



# background

## Juvenile Crime Update

# After the Storm

*Crime rates fall steadily following 1993 peak*

**V**iolent juvenile crime is in a prolonged free-fall.

Crimes such as murder, rape, and aggravated assault have dropped steadily since 1994, when an historically-high level of youth violence swept America and was answered with changes in public policy that hardened the way courts in most states deal with serious juvenile offenders.

Most experts agree that the improved crime trends are the result of a combination of factors rather than any particular program or condition. These factors include a steady drop in the use of handguns, a strong economy, shrinking drug markets, changes in policing practices, and greater community involvement in youth and anti-crime activities.

“Juvenile crime is going to fluctuate and the explanation as to why it does is always going to be somewhat speculative,” said Edward P. Mulvey, Ph.D., a University of Pittsburgh Professor of Psychiatry in the Law and Psychiatry Program at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic.

“In regard to the recent decline, I think there is something to be said about a concerted effort in law enforcement and gun confiscation, and probably shifts in drug markets, having a lot to do with it.”

National crime data gathered by the Department of Justice reveals both statistical trends and key characteristics

of juvenile crime offenders, their crimes, and victims.

### Juvenile Arrests

An estimated 2.6 million youths under the age of 18 were arrested in 1998. For the fourth consecutive year, America saw a decline in the number of juveniles arrested for Violent Crime Index offenses – murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. Between 1994 and 1998, juvenile arrests for those crimes fell 19%, compared to a 6% decline for adults.

However, juvenile arrests in 1998 for Violent Crime Index offenses were still 15% greater than the number reported in 1989.

### Murder

Juvenile homicides have also fallen steadily, although the murder toll remains higher than that seen in the mid-1980s.

In 1998, there were 1,960 murder victims under the age of 18 – down from the 2,880 juveniles murdered in 1993, when the toll was the highest ever in the U.S. The good news, however, is tempered by the fact that the recent decline has only returned the murder toll to the level reported in 1988, when youth violence was rising in America.

Fewer juveniles are also being arrested for murder. In 1998, an estimated 2,100 juveniles were arrested for murder – down from the 3,800 murder arrests made in 1993.

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### Victims

The age and gender of young people are factors in assessing their risk of becoming victims of murder.

Females face the greatest risk of being murdered in their first year of life and at age 23. Victims under the age of 12 are more likely to have been killed by family members. Older murder victims are more likely to be male and to have been killed with a firearm.

About 26% of the juveniles who were murdered between 1980 and 1997 were killed by another juvenile.

### Influence of Guns

The use of firearms powerfully influences violent juvenile crime trends. Nearly all of the increase in juvenile homicides from 1984 to 1993 – and all of the decline since – has been in murders committed with a firearm, with the hand-

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gun being the weapon of choice.

From 1980-1997, about 77% of the juveniles aged 15 years and older who were murdered by another juvenile were killed with a gun.

“Teenage males have always been known to be the world’s worst dispute resolvers,” said Alfred Blumstein, Ph.D., Director of the National Consortium on Violence Research at Carnegie Mellon University’s H. John Heinz III School of Public Policy and Management. “They have always fought. What changed in the late 1980s was the weaponry they fought with. It changed from non-lethal fists to very lethal handguns. The greater prevalence of handguns in the group both escalated the weaponry and provided an incentive to act before the other guy did.”

**After-School Violence**

Crime data suggest that, despite recent concern over school safety, children are much more likely to become victims of crime outside the classroom.

Violent crime against juveniles peaks during the hours of 3 and 4 p.m., when 10% of all violent crime against juveniles is committed.

**Reasons for Decline**

Experts suggest that it was no coincidence that gun-related homicides and drug arrests rose sharply at a time when crack cocaine began to be widely distributed on America’s streets. The crack industry leaned heavily on a labor force of juveniles, particularly black urban males. Street dealers vulnerable to being robbed of drugs and money armed themselves, more handguns made their way into poor neighborhoods, and armed youth gangs emerged in greater numbers.

“It was a terrible time for young

*The use of firearms, particularly handguns, has been a powerful influence on violent juvenile crime trends in the last decade*

people’s involvement in drug markets and in gun availability. It’s not rocket science to say that if you put a bunch of handguns in a group of impulsive 14-year-olds in the drug trade you’re going to see some violent crime,” said Mulvey.

The subsequent decline, Blumstein suggests, owes much to heightened efforts to curb access to handguns, such as more vigorous crime gun tracing and background checks for gun purchases, as well as the decline in the number of crack users beginning in the early 1990s, which has led drug markets to recede. At the same time, the economy has improved significantly and

economic gains are shared by a wider segment of the population, including those at high-risk of engaging in violence, such as teenagers and high-school drop outs.

Among the other factors likely contributing to lower crime rates are community-based initiatives, such as community policing, mediation and negotiation among youth gangs, mentoring programs, and community center activities for young people.

Just how long the juvenile crime rates will continue to slide is unclear. Juvenile crime trends historically are marked by peaks and valleys.

References

*This report was based on the following publications:*

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*Children, Youth & Family background* is published by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, a program of the University Center for Social and Urban Research. These reports are based on available research and are provided as overviews of topics related to children and families.

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