



University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development

Juvenile Crime Update

Facts vs. Perceptions

“Superpredator” theory belies crime data

The shocking accounts of school rampage murders, urban street killings and other high-profile youth crime that have become almost a staple of the nightly news tend to obscure more encouraging juvenile crime trends and reinforce an image of a violent-prone generation of children that belies the facts.

Violent juvenile crime has fallen steadily from the historically-high levels witnessed in the early 1990s. Murders committed in schools remain statistically-rare events.

And the notion of that children today represent a generation of “superpredators” conflicts with the most extensive juvenile crime data gathered to date.

“We’re at a low point for violence, not just violence that involves kids, but the whole population. But if you ask people on the street, they tend to think everything is terrible,” said Melissa Sickmund, co-author of *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report*, issued by the Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Such perceptions are not benign. Heightened concern over violent juvenile crime has led to significant changes in the way courts deal with young offenders.

Most states have passed laws making it easier, if not mandatory, for

juveniles accused of violent crimes to be tried as adults in adult court, where they are more likely to be incarcerated, rather than being tried as children in juvenile courts, where the emphasis is on rehabilitation.

A Diet of Shocking Crimes

Perceptions that juvenile crime is out of control and that there is a new breed of more violent children in America have been shaped by a number of factors.

Juvenile violence has been a hot topic in recent years, attracting intense coverage by the news media and increasing study among government agencies and universities.

As a rule, statistically rare – yet extremely shocking – incidents, such as school rampage shootings and murders committed by young children, receive widespread news coverage.

But national crime data show that, year in and year out, the overwhelming majority of juvenile crime is non-violent property crime.

And, over the last four years, America has witnessed a steady drop in violent juvenile crime, including a significant decrease in the number of juveniles murdered and the number of juveniles arrested for murder.

“Most juvenile crime is not violent crime, it is small stuff, property crime – but that’s boring, that’s not news,” said Sickmund. “It’s frustrating for people in the system, especially the perception

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Juvenile crime rates have fallen steadily since reaching historic levels in 1993. Data suggests that the use of handguns is a strong influence on the trends. See Report #31

that juvenile justice is a failure.”

The Phantom ‘Superpredator’

The image of a new breed of violent juvenile grew in popularity in the early 1990s, when, in fact, violent juvenile crime soared to new heights. The term “superpredator” emerged as a label for what some saw as generation of young people who were more cold-hearted and violent than their predecessors.

“I think that we have created an image in the public’s mind over an extended period that will take awhile to decay,” said Edward P. Mulvey, University of Pittsburgh Professor of Psychiatry in the Law and Psychiatry Program at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic.

“It wasn’t just the media. There were academics touting the next wave of super-predators. As it turns out, it is probably the biggest social science-media-political

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myth that has been promoted in a good while.”

The most damning evidence against the superpredator theory is the steady decline in violent juvenile crime after 1994. If the sharp increase in juvenile homicide, for example, was the work of a new generation of more predatory youths, why has violent crime fallen steadily over the last four years, when the population of high-crime aged youth has increased?

Even the crime data during the violent period between 1987 and 1993 raise doubt about the validity of the superpredator theory.

Alfred Blumstein, Director of the National Consortium on Violence Research at Carnegie Mellon University, suggests that a superpredator would be expected to use a gun, knife, club, fist – any means available – to commit murder. Yet, the increases in juvenile homicide in the early 1990s were almost entirely driven by the increase of murders committed with only a handgun.

“Don’t be afraid of your children,” Sickmund said. “They are not weird or different. They are just like you were. The difference is guns. Much of the severe stuff is very related to access to guns.”

Schools & Crime

High-profile school rampage shootings tend to paint a picture of in-school violence that is much worse than what is reflected in the juvenile crime data.

Violent crime against juveniles peaks during the after-school hours of 3 and 4 p.m., according to the Department of Justice. And those students who are victims of crime at school are most

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likely to be victims of nonviolent crime. Theft is by far the most common in-school crime, accounting for 60% or more of the crime reported in schools during a typical year.

Murder committed in school is rare, so rare that it is statistically difficult to generalize about it.

For example, no in-school murders were reported in a nationwide survey of the administrators of 1,234 public elementary, middle, and high schools during the 1996-97 school year. Using other data collection methods, such as newspaper clippings and media database

searches, another study found that a total of 63 students nationwide were murdered in school from 1992-1994 – a small fraction of the 7,294 children ages 5-19 who were murdered outside of school during that two-year period.

“For kids, it is more dangerous going to and from school. It is more dangerous in their homes,” Mulvey said. “This notion that schools are this environment that must be protected because they are so out of control is just not born out by the facts.”

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References

This report was based on the following publications:

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Contacts

- Edward P. Mulvey, Ph.D., University of Pittsburgh Professor of Psychiatry in the Law and Psychiatry Program at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic. Contact: Craig Dunhoff, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center News Bureau, (412) 624-2607.
- Melissa Sickmund, Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Center for Juvenile Justice, 710 Fifth Avenue Pittsburgh, PA 15219-3000; (412) 227-6950.
- 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. Contact: Peggy Neely, Carnegie Mellon Department of Public Relations, (412) 268-4381; pegneely@andrew.cmu.edu

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Co-Directors: Christina J. Groark, PhD.; Robert B. McCall, PhD. **Associate Director:** Carl N. Johnson, PhD.

background Editor: Robert B. McCall, PhD.; **Writer:** Jeffery Fraser (412) 731-6641, e-mail: Fraser53@msn.com

Office of Child Development, University of Pittsburgh, University Center for Social and Urban Research, 121 University Place, Pittsburgh, PA 15260; (412) 624-7425; fax: (412) 624-1187

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