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## **The Second American Crime Drop**

Trends in Juvenile and Youth Violence

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## ■ Introduction

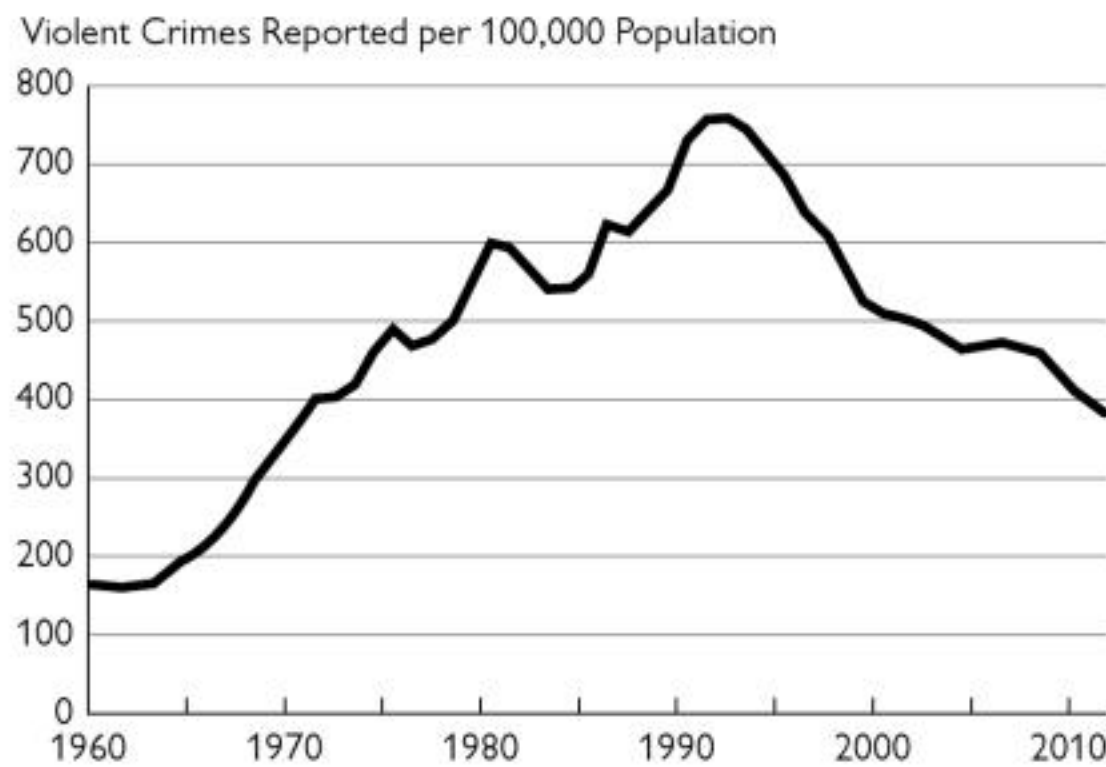
This chapter explores several questions. “Are today’s violent crime rates different from the rates of 30 years ago?” “Do recent trends in serious and violent crime by juveniles (under age 18) differ from trends among older youth (i.e., young adults ages 18–24), and how much of the overall crime decline that began in the 1990s can be attributed to juveniles and older youth?” The discussion focuses primarily on serious and violent youth crime since 1981. This is about as far back as a careful analysis can go if the goal is to compare crime trends for offenders of various ages. It was not until the 1970s that arrest statistics for detailed age groups were even available at the national level. Furthermore, it was during the three decades after 1980 when crime rates suddenly spiked and then dropped again, capturing the attention of criminologists, policymakers, and citizens alike.

This chapter reviews these trends and shows that young people (juveniles and older youth) were disproportionately responsible for growing rates of serious crime in the 1980s and early 1990s, but they contributed an even larger share to falling rates since the mid-1990s. In fact, young people appear to be largely responsible for a second violent crime drop in the United States. The second crime drop appeared after a brief period of increasing violence between 2004 and 2006. Violent crime began to decline again after 2006 and continued to decline through 2011, with juveniles and older youth leading the change.

## ■ The First Crime Decline: 1991–2004

In the 1990s, and after a decade of rising violence, the volume and rate of serious crime began to fall significantly in many countries, including the United States. Cities and states across the country benefitted from plummeting rates of violence and other forms of serious crime. The total rate of violent crime fell nearly continuously for almost 15 years. A short violent crime rebound then occurred. Crimes like murder, robbery, and weapons offenses grew between 2004 and 2006. The resurgence ended before the severe economic recession hit the U.S. economy in 2007. After 2006, crime rates resumed their downward trajectory, resulting in a second American crime drop. By 2011, the second crime decline had resulted in levels of violent crime not seen since 1970 (Fig. 3.1).

Scholars proposed many theories to explain the first crime drop, but no single theory seemed to offer a complete understanding (Blumstein & Rosenfeld, 2008; Blumstein & Wallman, 2006; Greenberg, 2013; Zimring, 2007). The decline in serious crime between the early 1990s and 2004 may never be fully explained. Most researchers in the 1990s assumed that violent crime would rise into the early 21st century because crime rates had been growing before the 1990s (Barker, 2010). Popular explanations for the growth



**Figure 3.1** Total Violent Crime Rate in the United States: 1960–2011.

Source: Uniform Crime Reports, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), U.S. Department of Justice. Data for 1960–2010 prepared by the National Archive of Criminal Justice Data. Available on the Internet: <http://bjs.gov/ucrdata/Search/Crime/Crime.cfm>.

in violent crime prior to 1990 included the expansion of the youth population from the post-World War II baby boom as well as perceived declines in the legitimacy of social institutions. After 1980, many blamed the emergence of the crack cocaine market for particularly sharp crime spikes. Some scholars noted that a variety of cultural factors were partly the cause for rising vio-

lence. Of course, most of these explanations suggested that serious crime would continue to grow (Baumer, 2011).

The sharp increase in violent crime ended suddenly in the early 1990s when adult crime rates began to fall. For several years, the declining rate of serious crime among older adults was overshadowed by ongoing increases in youth crime (Levitt, 1998). Then, to the surprise of criminologists and citizens in general, serious and violent crime rates also began to decline among juveniles and youth under age 25 (Levitt, 2004). Between 1991 and 2001, the homicide rate fell 43%, the total violent crime rate dropped 34%, and the rate of serious property crime decreased 29%. The crime drop had clearly begun.

