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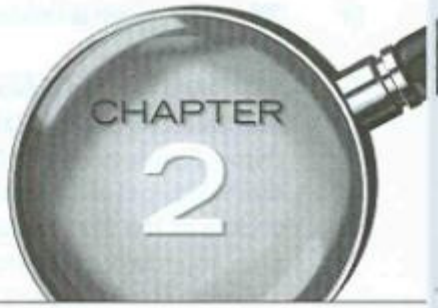

Trends in American Youth Crime

Jeffrey A. Butts and Daniel P. Mears

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

1. To review recent developments in American youth crime policy.
2. To analyze juvenile crime trends in the United States between 1980 and 2007.
3. To examine changes in the incidence and prevalence of juvenile crime using three different sources of information, including self-reports, law enforcement data, and victimization surveys.
4. To reconsider the focus and impact of juvenile crime policy within the context of recent crime trends.

Introduction

In an era when Americans and their elected officials demand more evidence-based policy and government accountability, it is striking how little correspondence often exists between youth justice policy and changing trends in youth crime. Few policy makers pay close attention to the research foundation underlying youth justice programs and policies. That is not entirely their fault—most cities and counties, and even some states, do not have the research capacity to track youth crime trends in a detailed or timely way. Regardless, the result is that many youth crime policies are based on impressions, anecdotes, and incomplete data of questionable value. Exceptions exist, of course, including a number of recent performance-monitoring initiatives that track the activities of youth justice systems (Mears & Butts, 2008). Most youth justice policies, however, are crafted by policy makers with little solid information about the causes of youth crime or about the amount and distribution of crime across social and geographic space.

The United States experienced declining rates of juvenile crime and violence during the late 1990s and into the early years of the 21st century, although one would not know that from the crime-policy discussions that took place in town halls and state legislatures across the country.[1] Well after the falling rate of violent crime had become obvious, policy makers and public officials continued to demand increased "toughness," suggesting that an aggressive crackdown on young offenders was needed to protect public safety. Their concerns became especially intense after a series of school shootings gripped the nation, including the multiple-victim tragedies at Columbine High School in Colorado and the campus of Virginia Tech.

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Tough talk in the face of falling crime rates is hardly a new phenomenon. Public opinion and the views of political officials have always been somewhat impervious to actual levels of crime. People persist in believing that the youth of today commit more frequent and more serious crimes than young people in the past, no matter the era (Bernard, 1992). The first decade of the 21st century revealed the enduring strength of these beliefs as youth crime rates, especially violent crime rates, remained at historic lows, yet government leaders continued to stress the need for more drastic measures to control what was frequently depicted as an out-of-control juvenile delinquency problem.

Against that backdrop, this chapter attempts to answer two deceptively simple questions, "How much juvenile crime is there today?" and "How does the level of juvenile crime today compare with juvenile crime 20 or 30 years ago?" The discussion focuses on juvenile crime trends in the U.S. since 1980. Nearly 30 years of data should be enough to see whether there were ever "good old days" when juveniles were more law abiding than they are today. In addition, 30 years is as far as a careful analysis of juvenile crime can look. It was not until the 1970s that national statistics on juvenile crime were available in the United States. And it was not until the 1980s that such information was detailed enough to permit analyses of whether delinquency was getting better or worse nationwide.

■ Accounting for Demography

In 1980, the total resident population of the United States was 227 million. By 2000, it had increased to 282 million and by 2007 it climbed to 302 million, an increase of 33 percent compared with 1980. A larger population means more potential offenders. The age distribution of the population is also important when analyzing youth crime trends. The juvenile justice system typically has jurisdiction over the offenses committed by children as young as 10 years of age, and jurisdiction in the majority of states ends after age 17. Changes in this population could have a marked effect on the volume of juvenile crime and violence coming to the attention of law enforcement and the courts. The reason stems from the fact that if there is one constant finding in criminological research, it is that offending increases dramatically during adolescence and then, just as dramatically, decreases in early adulthood.

The total number of youth in the juvenile age range of 10 to 17 years has fluctuated in recent decades. Between 1980 and 1990, for example, the juvenile population dropped 13 percent, from 31 to 27 million. The population then increased, growing to 34 million between 2000 and 2003. Moreover, the number of juveniles in the U.S. population is expected to rise in coming decades. Combined with high levels of immigration, a strong birth rate is generating a growing youth population. In 2008, the U.S. Census Bureau projected a juvenile population of 39.4 million by 2030, which would be an increase of 18 percent compared with the estimated juvenile population of 33.4 million in 2007 (see **Figure 2–1**). If delinquency were simply a function of the size of the juvenile population, we would expect juvenile crime to follow the same pattern. As we will see below, however, juvenile crime patterns are often more complicated.

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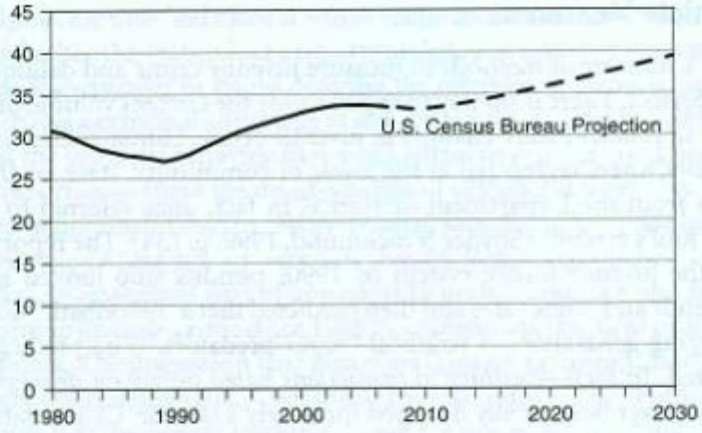

Figure 2–1 Historic and Projected Trends in United States Residents Age 10–17: 1980–2030 (in Millions)

Source: Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau. Release date of projections: August 14, 2008.

■ Asking the Right Questions

Traditionally, researchers answer questions about changing juvenile crime rates with data from law enforcement. According to estimates created from the Uniform Crime Reporting data from the Department of Justice, for example, law enforcement agencies across the United States made an estimated 2.2 million arrests of young people under age 18 in 2007 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008). The number of juvenile arrests in 1980, however, was also 2.2 million. Perhaps juvenile crime did not change at all during the past three decades. Is this an adequate answer? Does it tell us all we need to know about the volume of juvenile crime in America, or should we ask for more information? For instance, what happened between 1980 and 2007? Did juvenile crime fluctuate or remain flat? How many juveniles were in the U.S. population in 2007 compared with 1980? What offenses were involved in those 2.2 million arrests in 2007? Were they more serious or more violent than the offenses committed by juveniles in 1980? Can we assume that 2.2 million arrests of juveniles represent 2.2 million crimes by juveniles, or could America's juveniles have committed fewer crimes in 2007 but still been involved in 2.2 million arrests? Were juveniles in 2007 more likely to commit crimes in groups than were juveniles in 1980? If so, would an analysis of *crimes committed* reveal different findings than an analysis of *arrests made*? Furthermore, how many crimes occur that never appear in law enforcement data? Is it possible that juvenile arrests go up or down in part due to greater or lesser diligence by police as they attempt to detect the occurrence of crime and identify suspects? To examine juvenile crime trends properly, it is necessary to examine a range of data from a variety of perspectives.

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■ Using Multiple Measures

Researchers use a number of methods to measure juvenile crime and delinquency. None of the methods is perfect. There is no way to explain fully the current volume of juvenile crime in the nation or to predict future changes in juvenile crime. Human behavior is too unpredictable, especially when aggregated at the levels of community, state, or the country as a whole. A report from the Department of Justice, in fact, once referred to juvenile crime prediction as a "fool's errand" (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999, p. 134). The report alluded to the harm done to the juvenile justice system by 1990s pundits who looked simplistically at demographic trends and crime rates and then predicted that a "bloodbath" would soon erupt due to an emerging generation of youthful "super predators." The predicted crime wave never materialized. In fact—*contrary to predictions based purely on demographic trends*—violent crimes by juveniles actually dropped for nearly a decade. Crime data, it seems, can help us to understand the past, but we should not expect it, or information about demographic trends, to predict the future. If we examine the general magnitude and direction of juvenile crime trends during recent decades, we begin to appreciate the meaning of current crime levels in the proper context.

The amount of juvenile crime and delinquency is traditionally measured in one of three ways. First, researchers ask youth directly about the criminal acts they committed during the past year, the past month, etc. This technique produces a measure known as "self-reported delinquency." It has the advantage of capturing data about youthful law violations that otherwise never come to the attention of police. Self-reported measures, however, are complex and can be very expensive, making them financially impractical for most researchers. They are also subject to error because interview subjects may exaggerate or minimize their behavior depending on self-interest. Even so, studies show that self-report studies typically generate accurate estimates of offending. Because most researchers cannot afford to use self-reported methods with anything other than small samples, however, the technique is usually incapable of generating accurate estimates of rare events, such as severely violent crimes.

The second, and probably most well known method of measuring juvenile crime, is to analyze the workloads of the nation's justice system. The agencies that make up the justice system (police, courts, and corrections) generate regular measures of crime as they collect and organize data about the offenders they handle. Police agencies disseminate data about the crimes reported to them and about the arrests they make, including the age, sex, and ethnic background of each offender. Courts share information about the cases they receive from law enforcement and about how each case is processed—that is, whether the youth was handled informally or prosecuted, whether the court found the youth responsible (guilty) for the crime, and what actions were taken as a result, including placement in secure confinement. Especially in large cities, justice agencies have invested significantly in improved information gathering, analysis, and dissemination. As their information capacity has increased, official data have become more valuable to researchers.

