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# Defining and Measuring Juvenile Delinquency



## CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

- ❖ The Extent and Seriousness of Juvenile Delinquency and Victimization
- ❖ Measures of Juvenile Offending and Victimization

**J**uvenile crime is a serious problem in the United States and most other nations. A majority of young people admit to engaging in some types of delinquent behavior, though only a small number of youth are ever apprehended by police officers, and even fewer are ever referred to a juvenile court. The majority of crimes committed by juveniles are offenses such as theft and shoplifting, vandalism, drug and alcohol use, disorderly conduct, and simple assaults that include hitting, kicking, and fights that do not result in serious injury. Many youth engage in behavior such as curfew violations, running away, disobeying parents, school truancy, and alcohol violations, referred to as **status offenses** because they apply only to juvenile-age youth and children, and are not punishable under a state penal code.

In this chapter we examine the range of deviant and delinquent behaviors that may bring children and youth to the attention of law enforcement officials and the juvenile court. The definition of **juvenile delinquency** varies according to statutory

definitions of each state. Most states define a “juvenile” for jurisdictional purposes as a person between the ages of 10 to 18 years of age; although in some states 16- and 17-year-olds may be treated as adults when they have committed a crime. A “delinquent child” is defined generally as a child who has violated any state or local law; a federal law or law of another state; or who has escaped from confinement in a local or state correctional facility. Juveniles are subject to police intervention for a broader range of behaviors than are adults. Juvenile status offenses include alcohol violations (possession of), curfew violations, disobeying parents, running away, and school truancy. Status offenders may be stopped and questioned by police, and returned home to their parents, to school, or to the juvenile court intake officer (explained later in Chapter 8).

Most serious property and personal violent crimes are committed by adult offenders over the age of 18. Considerable attention is directed at delinquent behavior and juvenile offending, however, for at least two reasons. Juvenile-age youth commit a disproportionate number of crimes (compared with their proportion of the population); and delinquency prevention efforts are the first step in reducing crime and violence committed by adult offenders. Criminologists, social scientists, lawmakers, and policymakers have focused their efforts on examining the causes of juvenile crime, and on developing programs and public policies to prevent delinquency and correct juvenile offenders.

## The Extent and Seriousness of Juvenile Delinquency and Victimization

Children and youth are victims of theft and violent crimes. Some juveniles are victims of abuse and neglect at the hands of their parents or other caregivers. The term “dependent and neglected children” describes those who are not provided with proper shelter, clothing, food, clean and safe living conditions, and medical needs. Child abuse ranges from verbal abuse to physical and sexual abuse. The extent of child victimization is reported by the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). Child victimization has been linked to problem behaviors, delinquency, and criminal behavior later in life. An understanding of victimization and juvenile delinquency is therefore important for a better understanding of the most appropriate juvenile justice system responses to these problems. Some highlights from *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report* (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006) indicate the seriousness and extent of juvenile victimization in the United States:

- On average, between 1980 and 2002 about 2,000 juveniles were murdered annually in the United States.
- In 2002, on average, four juveniles were murdered daily in the United States.
- Children under 6 years of age who were victims of murder were most often killed by a parent.
- Nearly one million (906,000) children were victims of abuse or neglect in 2003, a rate of 12 victims per 1,000 children ages 0–17.

- As juveniles age, they are less likely to be victims of a violent crime by a family member.
- About two thirds of violent crimes with juvenile victims occur in a residence.
- Youth between ages 7 and 17 are about as likely to be victims of suicide as they are to be victims of homicide.
- About half of all violent crimes experienced by male and female students occurred in school or on the way to and from school.
- Many youth are subjected to inappropriate and potentially dangerous experiences on the Internet (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006, pp. 19–52).

Juvenile offending is often perceived to be extensive and serious, despite the fact that most serious property and violent crimes are committed by offenders over 18 years of age. Violent crimes committed by juveniles less than 18 years of age have actually declined in the past several years. Crimes committed by youth are newsworthy events that get a lot of attention from the news media. Violent crimes naturally are reported more often, and get a disproportionate amount of news coverage, so the public often gets a distorted view of the true extent of juvenile crime. Television, radio, and newspapers play an important role in society, informing the public about important events. Citizens depend on the media as a source of information. Most Americans' knowledge and opinions of crime and justice are based on what they see on television and read in the newspapers (Warr, 2000). Research studies have shown that television and the news media present a distorted and exaggerated view of the extent and seriousness of crime, and tend to portray racial minorities as responsible for the majority of crime (Surette, 1998; Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001). The extensive national television and news media reporting of school shooting incidents presented the false impression that most schools are unsafe and violent places, and that children and youth are more at risk of victimization in schools than elsewhere (Lawrence & Mueller, 2003). In fact, only a small percentage of violent victimization and homicides involving juvenile victims occur in schools. Children and youth are at greater risk of victimization in their own homes and in other parts of their communities. Understanding the true extent and source of juvenile crime and victimization is the first step to responding effectively to the problem.

