violent juvenile offenders. To assess the manner in which

juvenile courts handle cases involving youth charged with violent crimes, OJJDP asked the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) to analyze juvenile court case records in the National Juvenile Court Data Archive. The NCJJ study, which examines more than 1.4 million cases, debunks a popular misconception that juvenile court sanctions for violent offenders are tantamount to a slap on the wrist. To the contrary, the record shows that juvenile courts respond severely to violent offenders, perhaps even more severely than do adult courts.

Youthful violence presents a serious challenge to our Nation. As such, it demands a serious response. If that response is to be effective—one that rehabilitates offenders, deters offenses, and protects the public—it must be well considered. We in the juvenile justice community face this challenge together. It is our hope that the information presented in this *Update* will aid all of us in our efforts to find solutions.

John J. Wilson
Acting Administrator

bery.¹ In 1989, 7 percent of delinquency cases involved violent offenses (figure 1). Aggravated assaults constituted 56 percent of violent offense cases; robberies, 31 percent; violent sexual crimes, 9 percent; and homicides, 3 percent.

Among the 10 States examined in this study, violent offense cases accounted for as little as 1 percent and as much as 11 percent of the delinquency caseload in 1989. Cases involving male youth

were more likely to include violent offenses than cases involving female youth—7 percent compared with 5 percent. The court cases of black youth involved violent offenses more frequently than cases with white youth or youth of other races.² A violent offense was alleged in 11 percent of cases with black youth, 5 percent of cases with white youth, and 7 percent of cases with youth of other races.

Case rates

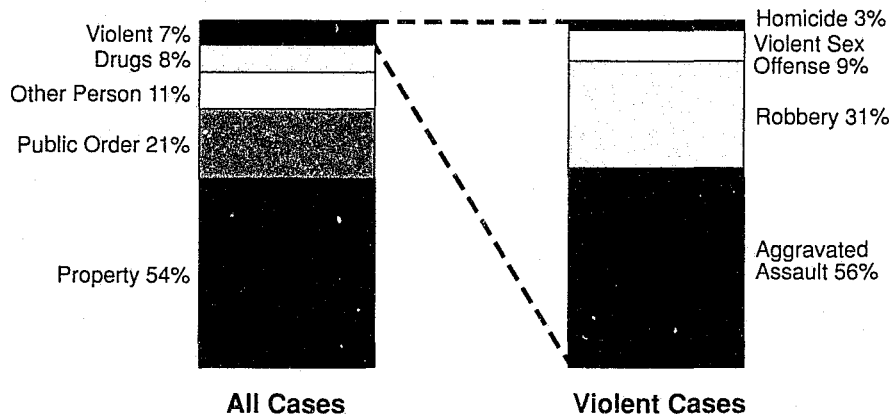
Using case rates makes it possible to study juvenile court activity over time and to make comparisons between and among States because this approach controls for differences in the population at risk of referral to juvenile courts—youth ages 10 through 17. The violent offense case rate increased 18 percent from 1985 to 1989, from 2.78 to 3.30 cases processed for every 1,000 youth at risk (table 1).³ During this period, the homicide case rate increased 73 percent; aggravated assault, 37 percent; and violent sex offenses, 9 percent. However, the case rate for robberies *decreased* 6 percent.

Case rates varied by gender, race, and age. In 1989 the case rate for males was seven times greater than the rate for females. Juvenile courts handled 5.68 violent offense cases involving males for every 1,000 males at risk, compared with 0.80 cases for every 1,000 females at risk. Case rates among males and females increased in nearly equal proportions from 1985 to 1989—18 percent and 19 percent, respectively.

In 1985 the violent offense case rate for black youth was 4.6 times greater than the rate for white youth. Case rates grew faster among white youth from 1985 to 1989. The violent offense case rate for whites increased 22 percent during that period, compared with a 12-percent increase for blacks and a 3-percent in-

Figure 1

Offense Characteristics of Delinquency Cases in 10 States, 1989



Note: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding.