The third method used by researchers to measure crime levels is to ask citizens in general if they have been the victims of crime in the past year, past month, and so on. Victimization

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surveys typically ask the time and place at which crime incidents occurred, what kind of crime was involved (whether the victim had property stolen, was attacked personally, etc.), and if the victim knew the offender or could describe the offender in terms of age, sex, and race. This approach shares a principal advantage of self-reported measures in that it is able to detect at least some of the criminal behavior that would otherwise never come to the attention of police. Victim reports also share the disadvantages of offender self-reports, however, as they are expensive to maintain, limited to relatively small samples of the population, and cannot accurately reflect the occurrence of very rare events. Regardless of their limited coverage, victim studies are an important part of any effort to understand juvenile crime trends.

We will examine juvenile crime since 1980 by considering the most prominent examples of each type of data. The discussion first describes changes in juvenile law-breaking as estimated by self-reported delinquency measures from Monitoring the Future, the University of Michigan study best known for tracking changes in juvenile drug abuse, and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a series managed by the U.S. Department of Labor. Next, we analyze trends in juvenile law violations using official data from the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) program managed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation within the U.S. Department of Justice. This section is the most detailed because UCR data are the most widely used and influential data on crime. Finally, we review findings from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), also managed by the Department of Justice. The NCVS is the largest data collection effort in the United States that uses victim reports to monitor changes in crime.

■ Youth Crime According to Self-Reports

One of the better ways to find out how much juvenile crime really occurs in society is to ask youth themselves. Many delinquent acts never come to the attention of law enforcement or the courts. Thus, they will never be part of official crime statistics. If we used only official data to measure trends in criminal behavior, we would be missing a sizeable part of the picture. In many crimes against property and even in some personal crimes, victims simply choose not to report, often because the act of reporting is time-consuming or because the victim does not see any benefit in reporting. Researchers that have studied discrepancies between victimization rates and reported crimes estimate that in half of all crimes, the victim fails to report the event to law enforcement (Pastore & Maguire, 2003, Table 3.33). More than half (52 percent) of assaults, for example, are never reported to police, just as 59 percent of all property crimes and 28 percent of robberies are never reported. Similarly, police never hear about 41 percent of household burglaries and 66 percent of thefts—even 43 percent of thefts involving losses of $250 or more. Rates of non-reporting are especially high for property crimes that result in minor losses, including attempted theft (63 percent not reported) and theft of property worth less than $50 (82 percent not reported).

Juveniles are probably disproportionately involved in minor offenses involving little or no harm to victims. Thus, a disproportionate number of juvenile crimes are most likely absent from official crime data. Interviewing juveniles directly could provide researchers with a more complete picture of the juvenile delinquency problem. Self-report measures,

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however, will never replace official data as a means of monitoring juvenile delinquency. The cost and complexity of conducting self-report studies restrict them to relatively small samples, and doubts about the possibility of willful deception by youthful research subjects cause some to dismiss the accuracy of their findings. Yet, self-reported measures are an important ingredient in our attempt to understand changes in the prevalence of juvenile-law-breaking.

The best-known source of self-reported delinquency measures is the juvenile drug abuse study Monitoring the Future, managed by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan (see http://www.monitoringthefuture.org). The study tracks the behaviors, attitudes, and values of high school students, focusing on their use of drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes. Each year since 1975, a national probability (i.e., random and representative) sample of 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade students has been asked a series of questions about illegal and risky behavior. One set of questions allows researchers to analyze the prevalence of law violations by American high school students over the previous 12 months. The questions are an important source of information about trends in juvenile delinquency.

The sampling frame used in Monitoring the Future (MTF) enables us to interpret the results as a national estimate of delinquency prevalence among high school students. As shown in TABLE 2-1, juvenile delinquency is very common among American youth. In recent years, between 8 and 10 percent of high school seniors reported that they had been apprehended by police at least once in the previous 12 months. More than a quarter of all youths reported having committed at least a minor theft within the past year, either shoplifting

TABLE 2-1 Percent of High School Seniors in the United States to Admit to at Least Some Behavior Within the Past 12 Months That Could Have Resulted in Arrest

	High School Graduation Class				
High School Seniors Admitting to Behavior Within Past 12 Months:	**1983**	**1988**	**1993**	**1998**	**2003**
Used a knife or gun or some other thing (like a club) to get something from a person	3%	3%	5%	4%	4%
Hurt someone badly enough to need bandages or a doctor	11	10	13	14	12
Gotten into a serious fight in school or at work	18	18	18	17	14
Taken something not belonging to you worth over $50	6	8	11	12	10
Taken something not belonging to you worth under $50	31	33	32	31	28
Taken something from a store without paying for it	26	30	31	30	27
Been arrested and taken to a police station	NA	NA	10	10	8

Source: Monitoring the Future, University of Michigan, presented in K. Maguire and A. Pastore, Editors. *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 2003* [Online], Table 3.43 [October 2008]. Data for 1983 and 1988 are from previous editions of the *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

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(27 percent) or theft of property valued at less than $50 (28 percent). Even in cases of more serious behavior, the number of self-reported delinquent acts was striking. More than one in 10 high school seniors (12 percent) reported having physically assaulted someone badly enough to require medical attention. One in 25 youths (4 percent) reported an act equivalent to armed robbery, using some form of weapon to take property from someone. The prevalence of delinquent behavior among high school seniors has been remarkably consistent over time. Comparable proportions of youth admitted to criminal acts whether they belonged to the graduating classes of 1983, 1993, or 2003.

One could argue that the MTF data series is not a fair representation of youthful offending because high school seniors are less likely to engage in delinquency than are youths in general. Quitting school is similar to delinquent behavior in that both are deviant behaviors rooted in the rejection of conventional beliefs and attitudes. If so, we would expect the MTF data to reflect a bias in the direction of less delinquency because most youths with the tendency to become school dropouts would have already dropped out by their senior year. Thus, the self-reported behaviors of high school seniors could actually underrepresent the prevalence of juvenile crime among all youths of that age.

Fortunately, there is another reliable source of self-reported delinquency data, and this source confirms the scale of delinquent behavior reported by the MTF sample. In 1997, the Bureau of Labor Statistics within the U.S. Department of Labor initiated a nationally representative survey of American youths. One of the topics of the survey was illegal behavior (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). The results of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) indicated that the lifetime prevalence of various delinquent behaviors among American 17-year-olds was as great as the levels suggested by MTF. According to the NLSY data, 37 percent of American youth commit vandalism at least once, 43 percent report having committed a theft involving property worth less than $50, 27 percent admit to an assault with intent to hurt seriously, and 16 percent admit to carrying a gun at some point.

Data from the NLSY may be used to examine behaviors within single-year age groups. For example, among 15-year-olds in the sample, 14 percent reported at least one act of vandalism, 13 percent admitted to at least one theft worth less than $50, 11 percent committed a serious assault, and 6 percent carried a handgun. In 1996 (the referent year for NLSY interviews in 1997), the resident population of 15-year-olds in the United States was approximately 3.9 million. Using the self-reported figures from the NLSY, one could ask how many 15-year-olds *could* have been arrested in 1996 had the police been able to detect and apprehend every juvenile offender. Recall that 11 percent of 15-year-olds in the NLSY reported having committed an assault in which they intended to inflict serious harm. This would suggest that 429,000 (11 percent of 3.9 million) 15-year-olds had committed at least one serious assault. Yet, police agencies across the country only made 300,000 juvenile assault arrests in 1996, including offenders of *all ages*. Even accounting for the possibility that some youth arrests may have cleared up more than one act of assault, the caseload of juveniles arrested for assault certainly would have been far larger if juvenile justice authorities were able to process all possible youth crimes.

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Summary of Self-Report Trends

While law enforcement reports of juvenile crime have fluctuated in recent decades, available self-reported data for juvenile crime show few substantial changes in the basic prevalence of delinquent behavior. According to the MTF study, the proportion of high school seniors that reported having committed a serious assault increased slightly from 1983 to 1998, from 11 to 14 percent, before falling to 12 percent in 2003. The percentage of high school seniors admitting to a theft worth more than $50 grew from 6 percent in 1983 to 12 percent in 1998 before dropping to 10 percent in 2003. For most behaviors, however, there was little significant change in 20 years. The proportion of youths reporting behavior akin to armed robbery vacillated between 3 and 5 percent. Serious fights were reported by 14 to 18 percent of high school seniors, and thefts under $50 were reported by as few as 28 percent and as high as 33 percent between 1983 and 2003. If we take the behavior of the MTF sample as an indicator of youth crime in America, we might fairly conclude that it has not changed substantially since the 1980s.

■ Youth Crime According to Official Data

Measuring delinquency with official data offers its own set of challenges. The workloads of law enforcement agencies and courts are in part the result of criminal activity, but they also reflect agency resources, policies, and practices. As we have just seen, data from the MTF study suggest that more than a quarter of all 17-year-olds in 2003 reported having done at least something that could have resulted in their arrest. In 2003, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the resident population of 17-year-olds in the United States was approximately 4.1 million. If 25 percent of these youths did something that could have resulted in their arrest during 2003, this suggests that there could have been 1 million arrests involving 17-year-olds that year. According to our calculations of national arrest estimates using FBI data, however, police nationwide made just over 500,000 arrests involving 17-year-olds in 2003. Thus, the total caseload of arrested 17-year-olds could have been twice as large as it was in 2003. This suggests that the scale of juvenile crime, when measured by official activities, could go up or down substantially, depending on the level of resources and personnel available to detect, apprehend, and prosecute young offenders.