Juveniles and older youth are always implicated in the rise and fall of violent crime rates. Young people commit serious crime at a rate that is disproportionate to their percentage of the population (Lawrence & Hesse, 2010). Indeed,

## Definitions

This chapter uses the terms “youth” and “young” to describe individuals who are 10 to 24 years of age. Some but not all youth are legal juveniles. The term “juvenile” is used in popular discourse as a synonym for young, but the legal definition of the term is more specific. It does not include all young people or even all people under age 18. Legal definitions vary according to state laws that set the age threshold for criminal prosecution. Most states extend juvenile status through age 17, but some extend it only through age 15 (e.g., New York) or age 16 (e.g., Georgia, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, South Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin).



the fluctuations in homicide and robbery during the 1980s and 1990s were in large part due to changes in youth violence (Blumstein, 2002) and to the sharp decrease in youth homicide rates that began after 1994 (Blumstein & Wallman, 2006).

There are many possible explanations for the unexpected drop in youth crime after 1994. Youth growing up in the 1980s and 1990s may have begun to reject the lifestyle they came to associate with drug use and criminal activity as they observed older siblings and friends becoming addicted to drugs or getting arrested (Curtis, 1998). The decrease in the relative size of the youth population in the United States also may have contributed to the reduction in crime (Zimring, 2007). Each of these factors likely exerts some influence on crime rates (Cook & Laub, 2002).

Another explanation—always popular in some circles—is that rapid growth in the use of incarceration after 1980 increased the deterrent effect of the justice system. Indeed, the most careful research does suggest that the extent of incarceration is partly associated with changes in crime rates and the scale of the nationwide crime drop. Some estimates suggest that growth of incarceration alone might explain one third of the crime decline at a national level (Levitt, 2004). When the incarceration levels and crime rates of individual states are examined, however, the relationship between incarceration and crime diminishes (Ouimet, 2002; Spelman, 2006).

Some of the more provocative explanations for the overall crime decline include growing police forces, the legalization of abortion in the 1970s, and the broader availability of firearms. Levitt (2004), for example, estimated that an increase in the number of police officers could explain between 10% and 20% of the total crime decline. Other researchers pointed out that, along with the general reduction in crack cocaine use, drug distribution methods in recent years shifted away from large open-air markets (in which dealers sell drugs in public spaces) and toward small-scale dealers selling primarily to people in their immediate social groups (Curtis, 1998). Such a shift would have likely produced a reduction in violence associated with illegal drug markets.

In one of the most controversial lines of inquiry, Levitt (2004) and Donahue and Levitt (2001) argued that legalized abortion accounted for some of the reduction in crime rates. States that legalized abortion prior to the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade* were the first states to demonstrate reductions in crime rates, and states with the highest rates of abortion demonstrated the largest decreases in crime. Other researchers disputed these findings, of course, showing that crime variations across time and between states are not consistent with the hypothesis that legalized abortion had a significant impact on the criminal behavior of subsequent birth cohorts (Joyce, 2004).

Still other popular explanations for the crime decline have included the role of firearms, with some observers pointing to the fact that crime rates fall with handgun use. In fact, the drop in youth homicides did mirror

the steady decline in the rate of handgun homicides, but non-gun homicide rates decreased along with gun-related homicides, thereby reducing the potential weight of this theory (Blumstein & Wallman, 2006; Cook & Laub, 2002).

Finally, some researchers suggest that crime rates fall due to environmental changes, including the expansion and restoration of cities and the growth of racial and ethnic diversity in the U.S. population. Studies show that urban development, the refurbishment of abandoned buildings, and construction of new residences and businesses on empty lots contributed to neighborhood stability and enhanced informal social controls, which may have helped to lower crime rates (Barker, 2010). Similarly, the increasing diversity of the American population may have had an effect on crime trends. Increases in the immigrant populations of metropolitan areas are associated with decreases in violent crime, particularly robberies (Stowell et al., 2009). In large and diverse cities such as New York, Houston, and Miami, the sharp rise in immigrant populations may have counterbalanced the criminogenic factors existing in formerly crime-prone neighborhoods, resulting in lower crime rates overall (Barker, 2010).

The Great American Crime Decline, as Franklin Zimring described it, inspired researchers around the world to generate competing explanations for fluctuating crime trends. Criminologists will likely continue to debate the causes of the decline, but one thing is clear: the fluctuating rate of juvenile crime and youth crime exerts a strong influence on the overall rate of serious and violent crime. The remainder of this chapter explores the extent of this influence.

## ■ Youth Crime Trends

By the mid-1990s, more than a decade of sharp increases in violent youth crime commanded the attention of the nation's policymakers, news media, and the public. The juvenile justice system was widely criticized and virtually every state in the country was implementing juvenile justice reforms intended to reverse the rising tide of juvenile crime (Butts & Mitchell, 2000). In most cases, the goal of these reforms was to make the juvenile system "tougher" (Butts & Mears, 2001). Of course, the nationwide rise in violent crime was never simply about juvenile crime. Typically, violent crime trends are dominated by the large number of "youth" crimes, or crimes by young people between the ages of 15 and 24. This is just as true about falling crime as it is about periods of increasing crime. Young people have a disproportionate effect on crime trends, but the juvenile justice system is responsible for only some of these youth—often those under age 18, but sometimes under age 17 or even 16. To understand the extent and nature of youth crime trends, researchers must examine data about young adults as well as juveniles.



There are several ways to examine youth crime trends and to identify the contributions of juveniles and older youth to crime in general. The most useful methods rely on analyses of (1) crimes cleared by juvenile arrests, (2) the actual number of juvenile and youth arrests, and (3) per capita rates of arrest for juveniles and older youth.

## Crime Clearances

The best source of data about changes in juvenile and youth crime in the United States is the information collected by law enforcement agencies across the country and reported to the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Information from the UCR includes the number of various crimes reported to police and the percentage of those crimes “cleared” (or solved) with the arrest of a juvenile—more specifically, the percentage of crimes cleared by the arrest of one or more persons, none of whom is aged 18 or older. Tracking the number of reported crimes cleared by juvenile arrests (juvenile “clearances”) is useful for gauging the extent to which juveniles account for the total level of crime, or least that portion of crime coming to the attention of law enforcement.