Homicide tends to receive the most attention in government and news media reports of deaths of children and youth. Deaths by homicide, however, are *not* the most common causes of deaths of children and young people. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the leading cause of death for children and youth is accidents and unintentional injury; homicide ranks fourth for children ages 5–9, fifth for youth ages 10–14, and second for youth and young adults ages 15–19. More youth aged 10–14 were victims of suicide (244) than homicide (202) in the United States in 2003 (Heron & Smith, 2007). The rank and frequency of leading causes of death for young people are reported in Table 1.1. It should be noted that one reason homicide ranks higher as a cause of death among children and youth is because they are less likely to die of “natural” health-related deaths than older people. Other reports have confirmed that suicide is a leading cause of death of young people. Snyder and Sickmund (2006) reported that between 1990 and 2001, suicide was more prevalent than homicide among white juveniles (p. 25). The statistical reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2008b) note that

**Table 1.1** 10 Leading Causes of Death, United States, 2003 (All Races, Both Sexes)

Rank	Age Groups		
	5–9	10–14	15–19
1	Unintentional injury 1,096	Unintentional injury 1,522	Unintentional injury 6,755
2	Malignant neoplasms 516	Malignant neoplasms 560	Homicide 1,938
3	Congenital anomalies 180	Suicide 244	Suicide 1,487
4	Homicide 122	Congenital anomalies 206	Malignant neoplasms 690
5	Heart disease 104	Homicide 202	Heart disease 393

**SOURCE:** Adapted from Heron, M. P., & Smith, B. L. (2007). Deaths: Leading causes for 2003. *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 55(10), p. 17.

while homicide is one of the leading causes of death among children and youth, many deaths can be prevented through better education and supervision to prevent accidental deaths and through more comprehensive provision of mental health services for young people. Law enforcement and juvenile justice officials are focusing efforts on reducing the number of homicides and nonfatal victimization of juveniles.

## Measures of Juvenile Offending and Victimization

The primary measures of juvenile crime are **official measures** by police, courts, and corrections; self-report measures; and victimization surveys. *Official crime statistics* are often considered the most accurate measures of crime and are the ones most often reported in the news media and by justice agencies. They are not a precise measure of the true extent of crime, however, because many crimes are not reported to police or other criminal justice agencies. The problem of unreported crime led criminologists to devise other **unofficial methods** of measuring crime. **Self-report measures** are confidential questionnaires administered to samples of youth who voluntarily report on their own involvement in delinquent activities, whether or not they were ever caught. Self-reports provide a more complete picture of juvenile delinquency, but are not completely error free since they depend on subjects' honesty and reliability of memory. **Victimization surveys** are a third measure of crime designed to supplement official statistics and self-report measures. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)

has been administered regularly to a representative sample of the U.S. population, asking respondents whether and how often they have been victims of crime and asking about the perpetrators and circumstances of the crime. The NCVS is limited to juvenile victims aged 12 to 17, so younger victims are not included. Victimization surveys are not as reliable and accurate for measuring juvenile offending as are official measures and self-reports. Victims may not be able to identify their perpetrator; and even if they can, they may not know if the perpetrator is a juvenile or a young adult offender. Victimization surveys of crime are not highly reliable and error-free measures, nor are they intended to replace official police statistics. The School Crime Supplement (SCS) to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is a more accurate measure of juvenile victimization, but it is limited to crimes that occur in and around schools (see Lawrence, 2007).