It may be risky for researchers to use official data produced by the justice system to make inferences about changes in youth behavior. One example of this occurred during the late 1980s and 1990s. Juvenile arrests for drug offenses swelled *even though research studies showed largely flat or declining use of drugs by juveniles.* The difference suggested that law enforcement agencies had begun to enforce drug laws more strictly against juveniles. If researchers had only the police data with which to analyze juvenile drug offenses, however, they would have concluded that the drug problem itself had become much worse. Indeed, it appears from the trend toward tougher enforcement of drug laws and sanctioning of drug offenders that policy makers focused almost exclusively on the results of studies that relied on police data. That situation is striking given that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the federal agency that compiles such data, recommends that people exercise great caution when

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analyzing and interpreting official crime data because a wide range of factors other than the incidence of criminal behavior can affect the data. In an FBI report for 1998, the agency listed a number of these factors (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999, pp. v–iv):

- the administrative strength and investigative emphases of law enforcement agencies;
- policies and practices of other agencies (e.g., prosecutors, judges, corrections);
- citizen attitudes toward crime and local crime reporting practices;
- resident mobility and local commuting patterns;
- economic conditions, and cultural, educational, and recreational factors;
- family conditions (e.g., divorce, family cohesiveness);
- even the local climate.

If the use of official information entails so many risks and can be so easily misinterpreted, why do researchers use it to analyze changes in juvenile crime? Official data represent the most comprehensive source of crime information for researchers. Such data are widely collected and disseminated, and in some cases they include nearly every jurisdiction in the country. Researchers can use the large databases of law enforcement and the courts to analyze even rare criminal events, and they can track changes in the volume of justice system activity over time. For these reasons, official crime statistics are the most widely used and influential data about juvenile crime.

The most comprehensive source of crime information in the United States is the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) series. Maintained by the FBI, the UCR data represent thousands of separate data files contributed by police agencies across the country.[2] When Americans hear about changes in the crime rate, they are most likely getting new figures from the UCR. A compilation of data from the UCR is published each year in a document called Crime in the United States (see http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm#cius). The Crime in the United States (CIUS) report and the various preliminary and supplemental reports associated with it are the primary sources of crime information for the nation's news media, government agencies, and elected officials. The direction and magnitude of trends reported in CIUS have a profound influence on the formation of public policy whether at the local, state, or federal level.

CIUS contains two data elements used to track the volume of juvenile crime. The first element is the number of arrests involving young people under age 18. We will refer to these as "juvenile arrests," although not all persons under age 18 are legally juveniles. The second element is the number of crimes reported to police that are "cleared" (or solved) with the arrest of a juvenile, or more specifically, by the arrest of one or more persons, none of whom is age 18 or older. It is important to keep this distinction in mind because the two measures can be very different in how they assess juveniles' relative contribution to the crime problem (Snyder, 2008, p. 2). Knowing the number of arrests that involve juveniles is useful for monitoring the relative proportion of juveniles in the workload of police agencies across the country. Tracking the number of crimes cleared by the arrests of juveniles (juvenile "clearances") is more useful for gauging the extent to which juveniles may account for the actual

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level of crime in America, or at least that portion of crime coming to the attention of law enforcement. In general, the proportion of arrests that involve juveniles tends to be higher than the proportion of crimes cleared by arrests involving juveniles, in part reflecting the greater likelihood of juveniles to commit crimes in groups (see TABLE 2-2).

Development of the UCR

Until the 1970s, it was not possible to rely on Crime in the United States for an understanding of the actual volume of juvenile crime, either arrests or clearances. Before the late 1960s, for example, the definition of theft used by the UCR program excluded offenses involving small amounts of property (i.e., less than $50). Small thefts were simply not included in the official crime data. Because juveniles are disproportionately involved in low-value thefts, the exclusion of such offenses most likely suppressed the reported number of juvenile theft offenses in the UCR. When the FBI began to include reports of small-amount thefts, the number of offenses reported for juveniles would have increased relatively more than the number for adults.

Even with improvements made during the 1960s, however, the CIUS reports continued to have limited value for understanding the scale of juvenile delinquency. Until the 1970s, the population covered by the UCR data collection program varied considerably from year to year. For administrative or technical reasons, not all police agencies were able to participate in the UCR program. Many participated but could not provide the FBI with data for an entire year. For the CIUS report, the FBI would accept data from any law enforcement agency that was able to participate for at least six months in a given year. If an agency could send data for the months of January through June, the UCR program would include the jurisdiction

TABLE 2–2 Proportion of Youth Arrests Compared to Crimes Cleared

	Juveniles as Percentage of 2005 Arrests	Juveniles as Percentage of 2005 Clearances
Violent Crime Index:	**16**	**12**
Murder	9	5
Forcible rape	15	11
Robbery	25	15
Aggravated assault	14	12
Property Crime Index:	**26**	**18**
Burglary	26	16
Larceny-Theft	26	19
Motor vehicle theft	26	15
Arson	49	42

Source: Snyder, Howard N. (2008). *Juvenile Arrests 2005*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (NCJ 218096).

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in its data files. Of course, the amount of juvenile crime in that jurisdiction would appear to be roughly half of what it should have been. This rendered the number of arrests reported in CIUS essentially non-interpretable.[3] The FBI continued to work on these problems, and by the 1980s the UCR sampling coverage was more reliable; researchers began to use the data to calculate the actual number of arrests in a given year. Before the 1980s, the only valid analysis of juvenile arrests that was possible using the CIUS data was to estimate the proportion of all arrests that involved juveniles. Given these caveats, what can the data from the UCR program tell us about trends in youth crime?

Clearance Rates

As described earlier, there are two types of juvenile crime data available from the UCR program. The most well known UCR data measure arrests made by law enforcement agencies, but another important source of information tracks the crimes that are "cleared" by those arrests. A crime is cleared when someone is arrested and charged with the offense. A single crime can be cleared by several arrests, or several crimes may be cleared by a single arrest. Clearance statistics are an important measure of juvenile involvement in crime because they measure offenses, whereas arrest statistics count law enforcement actions.

In the UCR program, a law enforcement agency reports that an offense is cleared by arrest, or solved for crime reporting purposes, when all of the following three conditions have been met for at least one person (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008):

- Arrested
- Charged with the commission of the offense
- Turned over to the court for prosecution (whether following arrest, court summons, or police notice)

In 2007, arrests of juveniles (or youth under age 18) made up 16 percent of all arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses, but juveniles accounted for just 12 percent of the Violent Index crimes cleared that year (see **Figure 2–2**). Adult arrests cleared 88 percent of all violent crimes in 2007. Similarly, juveniles accounted for 26 percent of all arrests involving any of the offenses included in the Property Crime Index, but these arrests cleared just 18 percent of Property Index crimes reported. Adults were responsible for 82 percent of the Property Index offenses cleared by arrest. Long-term trends in juvenile clearance rates are important in an effort to assess the overall trajectory of youth crime since 1980. The proportion of all crimes cleared by the arrest of juveniles appears to be cyclical, falling during the 1980s and climbing through the mid-1990s. The juvenile proportion of property crime clearances began to fall again through the mid-2000s, but clearances of violent crimes showed a different pattern. Although there was a modest drop in the juvenile proportion of violent crime clearances from 1994 to 2001—from 14.2 to 12.1 percent of all clearances—the juvenile percentage did not change substantially after 2001. This pattern was not shared by all offenses within the Violent Crime Index. The juvenile proportion of murder clearances followed a trajectory that was very similar to that of violent crime arrests, as will be seen next. Juvenile murder clearances grew throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s and then fell just as sharply through

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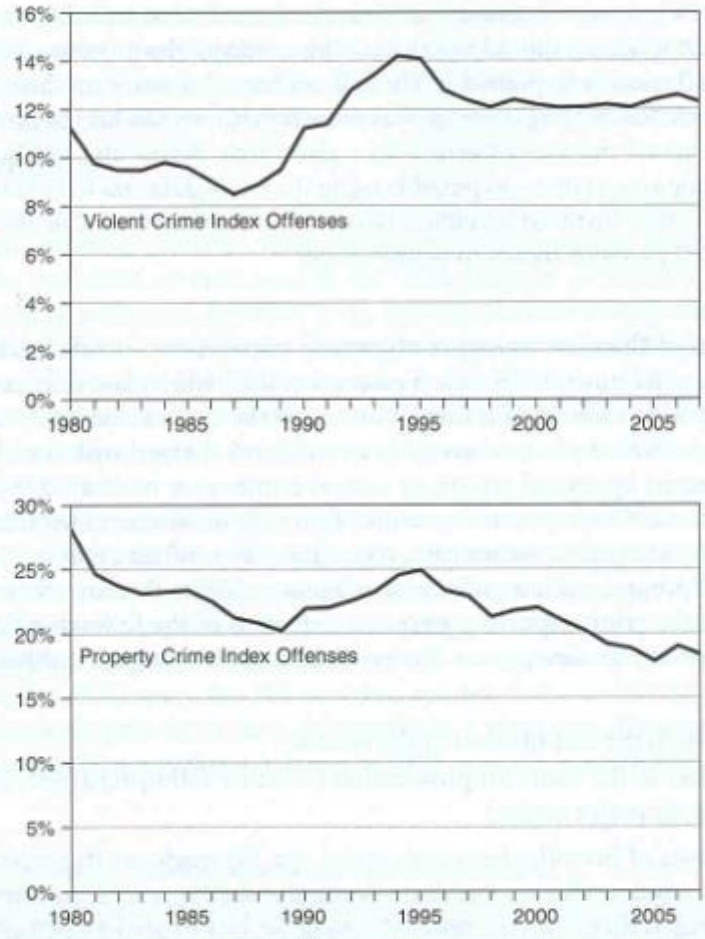

Figure 2–2 Percentage of Crime Clearances Involving Juveniles: 1980–2007

Juveniles accounted for an increasing proportion of both violent crime and property crime clearances during the early 1990s, but when juvenile clearances dropped for property crime after 2000, the trend for violent crime was relatively unchanged.

Source: Crime in the United States, 1980–2007. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice.

2004 (see **Figure 2–3**). The trend in juvenile clearances for aggravated assault was quite different, remaining essentially unchanged after the mid-1990s.

