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## OJJDP Update on Research

Verne L. Speirs, Administrator

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# Study Sheds New Light on Court Careers of Juvenile Offenders

A youth's second court appearance may be an early warning sign of future delinquency, according to a new study on the court careers of juvenile offenders. This finding is important because many courts currently concentrate their energies and limited resources on youth who have appeared in court five or six times and have been labeled chronic offenders. However, the study's findings indicate that although the majority of youth (59 percent) went to juvenile court only once, juveniles who are referred to court for a second time before age 16 are very likely to continue their delinquent behavior.

The study, *Court Careers of Juvenile Offenders*, was conducted for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) by Howard Snyder of the National Center for Juvenile Justice. It analyzed the court careers of 69,504 youth born between 1962 and 1965 who were processed by the juvenile courts in Maricopa County (Phoenix), Arizona, and in the State of Utah. It examines the characteristics of a juvenile offender from the court's perspective and describes the type and prevalence of offenses committed by youth.

The findings from this study can help practitioners and policymakers working

in the juvenile justice system to devise new intervention programs and strategies.

According to the research:

- Only 5 percent of the youth referred to juvenile court were ever charged with a violent offense,\* and less than 1 percent had more than one violent offense referral in their court career.

- Youth *most* likely to have a second referral to court were those originally charged with burglary, truancy, motor vehicle theft, or robbery.

- Youth *least* likely to commit a second offense were originally charged with underage drinking, running away, or shoplifting.

- Those referred for a violent offense had been or are likely to be charged with a wide range of delinquent behaviors.

### From the Administrator:

We know from past research that a relatively small number of youths are responsible for a large portion of the offenses committed by juveniles. A logical next step, then, is to ask what courts can do to intervene early on to deter these youth from committing further serious delinquent acts.

To help answer this question, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) funded a research study to examine the delinquent careers of chronic juvenile offenders from the court's perspective.

The findings from this project have important implications for the juvenile justice system, including courts, probation, corrections, and

other professionals in the field. However, because of busy schedules and a lack of time to read indepth reports, research results such as these often don't make it into the hands of policymakers and practitioners. To help remedy this, we produced this OJJDP Research Update, which briefly summarizes—in an easy-to-read format—findings about the court careers of juvenile offenders.

The findings from this study can be especially helpful to juvenile justice decisionmakers in developing policy. We believe they can help jurisdictions across the Nation develop programs to respond more effectively to serious juvenile offenders.

Verne L. Speirs  
Administrator

\* In this study, violent offenses included criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

## Juveniles and court careers

More than half of all youth (58 percent) first appeared in court *before* age 16. The statistics show that boys were more likely to recidivate than girls: 46 percent of all males had more than one court referral compared to only 29 percent of the females.

Eighty-one percent of all youth referred to court were referred at least once for a delinquent offense, i.e. a criminal law violation. The remaining youth were charged only with status offenses—acts that are offenses only if committed by a juvenile, such as running away, truancy, or underage drinking.

Whether a youth commits another crime was also related to the type of offense that resulted in the youth's first court referral. Those most likely to recidivate were first referred for burglary, truancy, motor vehicle theft, or robbery.

## Violent offenses and juveniles

The younger a juvenile was on entering the court system, the greater the likelihood that the youth would later be referred for a violent offense. For example, a youth whose first court referral was at age 13 was twice as likely as a youth first referred at age 16 to have a violent offense referral.

Although youth who committed violent offenses were the least common of all juvenile offenders (5 percent), these juveniles were the most likely to return to court charged with a violent offense. This pattern was found among both boys and girls.

Youth most likely to commit a subsequent violent offense were first referred to court for robbery; more than half of these youth recidivated, and one-eighth were later referred to juvenile court for another violent offense. The second group of youth most likely to be referred for a subsequent violent offense were

those whose first referral was for aggravated assault or burglary. Juveniles who were first referred for underage drinking, truancy, drug law violations, or shoplifting were *least likely* to commit a subsequent violent offense.

This study found little evidence for specialization, when a youth is referred again and again for the same type of offense. Most youth tended to be involved in a wide range of offense types.

## Who are chronic offenders?

Chronic juvenile offenders are youth who are most likely to continue their law-violating behavior. It has been the juvenile justice system's goal to identify chronic offenders as early in their court careers as possible and design effective intervention strategies. Most youth never return to juvenile court after their

Table 1

Percentage of youth who returned to juvenile court—breakdown by age at referral and the current number of referrals in the juvenile's court career

Age at referral	Number of referrals									All referrals
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
10	61%	84%	96%	97%	99%	96%	93%	94%	95%	71%
11	60	85	91	92	98	99	99	96	100	72
12	59	83	89	97	98	95	98	96	98	72
13	57	82	90	93	95	97	96	98	98	73
14	53	77	86	91	92	94	96	95	95	70
15	45	69	80	84	89	89	91	93	92	66
16	33	55	68	73	77	81	82	83	86	54
17	16	27	36	41	45	48	50	53	51	30
Ages 10 through 17	41	59	67	71	74	77	77	79	79	56

Note: To interpret the values in this table it may help to provide a few examples: Seventy-seven percent of all youth whose second referral to court occurred at age 14 were referred again. Fifty-nine percent of all youth with two referrals had a subsequent referral to juvenile court. Seventy percent of all youth referred at age 14 were referred later for a new offense.

first referral; the juveniles who are referred to court again often compile a long list of offenses by their eighteenth birthdays. Traditionally, the court has waited until juveniles accumulate five or six referrals before labeling them chronic offenders.

The study's major finding—that youth who were referred to juvenile court for a second time before age 16 were likely to continue their law-violating behavior—indicates that juveniles with two offenses may, in fact, be identified as chronic offenders. This study argues that these juveniles should be treated the same as those chronic offenders who have committed five or six offenses.

## Implications for the juvenile court

Juvenile courts have the opportunity of intervening in the lives of a large percentage of youth at a time when problems first become apparent. The volume of youth who enter a court restricts both the quantity and quality of attention that

can be given. It is, therefore, essential that a court's limited resources be efficiently expended and that youth who need the court's guidance be identified as quickly as possible.

The study's findings support the search for indicators of future law-violating behavior, such as risk-screening instruments. If chronic offenders are identified at an earlier age, programs could be developed to concentrate specialized resources on youth most in need of services early in their court careers.

Most importantly, the finding that a youth referred to court for the second time before the age of 16 could be considered, with a high degree of certainty, a chronic offender, implies that the courts should not wait until the youth has returned for the fourth or fifth time before taking strong action. Most of these youth will cycle through the court's dispositional alternatives, consuming more and more resources. Greater expenditures earlier in a career should shorten a youth's law-violating career, reduce future court workloads,

and provide greater protection to the community.

The data for this study were supplied by the National Juvenile Court Data Archive, supported by OJJDP. For more information about the Archive, contact:

National Juvenile Court Data Archive  
National Center for Juvenile Justice  
701 Forbes Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15219  
412-227-6950

To order a complimentary copy of the full study, contact the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850; or call 800-638-8736.

*The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and Office for Victims of Crime.*

Figure 1

Percentage of youth who returned to juvenile court after a first referral for the following offenses