In summary, self-report and to a lesser extent victim surveys are valuable supplements to official statistics and provide information about crime that is not available from police and court statistics. Each of the crime measures has strengths and weaknesses, but together they provide the best available measures of juvenile crime. Readers desiring to know more about the extent and seriousness of juvenile victimization and offending are encouraged to see *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report* (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

### Official Statistics on Juvenile Offending

Official measures of juvenile offending include statistics compiled by police, courts, and corrections. Many juvenile offenders who are arrested by police, however, are not referred to a juvenile court or correctional agency, so the latter two statistical reports do not include many offenders who are known to police. Local, county, and state police reports are compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and published in an annual report on *Crime in the United States*, more commonly known as the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2008). While the UCR is considered the “official” report on crime in the United States, it is at best an estimate, since many crimes are not reported to police. Crimes are more likely to be reported if they involve a serious injury or large economic loss, and if the victim wants law enforcement involved. Changes in crimes reported therefore represent more than changes in the number of crimes committed. They may also reflect changes in victims’ willingness to report crimes. Police reports of crime are also a measure of police policies and practices as much as they are a measure of juvenile offending. For example, more juvenile crime will be detected and more arrests are likely to be made where there is a greater concentration of police patrols. Another important distinction is that UCR statistics report the number of arrests made, not the number of persons arrested. A person can be arrested more than once in a year. Furthermore, one arrest can represent more than one crime; and UCR data report only the most serious offense for which a person was arrested. The FBI is implementing a new National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) that collects data on each reported crime incident. Under this system, local police departments will be required to provide more information on each incident and arrest, including the victim and offender. The new

NIBRS program will provide more information on juvenile crime when it is fully implemented throughout the United States. More details on the method and accuracy of the FBI's UCR data and the NIBRS program are available in *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report* (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006) and the FBI's report on *Crime in the United States* (FBI, 2008). The number and percentage of arrests of persons under age 18 are reported in Table 1.2.

**Table 1.2** Juvenile Arrests in 2005

Most Serious Offense	2005 Juvenile Arrest Estimates	Percentage of Juvenile Arrests		Percentage Change	
		Female	Under Age 15	1996–2005	2001–2005
<i>Total</i>	2,143,700	29	30	–25	–6
<i>Violent Crime Index</i>	95,300	18	31	–25	0
Murder, manslaughter	1,260	10	10	–47	16
Forcible rape	3,940	2	37	–25	–15
Robbery	28,910	9	23	–34	13
Aggravated assault	61,200	24	34	–20	–5
<i>Property Crime Index</i>	418,500	34	34	–44	–15
Burglary	78,000	12	33	–44	–13
Larceny–theft	294,900	42	35	–43	–15
Motor vehicle theft	37,700	17	23	–54	–24
Arson	7,900	14	59	–24	–12
<i>Non-index Offenses</i>					
Other assaults	247,900	33	41	4	9
Forgery, counterfeiting	4,200	31	12	–52	–31
Fraud	8,200	35	18	–31	–13
Embezzlement	1,200	44	6	–15	–40
Stolen property (buying, receiving, possessing)	22,300	17	25	–48	–16
Vandalism	104,100	14	42	–28	–3
Weapons (carry, possess)	44,800	11	34	–14	24

Most Serious Offense	2005 Juvenile Arrest Estimates	Percentage of Juvenile Arrests		Percentage Change	
		Female	Under Age 15	1996–2005	2001–2005
Drug abuse violations	191,800	17	16	–10	–7
Driving under influence	17,800	22	2	–4	–13
Liquor law violations	126,400	36	9	–20	–13
Drunkenness	15,900	24	12	–39	–21
Disorderly conduct	201,400	32	40	3	14
Curfew and loitering	140,800	30	28	–27	0
Runaways	109,000	58	35	–44	–16

SOURCE: Adapted from Snyder, 2007, p. 3.

Law enforcement agencies arrested an estimated 2.1 million juveniles in 2005. Juveniles (under 18 years of age) accounted for 12% of all violent crime arrests in 2005, including 5% of murders, 11% of forcible rapes, 15% of robberies, and 12% of aggravated assaults; and 26% of all property crime arrests in 2005 (Snyder, 2007, p. 1). The number of arrests of juveniles for murder has been declining since the peak year of 1993 when there were 3,790 juvenile arrests for murder; in 2005 there were 1,260 juvenile arrests for murder, about one third of the number in 1993. Of the estimated 1,650 juveniles murdered in 2005, 36% were under 5 years of age, 71% were male, 50% were white, and 50% were killed with a firearm (Snyder, 2007, p. 1). There was a slight increase (2%) in juvenile arrests for murder from 1,110 in 2004 to 1,260 in 2005. The juvenile arrest rate for simple assault increased slightly, and females accounted for 33% of those arrests (Snyder, 2007).