Arrests

We next consider the juvenile arrests reported by law enforcement agencies throughout the U.S. between 1980 and 2007 (see **Figure 2–4**). The CIUS reports contain no national estimates of juvenile arrests, only data for the jurisdictions included in the reporting sample each year. In the 1990s, however, the United States Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) began publishing national estimates of juvenile arrests.[4]

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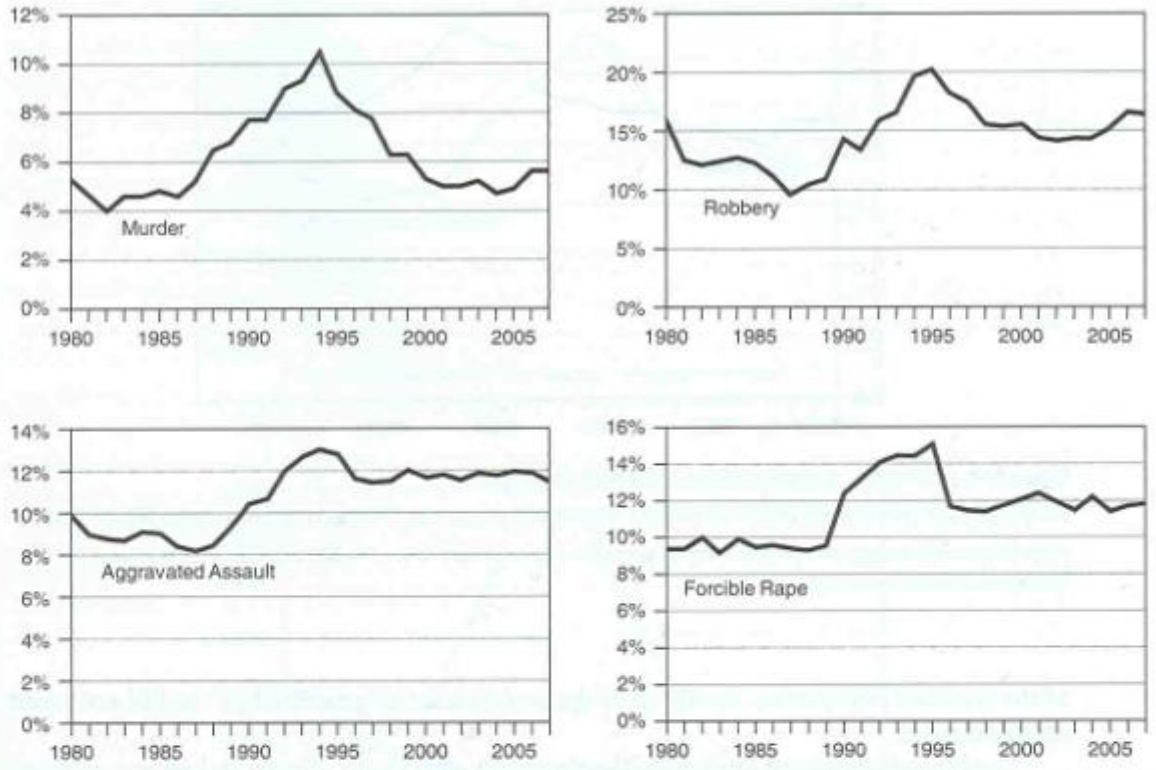

Figure 2–3 Percentage of Crime Clearances Involving Juveniles: 1980–2007

Juveniles accounted for a growing proportion of all violent crime clearances during the mid-1980s and early 1990s. By the mid-2000s the proportion of murder clearances involving juveniles had returned nearly to the levels of the 1980s, while juvenile clearances for other violent crimes remained higher.

Source: Crime in the United States, 1980–2007. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice.

The arrest estimates shown here were calculated by the authors using the same methodology supported by OJJDP.

More specifically, the national arrest estimates presented here (as well as the per capita rates based upon those estimates) were calculated by the authors using data from the UCR program of the FBI. The FBI collects annual information on arrests made by law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. Data are collected from jurisdictions containing a majority of the U.S. population, typically between 70 and 80 percent of residents nationwide. The primary publication of UCR data, *Crime in the United States*, is based upon data from those police agencies able to participate fully in the UCR program each year. Full participation requires that agencies submit their data to the FBI on time, and their data must cover all arrests for a minimum number of months during the year. In 2007, for example, the jurisdictions that participated fully in the UCR program represented 75 percent

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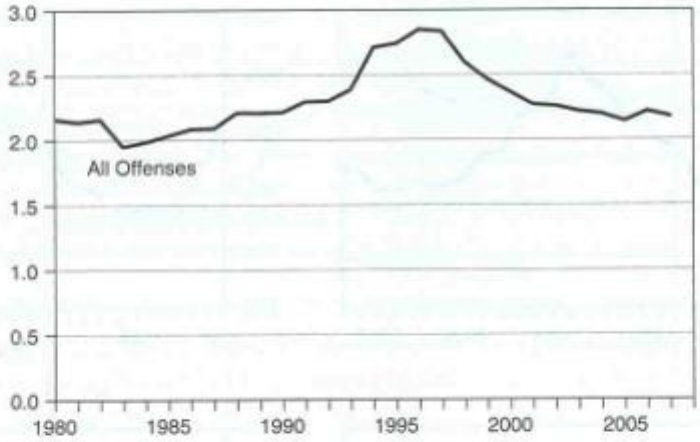

Figure 2–4 Total Number of Juvenile Arrests: 1980–2007 (in Millions)

The total number of juvenile arrests grew from just under 2 million in 1983 to more than 2.8 million in 1996 before falling through 2004.

Source: National arrest estimates calculated by the authors using data from *Crime in the United States, 1980–2007*. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice.

of the national population. Nearly all of the arrest statistics generated by the FBI are based on this sample.

The FBI calculates just one national estimate for each major offense. It does not calculate national estimates for different age groups. To present national arrest estimates for various groups and to calculate per capita arrest rates for those groups, this chapter relies on the FBI's estimate of total arrests for each major offense. It uses the data reported by UCR-participating jurisdictions to determine the proportion of arrests for each offense that involved individuals of various ages. That proportion is then applied to the FBI's national estimate for each offense. Arrest rates are determined by dividing each national arrest estimate over the appropriate population data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The estimates show that juvenile arrests began to climb steeply in the mid-1980s and continued to rise through the mid-1990s, suggesting that juvenile crime was increasing rapidly. The data shown in Figure 2–4, however, include many minor and miscellaneous offenses that may not be reported reliably by police agencies across the country. The growth in juvenile arrests that extends from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s could be due to a number of influences other than the behavior of juveniles. These could include population fluctuations, definitional changes in how law enforcement categorizes juvenile offenses, as well as changes in police enforcement policies and practices. A more accurate examination of arrest trends would focus on a few, select offenses that are more consistently and reliably reported to the FBI (i.e., the offenses included in the FBI's Crime Index).

Increasing arrest numbers are always of greatest concern when they appear in the violent offense categories (see **Figure 2–5**). Between 1985 and 1995, the number of juvenile arrests for

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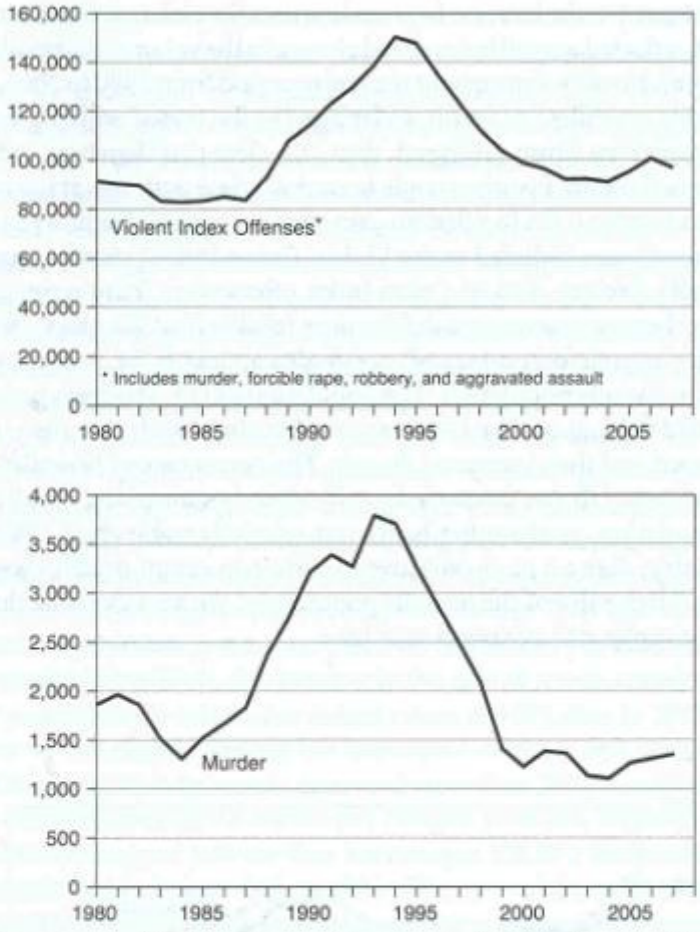

Figure 2–5 Juvenile Arrests for Violent Offenses: 1980–2007

Juvenile arrests for violent offenses climbed sharply from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s and then declined sharply through 2004.

Source: National arrest estimates calculated by the authors using data from *Crime in the United States, 1980–2007*. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice.

Violent Index offenses (i.e., murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) grew 77 percent. During the same period, juvenile arrests for murder jumped 114 percent. By the early 1990s, these spikes in juvenile arrest numbers commanded the attention of the nation's policy makers, news media, and the public. Throughout the rest of the decade, the juvenile justice system was widely criticized, and virtually every state in the country began to impose drastic reforms with the hope that they could stem the tide of juvenile crime and especially juvenile violence. Was the growing rate of juvenile violence during this period as severe as it seemed, or was it in part a function of demographic changes and other factors?

