Youth Violence: Perception Versus Reality
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As public concern grows over juvenile violence, the juvenile court system is increasingly seen as weak and ineffective. Federal and state legislators are under pressure to pass stricter juvenile crime laws, send more youth to adult court, and make the juvenile system more formalized and adversarial. However, our research shows that some of this public concern is based on inaccurate perceptions of who is responsible for violence in America. Specifically, there is confusion over the difference between crime by juveniles and crime by youth, which includes young adults.

Juvenile Crime or Youth Crime?

Conventional wisdom suggests that anti-crime policy should focus on juveniles because they are responsible for most violent crime. But this common perception is inaccurate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violent is Not Primarily “Juvenile”</th>
<th>Percent Under Age 18 in 1997</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Population</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Arrests</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent Index Arrests</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrests for Murder</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property Index Arrests</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Highlighting juvenile crime rates by contrasting them with adult crime rates hides the fact that young adults (ages 18 - 23) are violent at an even higher rate than juveniles. The United States has a profound youth violence problem; juvenile violence is only a part of this problem.
In tracking changes in murder, for example, analysts often compare juvenile murder arrests with all adult arrests for murder. The results of this analysis suggest that juveniles were largely responsible for the increase in murder arrests during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

However, examining the rate of arrests in this way can be misleading and ignores the fact that the crime rate among young adults (youth) in their late teens and early twenties is often equal to, or higher than, the rate among juveniles (under age 18). This is clear when we look at the 1997 per capita rate of arrests for Violent Index Crimes (homicide, forcible rape, aggravated assault, and robbery).
The "age-crime curve" in 1997 formed by these age-specific arrest rates reveals that the rate of violent crime peaked in the late teen years, with most of the peak crime years actually falling in the adult category.

If data for adults between the ages of 18 and 23, with their high rates of arrest, are combined with data for the far more numerous low-rate adults over age 25, the contrast between juvenile and adult crime may obscure significant differences within the adult category and make it appear as if only juveniles have very high rates of violent crime.

The public presentation of murder trends over the past decade is a case in point. Arrest rates for murder increased sharply during the late 1980s and early 1990s, a time of great concern about juvenile violence. During this period, arrest rates for murder doubled among juveniles while remaining relatively flat among adults.

This comparison made it seem as if the juvenile justice system was failing to control crime. Most states reacted by making radical changes in their juvenile justice systems and enacting policies to send more juvenile offenders to criminal court. However, a closer look at the data shows that the dramatic increase in murder arrests between 1980 and 1994 was due to the increase in arrests of juveniles and young adults, not juveniles alone.

This is clear if we examine actual increases in the number of murder arrests rather than the rate of murder.
arrests. The entire increase in murder arrests between 1980 and 1994 was due to growth in arrests among young people, but adults (ages 18 - 23) and juveniles (ages 13 - 17) were equally responsible for the increase.

### Policy Implications

Public perceptions of growing juvenile violence have had serious policy implications in the past decade. State and federal policymakers concluded that something was terribly wrong with the nation's juvenile justice system. States de-emphasized the juvenile court's traditional mission of individualized intervention and rehabilitation and moved to embrace the retribution model used in the criminal justice system. In addition, they enacted policies to send thousands of juveniles to adult court.

Yet, as research makes clear, the growing rate of serious violence in the United States during the late 1980s and early 1990s was not due to the behavior of juveniles alone. It reflected a more generalized surge in youth violence.

This suggests that current arrangements for dealing with violent young adults are in need of repair, especially now that the adult justice system is responsible for a larger proportion of all violent young people, including thousands of young offenders once defined as juveniles. In order to address the nation's violence problem more fully, the justice system as a whole should be working to create new and effective approaches to intervening with youth in general.

### Other Publications by the Authors

- Jeffrey A. Butts