In general, the juvenile proportion of actual arrests tends to be higher than the juvenile proportion of *crimes cleared* by arrests, in part reflecting the greater likelihood of juveniles to commit crimes in groups (Table 3.1). In 2011, arrests involving juveniles accounted for 13% of all arrests for the four offenses included in the UCR Violent Crime Index (i.e., murder, robbery, aggravated assault, and forcible rape). Thus, adult arrests represented 87% of all arrests for Violent Index crimes. On the other hand, juveniles accounted for just 10% of the Violent Index crimes cleared that year. Similarly, juvenile arrests accounted for 21% of all arrests for Property Crime Index offenses, but these arrests cleared just 15% of serious property crimes. In other words, adults ages 18 and older were involved in 85% of the Property Index offenses cleared by arrest.

The trending pattern in juvenile clearances is an important way to assess the trajectory of youth crime since 1981 (Fig. 3.2). For example, the juvenile proportion of property crime clearances began to fall just as the youth crime decline began in 1994 and it continued to fall nearly continuously through 2011. Between 1995 and 2011, the juvenile proportion of clearances for offenses in the FBI’s Property Crime Index dropped from 25% to 15%, suggesting either that the falling rate of property crime among juveniles exceeded the decline among adults or that adult property crimes were actually increasing during this time.

On the other hand, the proportion of violent crimes cleared by the arrest of juveniles appeared to fluctuate between 1981 and 2011, rising from 1987 through 1994, and then falling for several years just as the youth crime decline

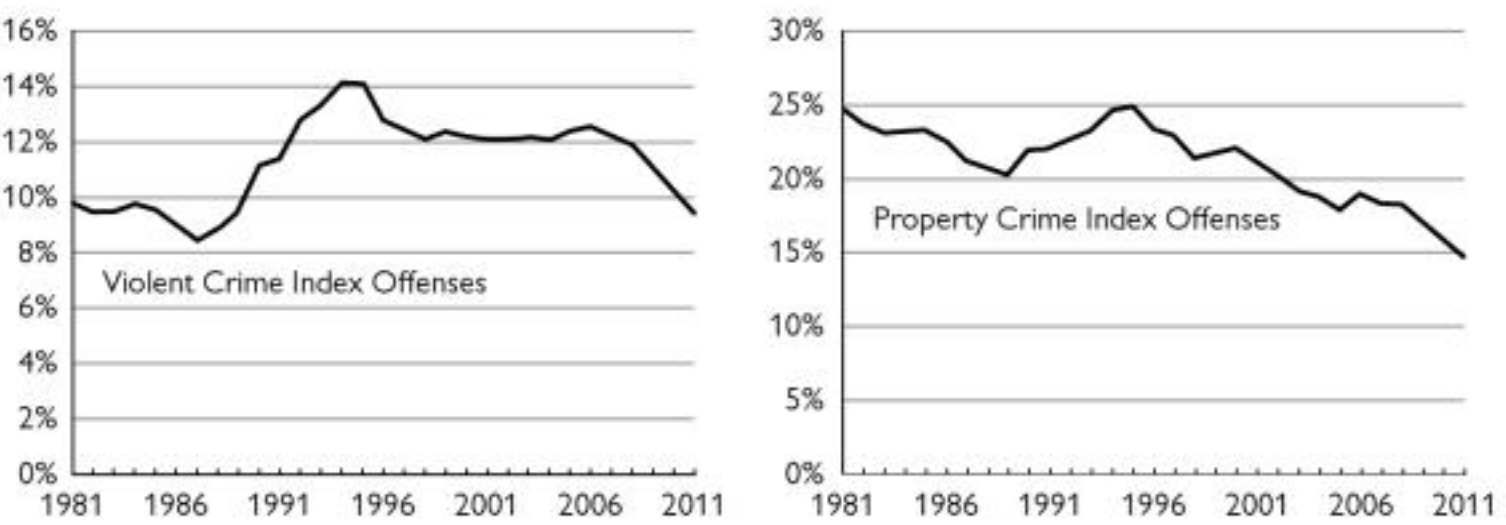
**Table 3.1**      **Juveniles Under Age 18 as a Proportion of Arrests and Crimes Cleared: 2011**

	Youth under age 18 as a percentage of Arrests	Youth under age 18 as a percentage of Crimes Cleared
<i>Violent Crime Index</i>	13%	10%
Murder	8	4
Forcible rape	14	10
Robbery	23	13
Aggravated assault	11	9
<i>Property Crime Index</i>	21%	15%
Burglary	22	13
Larceny-Theft	21	15
Motor Vehicle Theft	22	12
Arson	46	36

Source: Crime in the United States 2011, Tables 28 and 47. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice.