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As shown in **Figure 2–6**, the increase in juvenile arrests for violent crime from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s reflected a small but marked change in the volume of juvenile arrests among all types of offenses. Notably, throughout the entire period from 1980 to 2007, the proportion of arrests involving juveniles (or youth under age 18) fluctuated within a relatively narrow range of 15 to 20 percent. From this trend, then, it is clear that there was not a fundamental change in the contribution of young people to overall crime patterns, at least as measured by arrest data. Just as notable is the fact that the same pattern can be seen in arrests for all offenses and in arrests for offenses included in the Violent Crime Index (murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault). Because Violent Crime Index offenses are more serious, the tabulation and reporting of these arrests were probably more reliable than for other offenses.

Trends in the juvenile percentage of arrests also appear to be at odds with the growth and decline of the juvenile population. The population of U.S. residents between the ages of 10 and 17 declined throughout the 1980s, a period during which juvenile arrests for violent crime first dropped and then increased sharply. The percentage of juveniles among violent crime arrests continued to rise through the mid-1990s before falling rapidly through 2002. The juvenile population, on the other hand, was relatively stable from 1990 through 2005. Does this mean that changes in violent juvenile crime in recent decades were not simply a reflection of the relative size of the juvenile population? We next examine this possibility by analyzing the per capita rate of arrests over time.

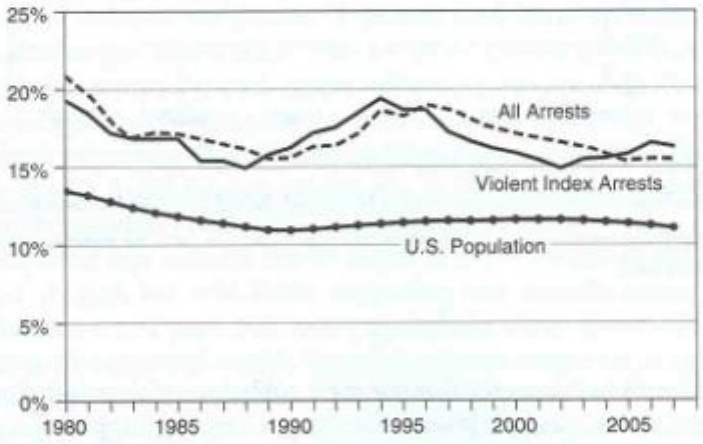

Figure 2–6 Proportion of Arrests Involving Juvenile (Ages 10–17): 1980–2007

The increase in youth violence during the late 1980s and early 1990s was produced by a relatively small increase in the proportion of all arrests that involved juveniles, and the increase was seen among all types of juvenile crime, not violent crime alone.

Source: National arrest estimates calculated by the authors using data from *Crime in the United States, 1980–2007*. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice.

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Arrest Rates

Arrest rates (i.e., arrests per 100,000 juveniles) allow us to examine the volume of juvenile arrests while controlling for changes in the juvenile population (youths ages 10 to 17 years). Criminologists have long observed the relationship between age and crime and posited that juveniles will be nearly always overrepresented in the arrest statistics produced by law enforcement agencies (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983). In 2007, according to estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, youths ages 10 to 17 years represented 11 percent of the total population of the United States. If they were arrested at the same rate as everyone else, they would have accounted for 11 percent of arrests. Instead, they accounted for 15 percent of all arrests (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008). Moreover, youth younger than age 18 years represented 16 percent of arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses and 26 percent of arrests for Property Crime Index offenses. So, youth appear to contribute disproportionately to overall arrests, especially property arrests.

What do UCR juvenile arrest figures look like when we control for the size of the population? In other words, how did *per capita arrest rates* change in recent decades? If we begin by considering the rate of juvenile arrests for Violent Index offenses, it is clear that juvenile arrests increased between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s and then fell through the mid-2000s, independently of the size of the juvenile population (see **Figure 2–7**). In fact, the violent crime arrest rate grew more than 60 percent between 1987 and 1994, from approximately 300 arrests per 100,000 juveniles to just over 500 arrests per 100,000. With a juvenile population of roughly 30 million, this increase in the rate of arrests translated into approximately 65,000 more juvenile arrests for violent crime in 1994 than in 1987.

The pattern varied slightly among the individual offenses that make up the Violent Crime Index. The rate of murder arrests increased more than 200 percent between 1984 and 1993, to a rate of approximately 13 arrests per 100,000 juveniles. Between 1993 and 2000, the murder arrest rate dropped to fewer than 4 arrests per 100,000, the lowest level of juvenile murder arrests experienced since before 1980. The rate of juvenile arrests for murder remained relatively stable after 2000, fluctuating within a narrow band around 4 arrests per 100,000 between 2000 and 2007.

Robbery arrest rates followed nearly the same pattern as did murder arrests until 2004. The rate of juvenile arrests for robbery fell more than 50 percent between 1994 and 2000. The rate appeared to be stabilizing after 2000, but between 2004 and 2005 the arrest rate began to climb once again, reaching a rate that exceeded 100 arrests for every 100,000 juveniles in the population. The increase stopped after 2006, however, and the robbery arrest rate dropped slightly in 2007.

The pattern of juvenile arrest rates for aggravated assault and forcible rape differed from the rates of murder and robbery. The arrest rate for aggravated assault, for example, more than doubled between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s. After peaking in 1994, however, the arrest rate dropped more slowly. By 2000, the aggravated assault arrest rate remained substantially higher than it had been during the early 1980s. Yet, the arrest rate continued to fall after 2000 and did so more consistently than either the murder or robbery arrest rates. Because aggravated assaults usually account for more than half of all juvenile arrests for Violent Index

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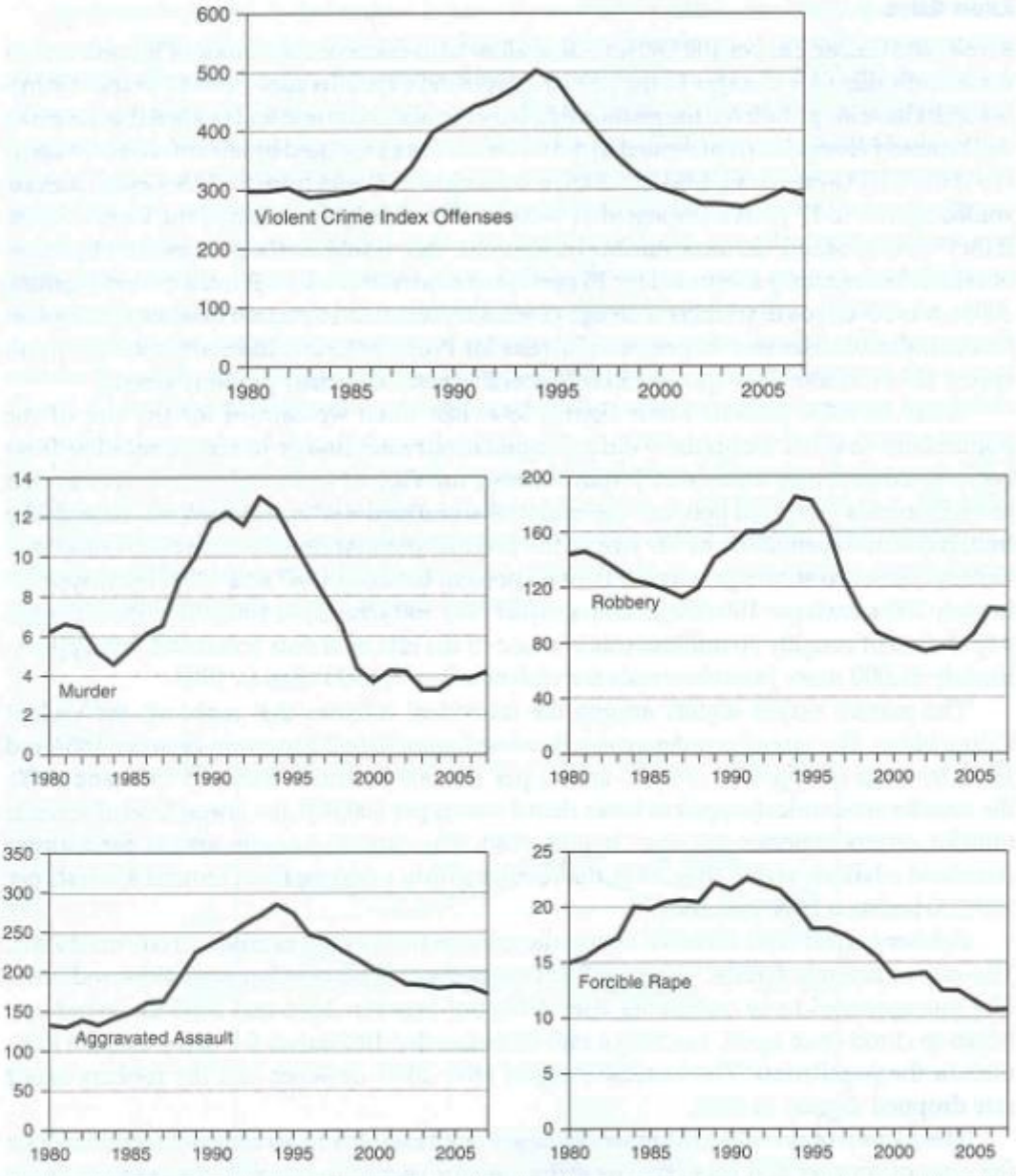

Figure 2–7 Juvenile Arrests for Violent Offenses per 100,000 Youth (Ages 10–17): 1980–2007

Juvenile arrest rates for offenses included in the Violent Crime Index increased markedly from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s before falling just as sharply. Increases in robbery arrest rates started in 2004 but appeared to have ended as of 2007.