Data Sources: AL, AZ, CA, MD, MS, NE, OH, PA, UT, VA

Offense Definitions

Juvenile court cases were classified based upon the most serious offense associated with each referral. Similarly, case disposition was based on the most severe disposition if more than one disposition was ordered. Violent offenses were defined as follows:

Homicide: Intentionally causing the death of another person without extreme provocation or legal justification, or causing the death of another while committing or attempting to commit another crime.

Violent Sex Offenses: Forcible rape and other violent sex offenses carried

out against the will of the victim, by force or threat of force, by a member of the same sex or different sex.

Robbery: Taking or attempting to take property that is in the immediate possession of another by force or the threat of force.

Aggravated Assault: Intentionally inflicting serious bodily injury, or unlawful threat or attempt to inflict bodily injury or death by means of a deadly or dangerous weapon, whether or not any injury is inflicted.

¹ Other offenses against persons, such as simple assault, harassment, and sex offenses other than forcible rape are not included in this definition of violent offenses.

² Juveniles are classified into three racial groups: white, black, and other. The "other" group includes Native Americans, Alaskan natives, Asians, and Pacific Islanders. In both court and population data, the vast majority of juveniles of Hispanic ethnicity are included in the white racial group.

³ The case-rate increase reported in this sample of courts is consistent with the 19-percent increase in the violent crime arrest rates of youth under 18 years of age reported by the FBI (*Age-Specific Arrest Rates and Race-Specific Arrest Rates for Selected Offenses: 1965-1988*). Information on 1989 arrest rates were received via personal communication with the FBI.

crease for youth of other races. Even with these increases, the 1989 case rate among black youth was more than four times the rate for whites.

The rate of violent offenses is higher among older youth. In 1989 the violent case rate for 16-year-olds (6.15 per 1,000) was 29 percent greater than the rate for 15-year-olds (4.77 per 1,000) and 72 percent greater than that for 14-year-olds (3.58 per 1,000). However, the case rate for 17-year-olds (6.43 per 1,000) was only 5 percent greater than the case rate for 16-year-olds. From 1985 to 1989, all age groups experienced substantial, and approximately equal, increases in case rates for violent crimes.

Informal processing

Juvenile cases may be handled formally or informally. An informal case is handled without filing a petition and without a formal court hearing. A formal case appears on the calendar for an adjudicatory or waiver hearing in response to a petition that asks the court either to adjudicate the youth a delinquent and order appropriate sanctions or to transfer the case to criminal court.

From 1985 to 1989, about one-quarter of violent offense cases referred to juvenile courts were handled informally. Seven of every 10 informally processed violent offense cases were dismissed, often for lack of evidence. In the remainder of informally processed cases, youth agreed to voluntary probation, fines, or restitution, often with the condition that if the youth did not fulfill the agreement, a petition would be filed and the matter would be handled formally by the court.

Formal processing

From 1985 through 1989, the courts in this study petitioned on average three-quarters of their violent offense cases. The proportion of violent offense cases handled formally ranged from 46 percent to 91 percent among the 10 States included in this study.

Table 1

Violent Offense Case Rates in 10 States, 1985-1989

	Cases per 1,000 Youth at Risk					Percent Change (85-89)
	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	
Total	2.78	2.92	2.76	2.87	3.30	18%
Homicide	0.06	0.08	0.06	0.09	0.10	73
Violent Sex Offense	0.28	0.28	0.31	0.30	0.31	9
Robbery	1.08	0.98	0.88	0.87	1.02	-6
Aggravated Assault	1.36	1.58	1.50	1.61	1.86	37
Gender						
Male	4.80	5.01	4.75	4.93	5.68	18
Female	0.67	0.74	0.67	0.71	0.80	19
Race						
White	1.77	1.91	1.81	1.87	2.16	22
Black	8.15	8.44	7.92	8.24	9.17	12
Other	2.12	1.73	1.69	1.79	2.19	3
Age						
12	0.83	0.85	0.87	0.99	1.07	29
13	1.76	1.78	1.78	1.84	1.99	13
14	2.98	2.93	3.04	3.26	3.58	20
15	4.00	4.12	3.83	4.22	4.77	19
16	5.00	5.37	4.73	5.03	6.15	23
17	5.23	5.50	5.20	5.15	6.43	23