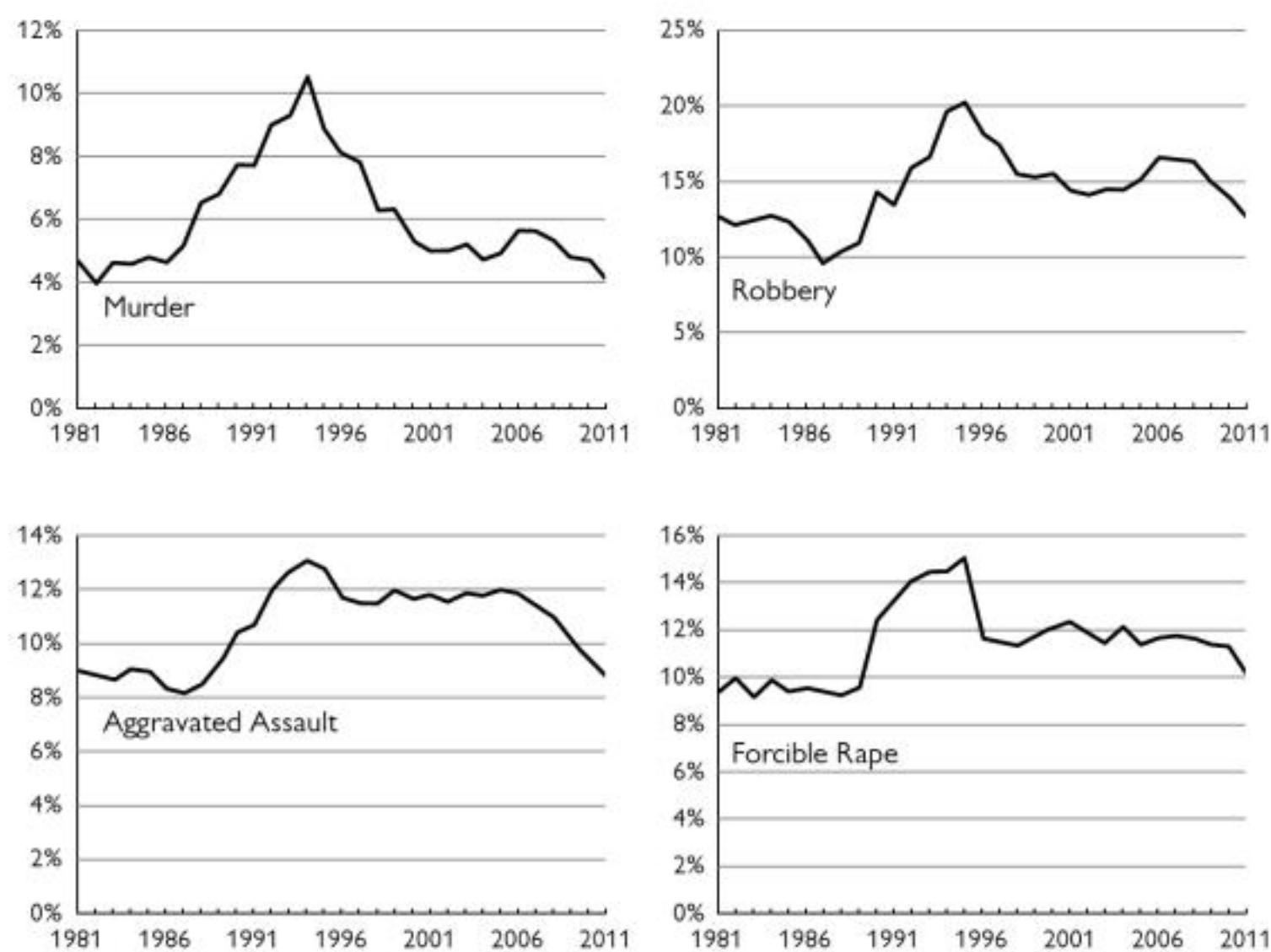
appeared. Unlike the clearances of property offenses, the juvenile proportion of violent crime clearances stabilized from 1998 to 2004, suggesting that juvenile violence was falling at approximately the same rate that violence among adults was falling. A short resurgence occurred in 2004 through 2006, but the juvenile proportion of clearances dropped steeply once again from 2006 through 2011. Again, this suggests that after 2006 the number of violent crime arrests involving juveniles was declining at a sharper rate than the number of arrests involving adults. This second crime drop, in other words, may have been largely a youth crime drop.

The pattern can be seen in several of the individual offenses included in the UCR Violent Crime Index (Fig. 3.3). Juvenile murder clearances fell sharply through 2004 but then increased between 2004 and 2006 before



**Figure 3.2**      **Percentage of FBI Index Crime Clearances Involving Juveniles Under Age 18: 1981–2011.**

Source: Crime in the United States (annual) 1981 through 2011. Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice.



**Figure 3.3** Percentage of FBI Violent Crime Index Clearances Involving Juveniles Under Age 18: 1981–2011.

Source: *Crime in the United States* (annual) 1981 through 2011. Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice.

plunging again through 2011. The trend in juvenile clearances for aggravated assault was slightly different, remaining essentially unchanged from 1998 through 2006 and then dropping consistently from 2006 through 2011. Thus, aggravated assault arrests involving juveniles were likely falling more steeply than they were among adults ages 18 and older. A similar pattern is apparent in juvenile crime clearances for robbery. Following a temporary rebound between 2004 and 2006, the decline in juvenile clearances for robbery outpaced those of adults. Again, these patterns in violent crime clearances suggest the existence of the second crime decline among juveniles between 2006 and 2011.

**Arrests**

Analyzing UCR data about the number of arrests involving juveniles and youth is useful for monitoring the relative contribution of young people to the total crime problem. Arrest data are not a precise measure of crime itself, but they are a valid measure of the crime problems handled by police agencies across the country. Arrest data, of course, are not the only information that could be used to analyze trends in juvenile and young adult crime, but data from other sources are geographically inconsistent and unstandardized (i.e., data