Source: National arrest estimates calculated by the authors using data from *Crime in the United States, 1980–2007*. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice.

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offenses, the slower decline of aggravated assault arrests caused the total violent crime rate for juveniles to depart from the pattern seen in murder and robbery arrests.

Contrasted with the trend in violent juvenile crime since 1980, arrest rates for Property Crime Index offenses (burglary, larceny-theft, auto theft, and arson) took different forms between 1980 and 2007 (see **Figure 2–8**). The juvenile arrest rate for all Property Crime Index offenses fell nearly consistently between 1988 and 2006, reaching a rate that was less than half the size of earlier years. The two largest categories in the Property Crime Index are arrests for burglary and larceny-theft. Burglary arrests dropped sharply and almost uniformly during the period from 1980 to 2005 before rising slightly in 2006 and leveling out in 2007. Larceny-theft arrests did not begin to fall until the mid-1990s but then assumed a trajectory similar to that of burglary arrests. Overall, the trend in serious juvenile property crime for the last two decades shows a marked decline. Juvenile arrests for weapon and drug offenses exhibited patterns more akin to those of the violent offenses (see **Figure 2–9**).

When public concerns about violent crime are on the rise, policy makers naturally turn their attention to violent youth crime, and this is certainly appropriate. Violent crime is disproportionately associated with young people, but young in this context means younger than age 20 years or even younger than age 25 years. It is not accurate to describe the increases in violent youth crime between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s as a wave of "juvenile" violence (i.e., crime by offenders younger than age 18 years). Of all violent crime arrests in 1995, for example, 18 percent (or 148,000 arrests) involved juveniles younger than age 18 years, but 27 percent (or just over 215,000 arrests) involved young adults between ages 18 and 24 years. Together, all young people through age 24 years accounted for 45 percent of violent crime arrests that year. When youth crime rates are broken down by age, nearly identical patterns emerge for young adults between age 18 and 24 years, and juveniles younger than age 18 years (see **Figure 2–10**). Similar trends are seen for all age groups, but the greatest volatility in violent crime was associated with the behavior of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Arrest rates for youth ages 15 to 24 years were higher than arrest rates for other age groups throughout the period between 1980 and 2007.

The increases in murder and robbery arrest rates between 1985 and 1995 were particularly striking for offenders between the ages of 15 and 20 years, and half of these youth (those ages 18 to 20) were already under the jurisdiction of the adult justice system. This suggests that policy efforts to curb violent crime should not be the province of either the juvenile or criminal justice system. Rather, reducing youth crime requires policies that cut across legal boundaries to address all youth, juveniles younger than age 18 years, and young adults age 18 years or older. If we acknowledge the fact that young adults are already under the jurisdiction of criminal court and that their crime numbers tend to move in the same direction as those of juveniles, it seems obvious that moving ever-larger numbers of juvenile offenders into criminal court would have few benefits in terms of crime reduction.

Summary of Arrest Trends

Relative to their representation in the population at large, juveniles contribute disproportionately to arrests, especially arrests for property crime, and this overrepresentation has

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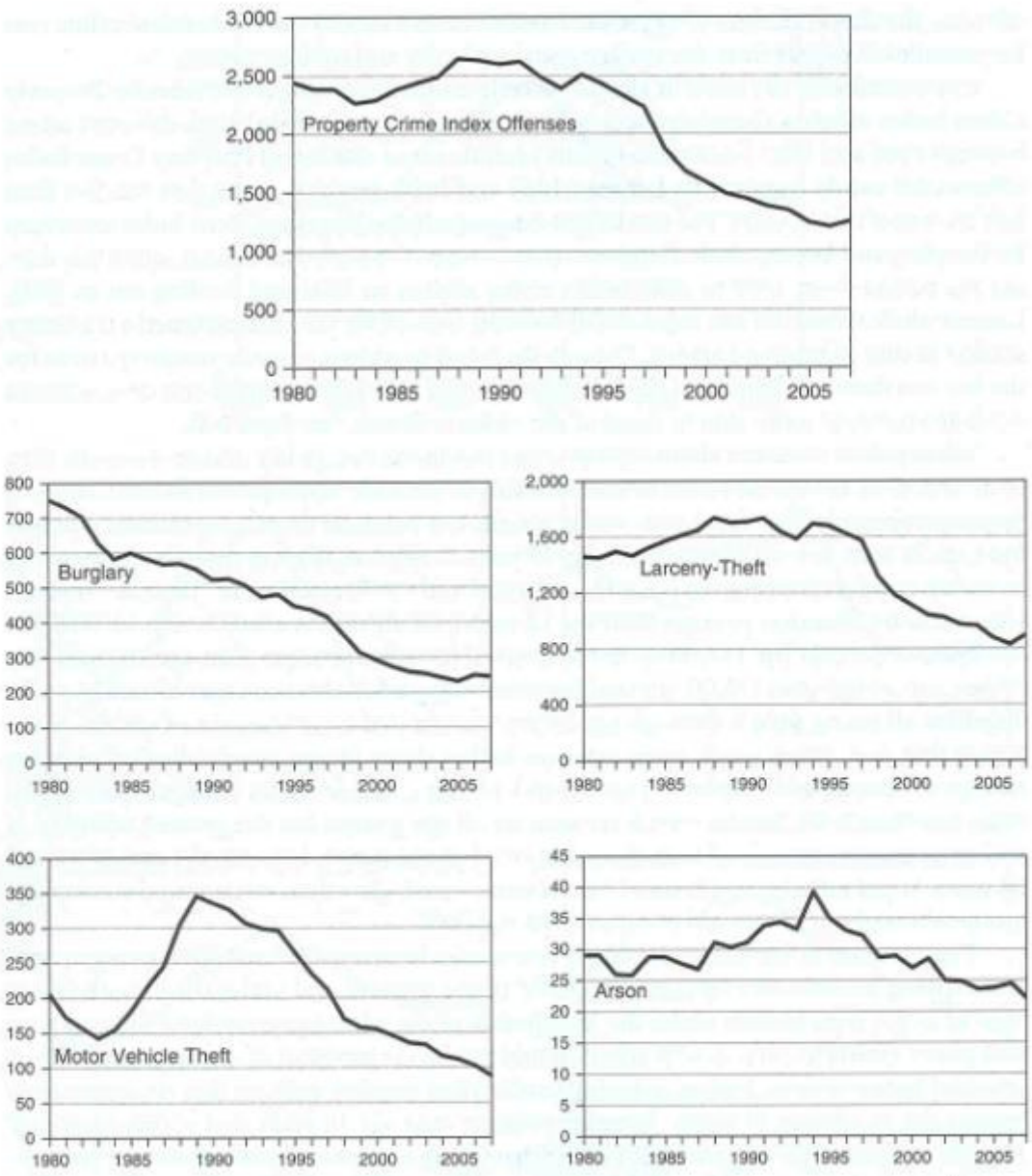

Figure 2–8 Juvenile Arrests for Property Crime Offenses per 100,000 Youth (Ages 10–17): 1980–2007

Juvenile arrest rates for offenses in the Property Crime Index plummeted during recent decades. Between 2006 and 2007, however, the long-term decline ended due to increases in juvenile arrests for burglary and larceny-theft.

Source: National arrest estimates calculated by the authors using data from *Crime in the United States, 1980–2007*. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice.

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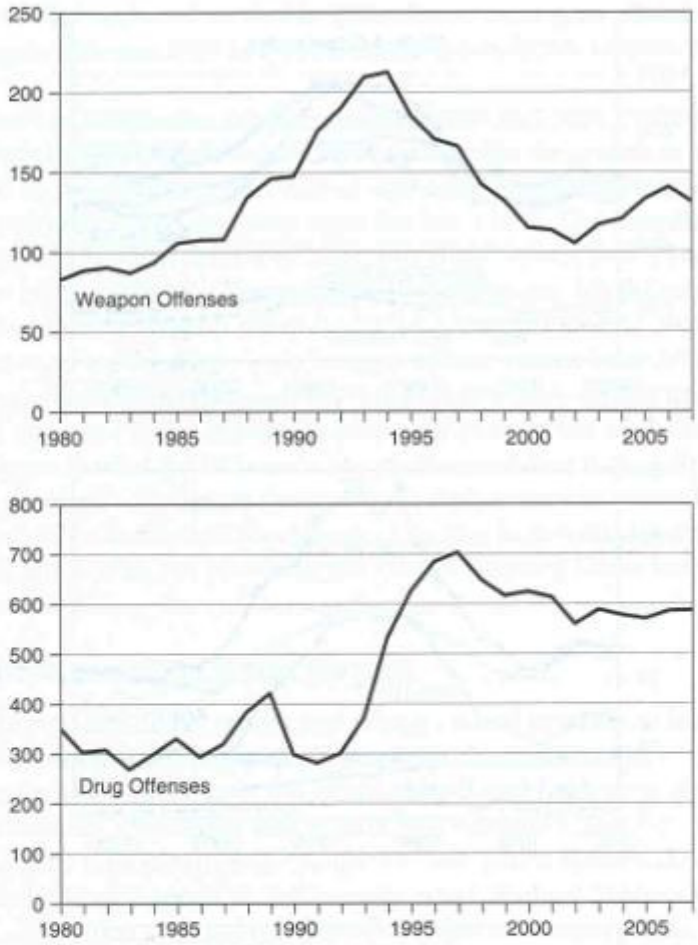

Figure 2–9 Juvenile Arrests for Weapon and Drug Offense per 100,000 Youth (Ages 10–17): 1980–2007

Juvenile arrest rates for weapon offenses followed the pattern seen in robbery arrests, rebounding after 2002 before dropping again between 2006 and 2007. Arrests for juvenile drug offenses have generally fallen since the mid-1990s but remain at levels far above those of the 1980s.