Note: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding. Case rate is defined as the number of cases for every 1,000 youth ages 10 through 17 in the population, or cases for every 1,000 youth at risk in each age, sex, and racial group.

Data Sources: AL, AZ, CA, MD, MS, NE, OH, PA, UT, VA

In 1989 courts petitioned nearly all homicide and robbery cases (90 percent and 87 percent, respectively), 81 percent of violent sex offense cases, and 69 percent of aggravated assault cases (table 2). Males charged with violent offenses faced petitioning more often than females (78 percent compared with 62 percent). White youth received petitions less often than black youth or youth of other races (73 percent compared with 78 percent and 79 percent, respectively). More than 80 percent of cases involving 16- and 17-year-old juveniles were handled formally, compared with 60 percent of cases involving

12-year-old juveniles and 67 percent of those involving 13-year-old juveniles.

Disposition of formally processed cases

The disposition of a petitioned case is determined by a judge or referee. The court may dismiss the case for lack of evidence or other reasons; order probation, restitution, fines, or out-of-home placement; or, when appropriate, waive the case to criminal court.

Table 2

Use of Formal Handling (Petitioning) in Violent Offense Cases, 1985-1989

	Percent of Cases Petitioned				
	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
Total	75%	74%	73%	73%	76%
Homicide	86	86	84	92	90
Violent Sex Offense	78	76	78	79	81
Robbery	84	82	83	85	87
Aggravated Assault	67	67	66	65	69
Gender					
Male	77	75	75	75	78
Female	65	62	60	62	62
Race					
White	73	70	71	70	73
Black	79	78	76	77	78
Other	76	75	73	78	79
Age					
12	57	58	59	56	60
13	66	65	67	64	67
14	73	70	71	72	74
15	78	75	74	75	77
16	80	79	78	79	81
17	80	78	78	78	80

Data Sources: AL, AZ, CA, MD, MS, NE, OH, PA, UT, VA

Source of Data

The findings of this study are derived from analyses of automated case records submitted to the National Juvenile Court Data Archive by 493 juvenile courts in Alabama, Arizona, California, Maryland, Mississippi, Nebraska, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Virginia. These jurisdictions were selected for analysis because they met three criteria: Their data represented the complete reporting of both petitioned and nonpetitioned cases from 1985 through 1989, their offense cod-

ing structure permitted consistent definitions of the four violent-offense categories in this study, and the upper age of juvenile court jurisdiction in each State was 17 years.⁵ The courts included in the study had jurisdiction over 25 percent of the U.S. juvenile population in 1989. Although the counties in which the courts are located are somewhat more urban than the Nation as a whole, their populations are racially similar to that of the Nation.

In 1989 the juvenile courts in this study dismissed 27 percent of formally processed violent offense cases, ordered probation in 34 percent and out-of-home placement in 30 percent, and transferred 3 percent to criminal court (table 3). Although dismissals among violent offense cases increased from 1985 to 1989, the dispositions of nondismissed cases changed only slightly.

Homicide cases processed in juvenile court in 1989 were far more likely than other violent offense cases to result in waiver to criminal court or out-of-home placement—15 percent and 48 percent, respectively (table 4).⁴ Courts waived 3 percent of robbery cases, 2 percent of violent sex offense cases, and 2 percent of aggravated assault cases. The courts ordered out-of-home placement in 35 percent of robbery cases, 27 percent of violent sex offense cases, and 26 percent of aggravated assault cases.