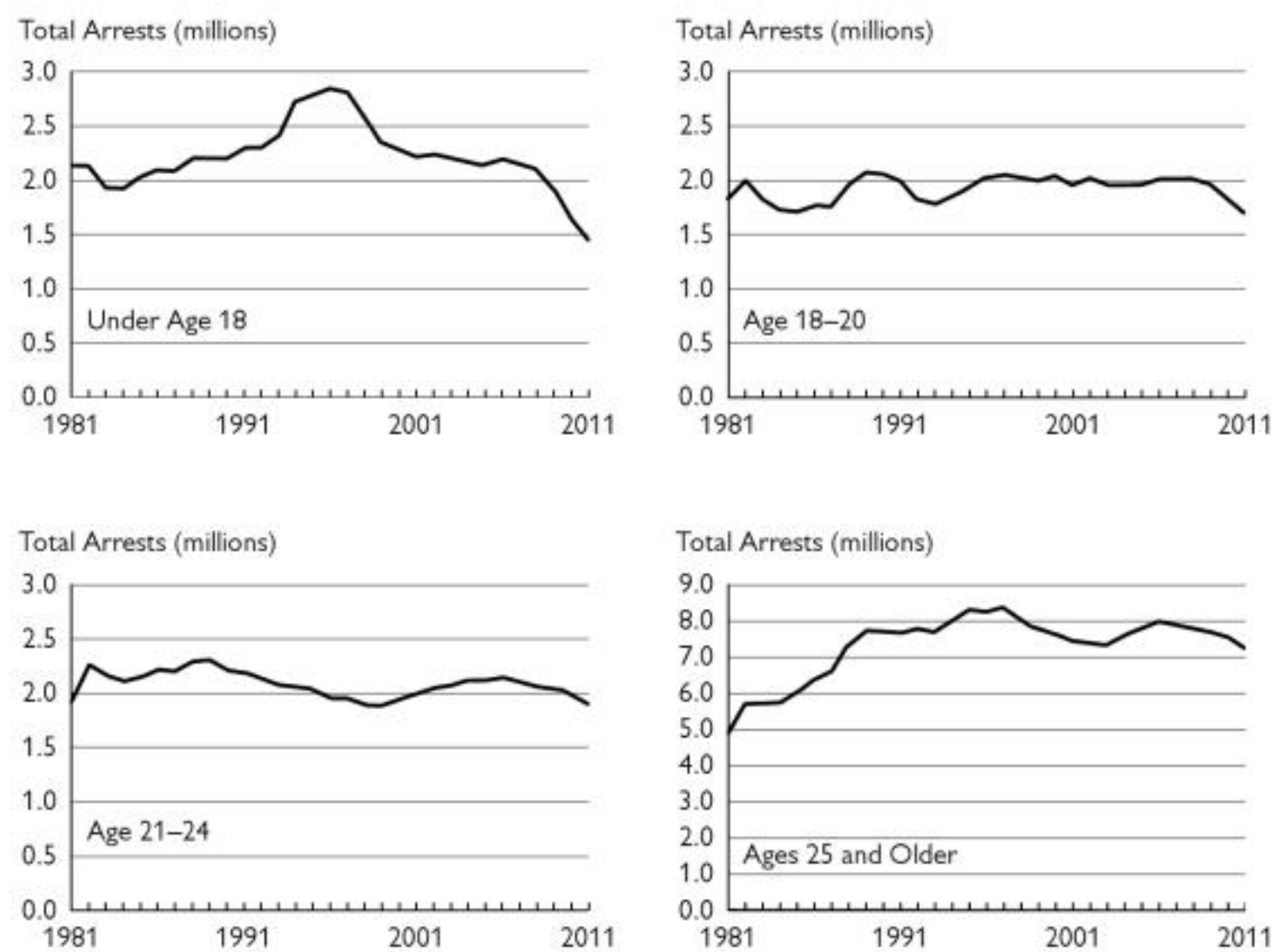


from courts), available only at the national level and not the state or local level (i.e., victim surveys), or lacking detailed information about the ages of the offenders involved in each crime (i.e., reported crimes and crime clearances). Unlike data about reported crimes and crime clearances, arrest data can be separated into more than two age groups to reveal disparities within the adult population. To explore the offending of more differentiated age groups, such as 18- to 20-year-olds and 21- to 24-year-olds, this chapter next analyzes arrest data directly.

The best way to examine trends in crime by different age groups is to analyze the national arrest estimates created by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) from the FBI's UCR data. Researchers must rely on the BJS national estimates because, while the FBI has been collecting arrest data from law enforcement agencies across the United States for 80 years, the agency publishes sample-specific data nearly exclusively. In other words, the FBI reports the number of arrests made by those agencies for which it has data each year (often representing about 75% of the U.S. population). The FBI, however, does not adjust these sample-specific arrest figures to represent arrests nationally.

In recent years, national estimates have become more accessible through the efforts of the BJS within the U.S. Department of Justice (Snyder & Mulako-Wangota, 2013). Statistical analysts at BJS create national estimates from the FBI's sample-specific data using a method disseminated more than 20 years ago by Dr. Howard Snyder. The estimation process begins with the single set of national arrest estimates calculated by the FBI each year for each major offense and for all ages combined (traditionally found in Table 29 of the annual report, *Crime in the United States*). To create national arrest estimates for varying age groups and then to calculate per capita arrest rates for those groups, analysts determine the proportion of sample-specific arrests for each offense that involved individuals of various ages. Those proportions are then applied to the overall national estimate for each offense to create national arrest estimates for detailed age groups. Next, the BJS process calculates arrest rates by dividing each national arrest estimate over the appropriate population as indicated by the age-specific population estimates from the U.S. Bureau of the Census.<sup>1</sup>

According to the most recent BJS estimates and other estimates calculated using the BJS method, law enforcement agencies across the United States made an estimated 1.5 million total arrests involving juveniles under age 18 in 2011, down substantially from 2.8 million in 1995 (Fig. 3.4). Another 1.7 million arrests involving youth ages 18 through 20 were reported in 2011, down from 2 million arrests in 1995. Arrests involving youth ages 21 through 24 also dropped slightly, from 2.1 to 1.9 million. Figure 3.4 clearly reveals the second crime decline between 2006 and 2011, and the drop in overall arrests after 2006 is clearly steepest among juveniles under age 18.



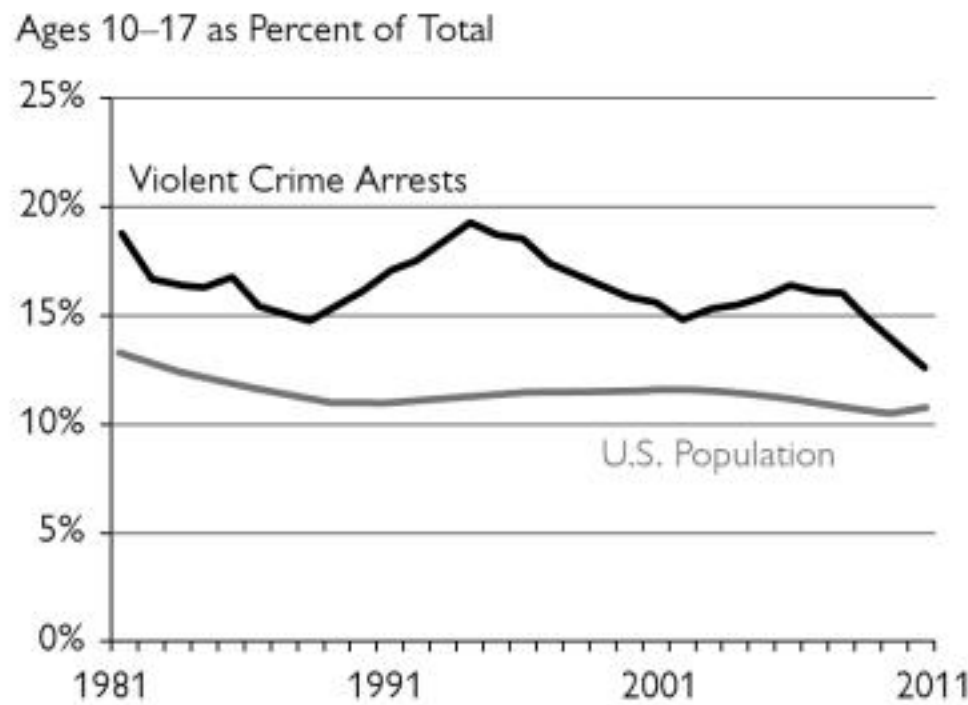
**Figure 3.4** National arrest estimates for all offenses: 1981–2011.