Source: National arrest estimates calculated by the authors using data from *Crime in the United States, 1980–2007*, Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice.

remained relatively constant over time. The situation looks somewhat different when we focus on arrest rates, which adjust for the number of youth in society. After steep increases during the late 1980s and early 1990s (increases that were similar for adults), the rate of juvenile arrests for violent crime fell just as precipitously through 2004, returning to levels not seen since the 1980s. Between 1994 and 2004, the violent crime arrest rate for juveniles dropped 46 percent to approximately 270 arrests per 100,000 juveniles. The crime

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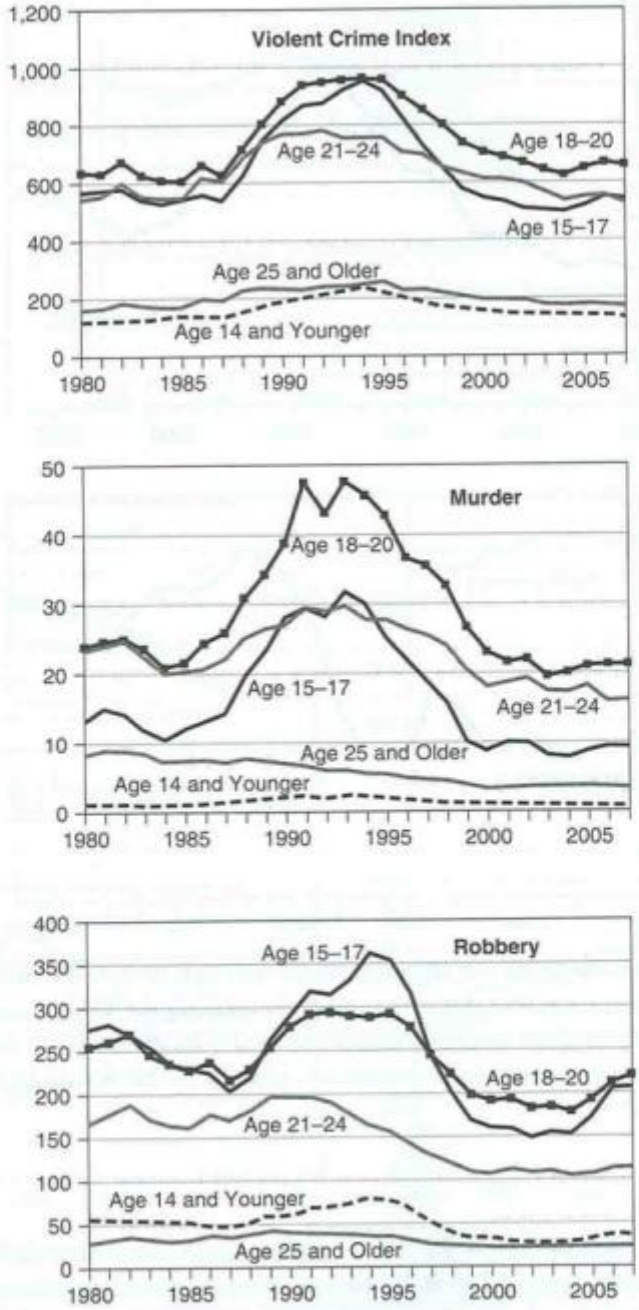

Figure 2–10 Arrest Rates for Violent Crime Broken Down by Age: 1980–2007

Juvenile arrest rates for violent crime resemble the rates for young adults ages 18 to 24 years.

Source: Crime in the United States, 1980–2007. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice.

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drop among juveniles appeared to end in 2004. Arrest rates grew slightly between 2004 and 2005 and again between 2005 and 2006, reaching nearly 300 violent crime arrests per 100,000 youth.

After two years of worrisome increases between 2004 and 2006, the juvenile arrest rate for violent offenses fell between 2006 and 2007. In particular, the growth in juvenile robbery arrests appeared to have stopped. The rate of aggravated assault arrests continued to fall through 2007, reaching a level not seen since the late 1980s. The juvenile arrest rate for murder grew slightly between 2006 and 2007, but when viewed in a 25-year context the murder rate was fairly stable, as it hovered around 4 arrests per 100,000 youth ages 10–17. The juvenile arrest rate for weapon offenses also fell between 2006 and 2007. This was particularly good news given the steep rise in weapon offense arrests from 2002 to 2006.

The best way to describe arrest trends for violent youth crime during the mid-2000s was to say that they appeared to be stabilizing after a 10-year period of decline and that the declines run counter to what the increase in the youth population nationally would have led us to expect. The generally good news about violent youth crime was contradicted somewhat by what appeared to be the end of the long-term decline in juvenile property crime. After falling every year since 1994, the juvenile arrest rate for property crime index offenses grew between 2006 and 2007.

■ Youth Crime According to Victim Surveys

As mentioned above, data about arrests and crimes cleared by arrest at least partly reflect the activity of law enforcement agencies rather than the incidence of crime itself. There always is a great deal of crime that is not detected by police (e.g., most illegal drug sales), and these crimes are not reflected in official data. Juvenile court caseloads, for example, are determined largely by referrals from the police. In 1960, police nationwide only referred 49 percent of juveniles they arrested to the juvenile court (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1961). The rest were either released or referred to other community agencies. By 1995, in contrast, police referred 66 percent of arrested juveniles to the juvenile court (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1996). This change in police handling would increase juvenile court caseloads even if juvenile crime itself were decreasing. One way to examine changes in youth crime while controlling for the level of activity by police and court officials is to review the findings of victimization surveys.

The U.S. Bureau of the Census began a National Crime Survey (NCS) in 1972. The program conducts regular interviews with a large, representative sample of the nation's households to generate estimates of the actual level of crime in American communities. Managed by the Bureau of Justice Statistics within the Department of Justice, the survey has been redesigned several times and is now known as the National Crime Victimization Survey. The NCVS has become an essential source of information on criminal victimization. In each survey, subjects answer a range of questions about the frequency, characteristics, and consequences of criminal victimization within their households. Just as political polls are able

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to track voter preferences, the NCVS is able to describe with a considerable degree of accuracy the incidence of crime in the nation as a whole.

Many Americans would be surprised to learn that, according to the NCVS, overall crime in the United States has been largely declining since the mid-1990s (see **Figure 2–11**). On the whole, Americans are far less likely to be the victim of a crime today than they were in the 1980s and early 1990s. The chances of being the victim of a property crime have dropped steadily. Theft victimizations, for example, dropped 69 percent between 1980 and 2005, from 378 thefts per 1,000 households to slightly more than 116 theft victimizations per 1,000 households. The burglary rate in 2005 was just under 30 victimizations per 1,000 households,

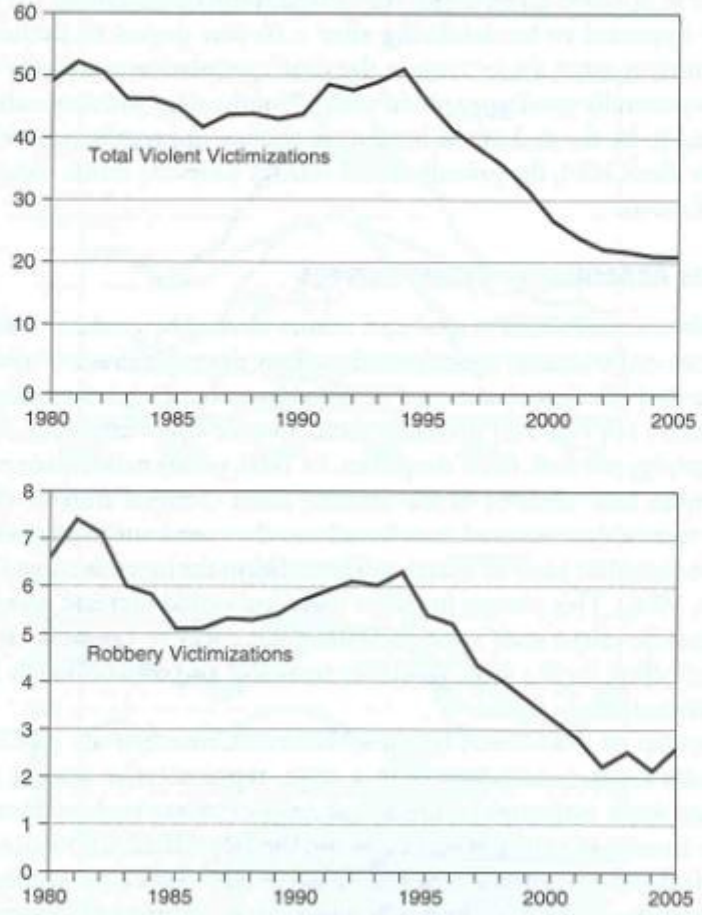

Figure 2–11 Crime Victimizations per 1,000 Americans: 1980–2005

The total rate of violent crime victimization in the United States plummeted after rising between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s.

Source: National Crime Victimization Survey. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. Internet: http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/cvict.htm

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about a third the rate of 1980 when 101 out of 1,000 households experienced burglary. Even for violent crimes, victimizations dropped steadily after the mid-1990s. The total rate of violent victimizations reported by American households fell by more than half between 1980 and 2005, from 49 to 21 victimizations per 1,000. Robbery victimizations were also down, from 6.6 to 2.6 victimizations per 1,000 households.

Victimization by Juveniles

The NCVS is a more complete accounting of crime than the UCR because it includes crimes not often reported by victims or recorded by police. This completeness is a great advantage for many research efforts, but it can sometimes be a disadvantage. The completeness of the NCVS is achieved in part by including many less serious offenses. In particular, the NCVS includes many offenses where victims do not bother to call the police, or where the police handle the situation without making a formal report. Juveniles may commit more of these offenses than do adults. Thus, there may be a tendency for the NCVS to overrepresent juveniles' contribution to the total level of crime. This may be especially true in crime categories subject to changing social and legal contexts (e.g., family assaults).