Juvenile arrests disproportionately involved minorities. The racial composition of the juvenile population in 2005 was 78% white, 17% black, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian. Most Hispanics (an ethnic group, not a race) were classified as white. Of the juvenile arrests for violent crimes in 2005, 48% were white youth, 50% were black youth, and Asian youth and American Indian youth each made up 1%. For property crime arrests, the proportions were 67% white youth, 30% black youth, 2% Asian youth, and 1% American Indian youth. Black youth were overrepresented in juvenile arrests (Snyder, 2007, p. 9).

### Self-Report Measures

Criminologists have used self-report studies such as the National Youth Survey to get a more accurate measure of the true extent of delinquency (Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985). Self-report surveys provide a more comprehensive measure of delinquency than police reports, but they also have weaknesses. The samples used are relatively small and may not be representative of the population of juvenile offenders, so the results may

underreport juvenile crime. Self-report studies are also vulnerable to response errors, as youth may overstate or underreport their offending behavior. Self-report measures do, however, offer an important supplement to **official measures of delinquency** and provide a more complete picture of the true extent of juvenile crime. Results of self-report measures show that delinquent behavior is spread more equally among youth of all social classes, and in fact white middle-class youth report involvement in offenses such as drug violations to a greater extent than lower-class and minority youths (Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985; Agnew, 2001). Self-report measures are very important for their contribution to providing a more complete picture of delinquent behavior. Findings that some delinquent behavior is nearly universal among all youth regardless of social class or ethnic and racial group led to the development of additional research and theories to explain delinquent involvement of middle-class youth and females. Elliott (1994) has emphasized the importance of using and integrating both self-reports and official statistics to gain a more complete understanding of the extent and seriousness of juvenile delinquency. Self-reports are regularly used to supplement official records, especially for the kinds of delinquent activities that are less likely to be reported by police. The “Youth Risk Behavior Survey” is regularly administered to a representative sample of youth in the United States to assess the extent and seriousness of risky behaviors in which youth are involved (Centers for Disease Control, 2008a). This includes both victimization experiences (being threatened with a weapon or assaulted) and deviant or illegal behaviors (being in a fight, carrying a weapon, using drugs). The “Monitoring the Future” surveys administered regularly to high school students are a good example of the value of self-reports for assessing the extent of young peoples’ drug and alcohol abuse and other delinquent behavior (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2008).

SOURCE: © Butch Martini/Getty Images.



**Photo 1.1** Juvenile males are at risk of engaging in deviant and delinquent behavior.



## SUMMARY

- Juveniles are involved in many crimes each year, both as perpetrators and as victims.
- Children and youth are subject to legal intervention for status offenses such as running away, school truancy, and curfew violations.
- Juvenile delinquency is defined according to the age of jurisdiction and varies among the states in the United States.
- Official measures of juvenile crime include those by police, the courts, and corrections agencies.
- Unofficial measures of juvenile crime include self-report and victim surveys, and provide a more complete description of the true extent of juvenile crime.

## KEY TERMS

Status offenses	Unofficial measures of delinquency
Juvenile delinquency	Self-report measures
Official measures of delinquency	Victimization surveys

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the ages for juvenile jurisdiction in your state? For the states next to you and in your region? Scan various Web resources (below) and review the differences in age limits for defining *juveniles* among the states.
2. What are the types of “official” measures of delinquency? What are the “unofficial” measures of delinquency? Which measures—official or unofficial—are likely to report a higher number of crimes or delinquent acts? Explain why.
3. Think back to when you were a teenager between the ages of 13 and 18. Based on personal experience, observation, or reliable admissions, how many acts of crime and delinquency do you personally recall having been committed by your friends, acquaintances, siblings, and yourself?
4. Do the same as in Question 3, but for how many times someone, including yourself, was a victim of a crime.
5. For how many of the above (No. 3 or No. 4) acts of delinquency was a person stopped, questioned, or apprehended by police?

## WEB RESOURCES

Juvenile offenders and victims: 2006 national report: <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/ojstatbb/nr2006/downloads/NR2006.pdf>

For the latest juvenile justice statistics, visit OJJDP's Statistical Briefing Book:  
<http://ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/ojstatbb/index.html>

FBI Uniform Crime Reports (UCR): <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS): <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/cnh05.pdf>

*Monitoring the Future* self-report survey data: <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/>

*The Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*: <http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/>

Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS): <http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbs/index.htm>