Source: National estimates of arrests are derived by weighting the sample-specific figures from the Uniform Crime Reports. Estimates for 1981–2010 are from Snyder & Mulako-Wangota (2013). Estimates for 2011 are calculated directly using the same method with figures from the FBI report, *Crime in the United States 2011*.

These figures, of course, represent arrests for *all* offenses, including minor crimes that are not reported consistently across jurisdictions and from year to year, such as disorderly conduct, vandalism, and shoplifting. Examining changes in the total number of arrests for different age groups is not sufficient for a full understanding of the characteristics of the crime decline among young people. What offenses were involved in the millions of youth arrests made in 2011? Were they more serious or more violent than the youth offenses in 1981 or 1995? In addition, some crime fluctuations may be due to changes in the population. How many youth were in the U.S. population in 2011 compared with 1981 and 1995? An examination of youth crime trends is more accurate when it focuses on the per capita rate of arrests rather than the volume of arrests, and when it concentrates on the serious offenses that are more likely to be reported consistently and reliably to the FBI (i.e., the offenses included in the FBI’s Crime Index and especially the Violent Crime Index).

**Violent Crime Arrest Rates**

Criminologists once predicted a relatively constant relationship between age and crime, positing that youth would be always over-represented in arrest



**Figure 3.5** **Juvenile Proportion of Violent Crime Arrests and the U.S. Population: 1981–2011.**

Source: National estimates of arrests are derived by weighting the sample-specific figures from the Uniform Crime Reports. Estimates for 1981–2010 are from Snyder & Mulako-Wangota (2013). Estimates for 2011 are calculated directly using the same method with figures from the FBI report, *Crime in the United States 2011*. Population estimates are from the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

statistics (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983). In 1981, according to estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, youths ages 10 to 17 represented 13% of the total population of the United States. If they were arrested at the same rate as everyone else, they would have accounted for 13% of violent crime arrests. Instead, according to the UCR, they accounted for 19% of all arrests for the four offenses included in the Violent Crime Index (Fig. 3.5).

With the onset of the 1990s crime wave and subsequent decline, however, the once-persistent relationship between the juvenile population and the juvenile proportion of violent crime arrests began to change. Between 1985 and 1995, the height of the violent crime wave, the disproportionate representation of juveniles actually increased. In 1995, 10- to 17-year-olds represented just 11% of the U.S. population, but they made up 19% of violent crime arrests. Between 1995 and 2011, the juvenile proportion of the U.S. population changed only slightly, fluctuating between 11% and 12%. As a percentage of all violent crime arrests, however, 10- to 17-year olds fell from 19% to 15% during the first crime decline, or between 1995 and 2004. After rebounding slightly between 2004 and 2006, the percentage dropped again during the second crime decline. By 2011, the juvenile percentage of violent crime arrests was just two points higher than the juvenile percentage of the U.S. population (13% compared with 11%). The first crime decline basically returned the juvenile percentage of violent crime arrests to levels that were similar to those of the early 1980s. The second crime decline brought the percentage lower than ever and very close to the juvenile proportion of the U.S. population as a whole.



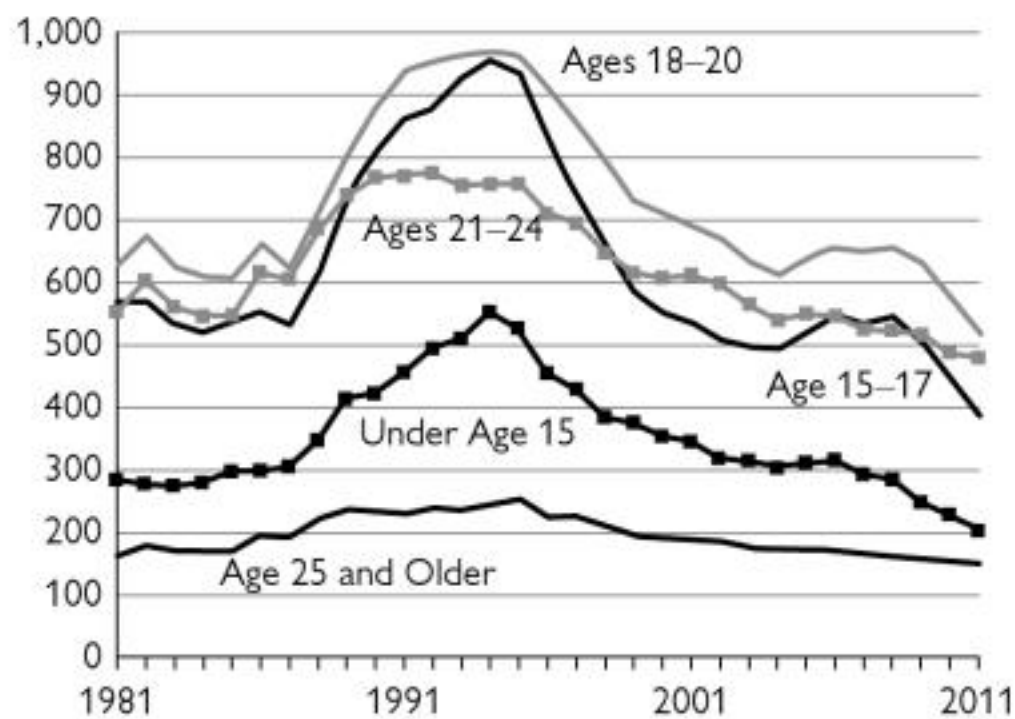
Did the trends in arrests of juveniles and older youth bring about the second crime decline? What do youth crime trends look like if we control for the size of the population and analyze arrest rates per capita? If we examine the rate of juvenile arrests for Violent Index offenses, it is clear that juvenile arrests increased between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s and then fell dramatically through 2004, independently of the size of the juvenile population. In fact, the violent crime arrest rate grew 67% between 1981 and 1994, from approximately 300 arrests per 100,000 juveniles ages 10 to 17 to just over 500 arrests per 100,000. It then plummeted 46% to 270 per 100,000 in 2004.

