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Violent Juvenile Offenders

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During the past fifteen years, violent juvenile offenders have been central to debates on the future of a separate juvenile justice system. The juvenile justice system, created at the turn of the century, was given broad discretion to deal with children with problems. It was based on the belief that juveniles are less culpable for their criminal activities than adults and that they are more amenable to treatment than hardened criminals. Thus the juvenile court was less concerned with proving guilt than it was with providing treatment to address the needs of the juvenile. In the process of identifying needs and treatment, the seriousness of the offense was not determinate.

There are several reasons why the issue of violent juvenile offenders came to the forefront in the late sixties and seventies. One is that there were more arrests for violent offenses in the United States during the 1970s than ever before in history. The perception was that juveniles accounted for most of the violent crime during that period. In fact, between 1960 and 1978 arrests of juveniles for violent crimes increased at twice the rate of arrests for adults. The explanations ranged from an increase in 16- to 19-year-olds in the population, to a response to the Vietnam War, to an increase in drug and alcohol use. The cause is open to conjecture. The reality, however, was that persons under the age of 18 accounted for between 20% and 25% of all arrests for violence during those years of high violent crime.

What Does Violent Juvenile Crime Look Like?

Patterns in Violent Juvenile Crime

Between 1960 and 1975 juvenile arrests grew by nearly 300 percent, more than twice the adult rate, with the largest growth occurring in the most violent crimes: robbery, aggravated assault, and homicide. The large increases in juvenile arrests seen in the 1960s and early 1970s began to level off in the late 1970s and then to decline slightly (Strasburg, 1984).

The juvenile population (ages 7 through 17) declined by 11% between 1970 and 1981. While the juvenile arrest rates went up between 1970 and 1975, the pattern between 1975 and 1981 showed both increases and then

decreases, finishing in 1981 with a rate 5% lower than in 1975. Arrest rates for violent crime, however, have shown a different pattern. Since 1978, arrest rates for violence have held fairly steady at the relatively high rate they attained in the mid-1970s.

When we turn our attention from arrests to patterns of offending as reported in the National Crime Survey, a different conclusion about the scope of juvenile violence emerges (Strasburg, 1984). In 1981, 9.8% of all cleared violent offenses involved the arrests of persons under 18. This share of violent crimes attributed to juveniles is less than their share of the population (17%), taking the 7 to 17 age group, and only slightly larger than the population share (8.3%) for the 13- to 17-year-olds. This is much different than the juvenile share of arrests for violent crimes (17.2%). The most obvious explanation for this discrepancy is the fact that juveniles tend to commit crimes in groups, and the arrest data double counts the cleared offenses because several arrests result frequently from one violent crime.

Profile of Violent Juvenile Offenders

Only a small percentage of the juveniles who come to the attention of the juvenile justice system are arrested for violent crimes. For example, only 4% of the juveniles arrested in 1980 were arrested for a violent act, and less than 2% of juveniles are ever arrested during their juvenile years for a violent offense. The number of juveniles arrested or adjudicated delinquent for repeat violent offenses is even smaller, so small in fact, that the National Violent Offender Initiative had to change the definition of violent offender from adjudicated delinquent twice for violent offenses, to adjudicated delinquent once for a violent offense and previously adjudicated delinquent for a serious property offense, in order to have enough eligible juveniles for the violent offender programs.

These violent few—the repeat violent offender along with the violent and chronic juvenile offender—are the critical population for the juvenile justice system. The ability to deal fairly and effectively with this population will restore confidence in a separate system of justice for juveniles.

The Violent Few and the Young Criminal Years of the Violent Few

A birth cohort study of juveniles arrested for violent offenses was conducted in 1976 (Hamparian, 1978). A follow-up study tracking the violent delinquents into the adult criminal justice system was conducted in 1984 (Hamparian, 1985). These data added to several other studies conducted during this period provided much needed information about violent juvenile offenders (Strasburg, 1978; Fagan, 1985; Wolfgang, 1972; Youth Policy and Law Center, 1984).