Juvenile courts waived formally handled violent offense cases involving males more often than those involving females in 1989 (3 percent compared with less than 1 percent). Cases involving males also received out-of-home placement more often than cases involving females (31 percent versus 21 percent). Formally handled violent offense cases involving females were more likely to receive probation than cases involving males (42 percent compared with 33 percent), and more likely to end in dismissal (31 percent versus 27 percent).

⁴ In many States a youth charged with homicide is first handled in a criminal court. Therefore, some of the homicide cases handled in juvenile courts are those that were determined to be inappropriate for criminal court processing.

⁵ The upper age of juvenile court jurisdiction is defined by statute in each State as the oldest age at which youth are automatically assumed to be under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court rather than the adult court. In most States this age is 17, but it ranges from ages 15 to 18. States were included in this analysis only if their upper age of jurisdiction was 17 during the years 1985 to 1989.

Black youth were slightly more likely than white youth or youth of other races to be waived to criminal court in 1989 (4 percent, 2 percent, and 3 percent, respectively). Petitioned, violent offense cases involving black youth also were more likely than other cases to end in dismissal—31 percent among black youth compared with 24 percent among white youth and 23 percent among youth of other races. Whites and youth of other races were more likely than blacks to receive formal probation (37 percent, 36 percent, and 31 percent, respectively).

Juvenile courts waived formally handled violent offense cases involving 17-year-old youth more frequently than cases involving younger juveniles. Juveniles ages 15 and 16 were more likely than those in other age groups to receive placement outside of the home (35 percent and 33 percent, respectively), while 12- and 13-year-old youth were more likely than those in other age groups to receive formal probation (47 percent and 45 percent, respectively).

Detention in violent offense cases

Juvenile courts may hold youth in secure detention facilities at some point between referral and case disposition. A court may decide detention is necessary to protect the community from a juvenile's behavior, to ensure a juvenile's appearance at subsequent court hearings, or to ensure the juvenile's safety. Nationwide, detention was used in 22 percent of delinquency cases referred to juvenile courts in 1989.⁶ From 1985 to 1989, nearly half (46 percent) of the violent offense cases in this study involved detention. The use of detention for violent offense cases ranged from 15 percent to 57 percent of cases handled in the jurisdictions studied.

In 1989 juvenile courts detained youth in 78 percent of homicide cases, 37 percent of violent sex offense cases, 56 percent of robbery cases, and 45 percent of aggravated assault cases (table 5).

Table 3
Juvenile Court Dispositions in 10 States by Manner of Handling and Type of Offense, 1985–1989

	Percent of Court Cases Disposed				
	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
Violent Offenses					
Petitioned					
Dismissed	21%	22%	22%	25%	27%
Probation	38	38	38	36	34
Placement	31	30	31	29	30
Waived	4	4	3	3	3
Other	6	6	6	6	5
Nonpetitioned					
Dismissed	69	69	71	68	72
Probation	20	21	22	24	24
Placement	*	*	*	*	*
Waived	*	*	*	*	*
Other	10	11	7	8	4
Other Delinquency					
Petitioned					
Dismissed	19	20	20	22	24
Probation	47	46	46	44	44
Placement	23	23	23	23	22
Waived	1	1	1	1	1
Other	9	10	10	10	10
Nonpetitioned					
Dismissed	66	66	66	66	67
Probation	23	22	23	23	24
Placement	*	1	*	*	1
Waived	*	*	*	*	*
Other	11	12	11	11	9

* = Less than 1 percent.
Note: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding.
Data Sources: AL, AZ, CA, MD, MS, NE, OH, PA, UT, VA

Use of detention increased somewhat from 1985 to 1989. For example, in homicide cases the use of detention increased from 69 percent to 78 percent; in aggravated assault cases the use of detention increased from 40 percent to 45 percent. In violent sex offense and robbery cases, however, the courts' use of detention changed little from 1985 to 1989.