The pattern varied only slightly among the individual offenses that make up the Violent Crime Index. The rate of juvenile murder arrests increased 86% between 1981 and 1994, to a rate of approximately 12 arrests per 100,000 juveniles. Between 1994 and 2004, the murder arrest rate for juveniles dropped to 3.3 per 100,000, which at that time was the lowest level of juvenile murder arrests experienced since 1980. The rate of juvenile arrests for murder actually grew 10% over several years after 2004, reaching 4 per 100,000 in 2007. Then, the rate dropped sharply to a new low: 2.5 arrests per 100,000 10- to 17-year-olds.

Robbery arrest rates followed a similar but more dramatic pattern when compared with murder arrest rates. The rate of juvenile arrests for robbery fell 60% between 1994 and 2004, from 184 to 75 per 100,000 juveniles. Then, between 2004 and 2006, the arrest rate climbed 38%, reaching a rate that once again exceeded 100 arrests for every 100,000 juveniles in the population. The increase stopped, however, and by 2011 the robbery arrest rate had dropped back to 71 per 100,000 juveniles, for the lowest rate recorded since 1981.

The pattern of juvenile arrest rates for aggravated assault differed from the rates of murder and robbery. The arrest rate for aggravated assault, for example, more than doubled between the 1980s and 1990s. After growing from 131 to 286 per 100,000 juveniles between 1981 and 1994, the rate dropped more gradually after 1994. By 2004, the aggravated assault arrest rate (179 per 100,000) still remained substantially higher than it had been in 1981 (132 per 100,000). Yet, the arrest rate continued to fall after 2004 and it did so more consistently than either the murder or robbery arrest rate. The rate reached its all-time low (121.5 per 100,000) in 2011. Because aggravated assaults usually account for more than half of all juvenile arrests for Violent Index offenses, the persistent decline of aggravated assault arrests caused the total violent crime rate for juveniles to depart from the pattern seen in murder and robbery arrests.

When public concerns about violent crime are on the rise, policymakers 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 under age 20 or even below age 25. 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



**Figure 3.6 Violent Crime Arrest Rates (per 100,000 population): 1981–2011 Youth Contribution to Violent Crime Decline.**

Source: National estimates of arrests are derived by weighting the sample-specific figures from the Uniform Crime Reports. Estimates for 1981–2010 are from Snyder & Mulako-Wangota (2013). Estimates for 2011 are calculated directly using the same method with figures from the FBI report, *Crime in the United States 2011*. Rates are calculated by dividing arrest estimates over the appropriate population. For juveniles under age 18, the denominator used is the population ages 10–17.

by offenders below age 18). Of all violent crime arrests in 1995, for example, just 18% involved juveniles under age 18, while 27% involved young adults between the ages of 18 and 24.

When youth crime rates are analyzed in more than two age groups, it is clear that violent crime trends are similar for juveniles under age 18 and older youth between age 18 and 24 (Fig. 3.6). The same patterns are seen for all age groups, but considerably more volatility is visible in the violent crime rates of young people. The increases in arrest rates between 1987 and 1994 were striking for young offenders, and the declines in rates after 1994 were strong for all youthful offenders. In every category under age 25, the violent crime arrest rate in 2011 was substantially lower than the rate had been in 1981. For older adults, however, the crime decline largely brought the rate back to where it was in 1981. Moreover, although the short increase in violent crime arrests between 2004 and 2006 was due almost entirely to increases among youth between the ages of 15 and 20, the subsequent drop during the second crime decline of 2006–2011 was also generated by the young. Just how much of both crime declines can be attributed to changing arrest patterns among young offenders?

The previous analysis suggested that recent declines in youth violence—measured by arrests of young people age 24 and younger—were steeper than declines in violent crime among older age groups. The chapter turns next to a related question: how much of the overall violent crime drop in America was due to changes in youth crime? The question can be answered by examining



Table 3.2      Number of FBI Violent Crime Arrests by Age Group: 1981–2011

Age at Arrest	1981	1994	2004	2011	Percent Change	
					1994–2004	2004–2011
14 and Younger	23,400	46,900	29,100	18,500	–38%	–36%
Ages 15–17	67,600	103,300	61,700	49,500	–40%	–20%
Ages 18–20	82,200	102,400	76,900	70,500	–25%	–8%
Ages 21–24	94,700	114,300	90,800	84,200	–21%	–7%
25 and Older	222,500	411,900	328,000	312,000	–20%	–5%
Total	490,500	778,800	586,600	534,700	–25%	–9%

Source: National estimates of arrests are derived by weighting the sample-specific figures from the Uniform Crime Reports. Estimates for 1981–2010 are from Snyder & Mulako-Wangota (2013). Estimates for 2011 are calculated directly using the same method with figures from the FBI report, *Crime in the United States 2011*.

Note: Detail may not add to total due to rounding.

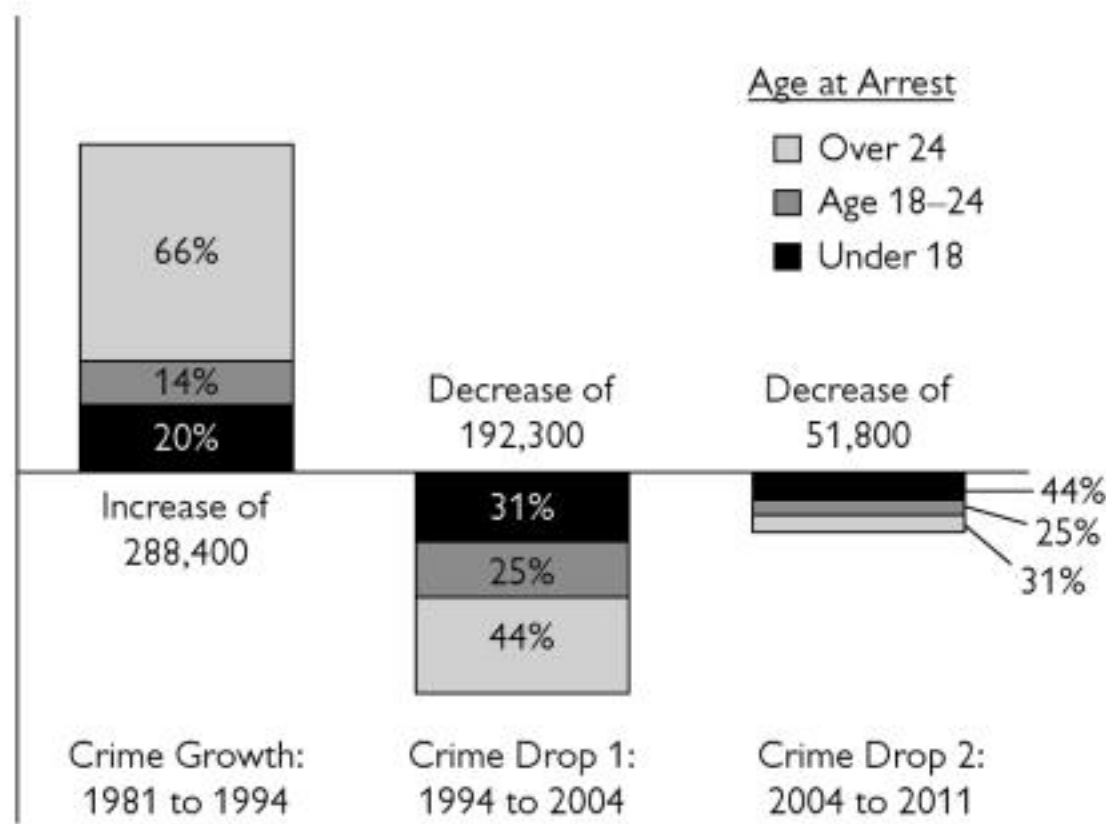
the age composition of the relative increases and decreases in arrests between 1994 and 2004, and between 2004 and 2011.