The relative changes in youth violence as detected by the UCR during the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as the subsequent decline, are confirmed by the NCVS (see **Figure 2–12**). The rate of serious violent crimes by juveniles as reported by the NCVS national sample fluctuated between 2,500 and 3,000 violent victimizations for every 100,000 juveniles ages 10–17 throughout most of the 1980s. The rate then increased sharply. In 1989, Americans reported 2,974 violent victimizations by juvenile offenders for every 100,000 households. Between 1989 and 1993, the rate jumped 43 percent to 4,262 victimizations per 100,000.

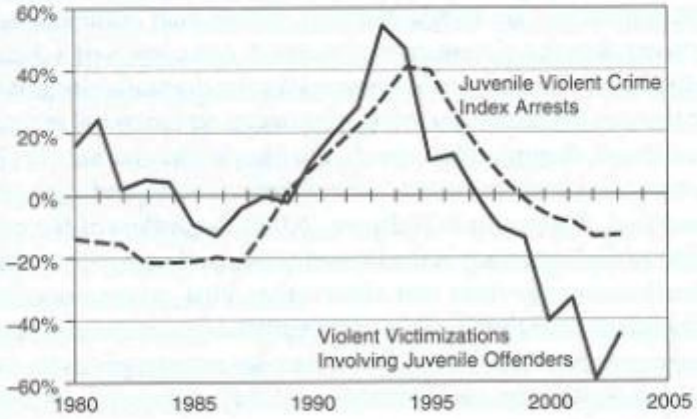

Figure 2–12 Percent Difference in Violent Crime by Juveniles: 1980–2003

The relative changes in violent crime by juveniles are apparent in both official data and victimization reports.

Source: Snyder, H. N. and Sickmund, M. (2006). *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (NCJ 212906).

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This spike suggested that perceptions of growing juvenile violence in the early 1990s were not due entirely to changes in the juvenile population or to changes in law enforcement practices but to a true increase in juvenile crime. A greater proportion of juveniles appeared to have committed acts of violence at that time, even if we control for the size of the juvenile population (by considering per capita rates) and for possible changes in police diligence (by considering victimization data rather than police data). If we examine juvenile victimizations and juvenile arrests simply in terms of the percentage deviation from long-term trends, we can see that the changes in juvenile crime were a reflection of crime trends in general. The pattern of increases and decreases in juvenile victimizations during the past 20 years is clearly visible, and the pattern is parallel to that of the relative changes in juvenile arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses.

Conclusion

Popular beliefs about ever-worsening youth crime do not appear to be consistent with an objective analysis of past trends. It is clear, however, that something happened in the United States during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The scale and severity of juvenile violence increased sharply for nearly a decade. In fact, all violence—including that of both adults and juveniles—increased during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Even so, between 1985 and 1995, it would have been justifiable for the public to believe that both youth and adults were becoming more violent every year. However, the increasing violence was short-lived. Rates of violence soon returned to previous levels or even continued to fall lower than at any time since 1980. Property crime by youth—a problem of far larger scale—declined even more sharply throughout this period, although falling rates of property crime appeared to be ending as of 2007. Notably, policy makers did not heed the drop in crime as a cause for de-escalating their emphasis on "get tough" policies. Indeed, that emphasis continued largely unabated in the years after the violent crime returned to the levels of a decade earlier.

Criminologists have proposed various reasons for the dramatic rise and fall in American crime rates over the past 25 years. The most persuasive explanations include the influence of economic conditions, demographic trends, changes in the market for illegal drugs, the use of firearms, expanded imprisonment, policing innovations, and changing social norms regarding violence (e.g., Blumstein & Wallman, 2006). Regardless of the cause, the sudden growth and decline of violent crime in the United States underscore that crime rates are not fixed. Two implications emerge from that observation. First, crime, even violent crime, is a social problem that varies over time, and this suggests that crime is amenable to intervention. Second, the American experience during recent decades encourages us to discard the popular notion that rising youth crime is inevitable, and that each generation of youth is more criminal than the last.

A central question remains: "How should communities respond to serious youth crime?" The relatively few juveniles who commit serious crime represent a challenge for their families,

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their neighborhoods, and their society, but it is probably the same challenge faced in previous decades and even previous centuries. Policy makers in search of more effective ways to meet this challenge do not have to invent an entirely new approach to crime reduction. They just need to improve upon the methods already available for dealing with youth crime and to focus on those that likely will yield the greatest returns.

A rational approach to youth crime policy would begin by attempting to quantify the amount and distribution of juvenile crime using multiple methods so as to avoid misallocating scarce resources. It would include broad prevention efforts targeted at all youth, but with a special focus on economically and socially vulnerable youth and those at a high risk of engaging in delinquency. A rational approach also would devote a large portion of our crime-fighting resources to early intervention efforts with first-time offenders. Early intervention would help avoid stigmatizing youth and would not draw them prematurely into the formal justice system; formal court processing should be avoided where possible because it may just as easily increase subsequent delinquency as reduce it (Bernburg & Krohn, 2003). This consideration is especially relevant when we consider the application of punitive sanctioning policies toward young drug offenders in a context in which, by objective measures, illegal drug use among young people did not, during the 1980s and 1990s, increase at nearly the rate that drug arrests did (Butts & Roman, 2004). Finally, a rational approach to youth crime would reserve the most punitive and expensive sanctions and programs (e.g., incarceration) for youth that have already shown a propensity for serious and violent crime. Such efforts would not focus on punishment alone but would include education, vocational training, and various types of treatment, as doing so increases the chances that these youth—who have many years in front of them after release from incarceration—can avoid lives of crime (Butts & Mears, 2001; Lipsey & Cullen, 2007).

These are not new ideas. In the United States, such concepts have been in place for more than 100 years, at least since the establishment of the first juvenile courts. The past 25 years have proven, however, that American crime policy is not always rational. It is often emotional and irrational. The widespread enactment of punitive, "get tough" approaches to youth crime made some sense during the early 1990s. Nearly every crime indicator showed that serious and violent youth crime was escalating at that time. Policy makers tried to counter what they feared would be an unstoppable wave of youth violence. Irrationality, however, was soon evident. When the wave of violent youth crime began to subside, policy did not adapt. Instead, policy makers across the country continued to promote get-tough approaches for years after the violent crime wave had clearly ended.

Policy makers knew very little—and criminologists still know relatively little—about the underlying causes of the spike in violent crime that appeared in the late 1980s and the sudden drop in crime that followed in the late 1990s. Without sound knowledge of what caused these changes, it made little sense to invest so much policy reform in a single approach—that is, the expansion of punitive policies. In nearly all states, however, the primary focus of youth crime policy was to "get tough," and these efforts continued well into the 2000s. In particular,

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state officials continued to enact policies that transferred large numbers of youth into the criminal (or adult) justice system. Essentially, policy makers wagered public resources on the notion that the rise in violent crime was attributable to the supposedly weak sanctioning policies of the juvenile justice system. Moving more youth into criminal court was an appealing solution to a poorly understood problem.

Some might argue that the rapid decline in juvenile violence after 1994 shows that increasing the use of punitive policies was the correct response. Indeed, that interpretation is plausible to a degree. Complicating matters, however, is the fact that juvenile violent crime began to fall in the mid-1990s, well before the efforts of many states to toughen their response to delinquency began to take effect. In addition, many other conditions in the United States were changing rapidly during those years, including a dramatic improvement in the U.S. economy. The number of overlapping changes makes it difficult to determine what factors actually generated declining crime rates. Furthermore, the drop in youth crime was too rapid and too widespread nationally to be attributable to the variety of policy interventions established by states in the 1990s. The impact of criminal court transfer, in particular, turned out to be far smaller than once thought (McGowan et al., 2007).

Policies for responding to youth crime are rarely inspired by a careful analysis of youth crime trends. Society's approaches for dealing with juvenile crime and delinquency evolve incrementally, with little effort to monitor their impact using systematic or high-quality studies. The result is what often appears to be an ever-growing menu of policies and practices. New policy ideas emerge constantly, piling onto older and more familiar concepts, many of which are never fully implemented. In most cases, we are never sure there was a genuine need for a particular policy; we never learn whether a policy was implemented properly and we never know whether it was effective. Perhaps our continued efforts to understand youth crime trends will one day enable future decision makers and practitioners to identify the need for and impacts of crime policy innovations.

Discussion Questions

1. Has juvenile delinquency changed since 1980, and if so, how?
2. Which aspects of the youth crime issue are likely to have the strongest effects on public opinion and public policy?
3. In light of juvenile crime trends in the United States, do the recent policy innovations enacted across the country seem appropriately targeted?
4. Would tracking crime trends more carefully improve the impacts of crime policy and programs?
5. Is it possible to predict changes in juvenile crime trends?

Notes

1. The term "juvenile" is generally used to mean younger than age 18 years, although the legal definition of juvenile status varies according to the state laws that govern the upper

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age of original juvenile court jurisdiction. Most states extend juvenile status through age 17 years, but some extend it only through age 15 years (CT, NC, and NY) or age 16 years (GA, IL, LA, MA, MI, MO, NH, SC, TX, and WI).

2. Since the 1990s, the FBI also has been enhancing its data programs by expanding the detail generated by local and state law enforcement data systems. This effort, known as the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), is increasing the utility of law enforcement data in crime monitoring and crime policy formation.
3. It was always possible to adjust for inconsistent coverage of the UCR data program by accessing the original data files used to create each Crime in the United States report and by creating independent population estimates. Except for academic research, however, this was rarely done. Policy makers and the media largely relied on the UCR data reported in CIUS. It is this aspect of the FBI's official data that is our focus here.
4. National arrest estimates are published regularly by the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in online resources, research bulletins, and other reports (e.g., Snyder, 2008).

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