In 1989 juvenile courts ordered detention in 50 percent of cases involving male juveniles and 41 percent of those involving females. Detention was used

in nearly half of violent offense cases involving white or black youth. Cases involving youth of other races were more likely to include detention, with youth being detained in 57 percent of those cases in 1989.

⁶ Snyder, Howard N., Melissa Sickmund, Ellen H. Nimick, Terrence A. Finnegan, Dennis P. Sullivan, Rowen S. Poole, Nancy J. Tierney. *Juvenile Court Statistics 1989*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (1992).

Table 4

Juvenile Court Dispositions of Petitioned, Violent Offense Cases in 10 States, 1989

	Percent of Court Cases Disposed					Total
	Dismissed	Probation	Placed	Waived	Other	
Total	27%	34%	30%	3%	5%	100%
Homicide	25	11	48	15	1	100
Violent Sex Offense	25	41	27	2	5	100
Robbery	28	30	35	3	4	100
Aggravated Assault	28	38	26	2	6	100
Gender						
Male	27	33	31	3	5	100
Female	31	42	21	*	5	100
Race						
White	24	37	32	2	5	100
Black	31	31	29	4	5	100
Other	23	36	31	3	6	100
Age						
12	25	47	22	0	7	100
13	23	45	26	0	5	100
14	24	41	30	*	5	100
15	24	35	35	1	5	100
16	28	31	33	3	5	100
17	30	30	29	6	5	100

* = Less than 1 percent.

Note: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding.

Data Sources: AL, AZ, CA, MD, MS, NE, OH, PA, UT, VA

The use of detention varied considerably by age in 1989. Detention was used in more than 50 percent of violent offense cases involving 16- and 17-year-old youth and 40 percent and 47 percent of cases involving 13- and 14-year-olds, respectively. Violent offense cases involving youth under age 16 were more likely to be detained in 1989 than in 1985. There was little change in the use of detention for 16- and 17-year-old juveniles from 1985 to 1989.

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Since 1975, OJJDP has provided all funding for the establishment and maintenance of the National Juvenile Court Data Archive. Both OJJDP and NCJJ gratefully acknowledge the efforts of the many State and local agencies that contribute data to the Archive. Their cooperation with requests for data and documentation make this work possible.

For more information

The National Juvenile Court Data Archive collects and stores automated records of cases handled by courts with juvenile jurisdiction. NCJJ uses Archive data to prepare policy and research studies as well as the annual *Juvenile Court Statistics* series, which presents national estimates of delinquency and status offense cases handled by juvenile courts. Archive data are available to researchers and policymakers. For more information about the National Juvenile Court Data Archive, contact the National Center for Juvenile Justice, 701 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15219-4783, or call 412-227-6950. For a copy of the latest *Juvenile Court Statistics* report or the *Guide to the Data Sets* in the National Juvenile Court Data Archive, call or write the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850 (800-638-8736; in Maryland and the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, 301-251-5500).

Table 5

**Use of Detention Among Violent Offense Cases
in Eight States, 1985-1989**

	Percent of Cases Detained				
	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989
Total	47%	47%	44%	45%	49%
Homicide	69	72	63	73	78
Violent Sex Offense	36	38	34	37	37
Robbery	58	56	51	51	56
Aggravated Assault	40	41	40	41	45
Gender					
Male	48	48	45	46	50
Female	37	37	36	38	41
Race					
White	47	46	41	43	48
Black	48	47	46	48	50
Other	50	59	54	55	57
Age					
12	30	28	26	29	33
13	35	37	36	35	40
14	42	41	42	43	47
15	48	48	45	47	52
16	53	51	49	51	55
17	54	51	47	50	54

Data Sources: AL, AZ, CA, MS, NE, OH, PA, VA

Utah and Maryland data do not permit comparisons of detained and nondetained cases.

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