According to the BJS national estimates, there were 778,800 total arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses in 1994, up 59% overall from 1991 (Table 3.2). Arrests increased for all age groups, and the total amount of the increase was 288,300 (i.e., the difference between 778,800 arrests in 1994 and 490,500 arrests in 1991). When the increase is disaggregated by age group, we see that the number of arrests grew by 100% among juveniles age 14 and younger, and by 53% among 15- to 17-year-olds. The number of arrests grew just 25% among older youth ages 18 to 20, and only 21% among young people between the ages of 21 and 24. Arrests among adults age 25 and older swelled by 85% between 1981 and 1994.

Note, however, that the size of the age groups varies considerably. While arrests doubled among young people below the age of 15, the total number of arrests in that age category was 46,900 in 1994, far smaller than the number of arrests among older juveniles (103,300). When we consider the number of new arrests in 1994 compared with 1981, it is clear that older juveniles ages 15 to 17 contributed 35,700 “new” arrests (103,300 in 1994 vs. 67,600 in 1981) while younger juveniles under age 15 contributed just 23,500 “new” arrests (up from 23,400 in 1981 to 46,900 in 1994). If these age groups are combined into just three categories (juveniles, youth ages 18–24, and adults over age 25), we see that juveniles accounted for 21% of the increase in arrests between 1981 and 1994, while older youth accounted for 14% of total growth, and adults over age 25 represented 66% of the total increase (Fig. 3.7).

In this way, the contribution of each age group to the total increase and decrease in the volume of violent crime arrests can be estimated by calculating the change in arrests for one group and comparing it to the total size of the change for offenders of all ages. The results of this comparison suggest





**Figure 3.7 Contribution to Change in Violent Crime Arrests: 1981–2011.**

Source: National estimates of arrests are derived by weighting the sample-specific figures from the Uniform Crime Reports. Estimates for 1981–2010 are from Snyder & Mulako-Wangota (2013). Estimates for 2011 are calculated directly using the same method with figures from the FBI report, *Crime in the United States 2011*.

that during the first crime decline (or 1994–2004) all juveniles (under age 18) accounted for a combined decline of 59,400 arrests. Because the total change in violent crime arrests between 1994 and 2004 was a drop of 192,200, this suggests that juveniles accounted for 31% of the total decline (i.e., 59,400 divided by 192,200).

Older youth ages 18 to 24, on the other hand, accounted for 25% of the decline because the number of arrests involving 18- to 24-year-olds fell from 216,700 in 1994 to 167,700 in 2004. This decline of 49,000 arrests represented just over 25% of the total decline of 192,200 during that period. Adults ages 25 and older accounted for 44% of the total decrease in arrest volume during the first crime decline of 1994–2004. The total number of arrests involving offenders ages 25 and older fell from 411,900 in 1994 to 328,000 in 2004, for a decrease of 83,900.

Thus, juveniles and older youth combined (all youth under age 24) were responsible for 34% of the increase in violent crime arrests between 1981 and 1994, but they accounted for 56% of the subsequent drop in arrests between 1994 and 2004. The first crime drop was disproportionately attributable to the declining number of arrests involving young people under age 25.

Finally, the analysis confirms that the second crime drop was proportionally even more attributable to the falling number of arrests among young people than was the first crime drop. Violent crime arrests overall fell by nearly 52,000 between 2004 and 2011. Decreases in arrests of adults over age 25 accounted for only 31% of the total crime drop after 2004. Juveniles accounted for 44% of the decline, while older youth ages 18 to 24 accounted for 25% of

the total. Together, therefore, juveniles and older youth contributed more than two thirds of the overall decrease in violent crime arrests.

## Conclusion

Researchers will likely continue to debate the reasons why violent crime in the United States increased sharply in the 1980s and early 1990s before dropping just as precipitously after the mid-1990s. All researchers will agree, however, that trends in violent crime during the past three decades had much to do with changing rates of youth crime. This chapter examined these trends and analyzed what portion of the overall crime drop might be attributed to juveniles (under age 18) and older youth (ages 18–24). The results demonstrate that while young people helped to generate 20% of the growth in violent crime arrests between 1981 and 1994, they contributed a far more disproportionate share to the crime decline in violence after 1994. Most of the decline in violent crime, in fact, was due to falling arrests among young offenders. Juveniles and older youth together accounted for 56% of the first crime drop between 1994 and 2004, and they represented 69% of the total decline in violent arrests during the second crime drop that continued at least through 2011.

## Note

- 1 Not all of the information in this section comes directly from BJS. At the time this chapter was completed, the BJS had released national estimates only through the year 2010. For our analysis, we calculated estimates for 2011 using the same process employed by BJS. In addition, although the BJS creates arrest rates for juveniles under age 18 with denominators representing *all* children under age 18 (including infants and toddlers), we calculated alternative rates with denominators that included only youth 10–17 years of age.

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