

77-NI-99-0036

SERIOUS JUVENILE DELINQUENCY: A THEORETICAL AND
STATISTICAL ASSESSMENT OF POPULATION
CHARACTERISTICS¹

By

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This article is based on Ph.D. dissertation research which was supported by Grant No. 77-NI-99-0036, awarded by the Office of Criminal Justice Education and Training, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of views or opinions stated in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Much concern is being expressed by the general public, elected officials, juvenile justice authorities and others over the need to develop a greater understanding of how to deal with the problem of serious juvenile delinquency. Many states have set up special task forces and study groups to understand this problem, make recommendations, and establish guidelines for dealing appropriately with serious juvenile offenders. However, little specific information and empirical data that distinguish serious juvenile delinquents from other youthful offenders have been made available to policy and decision makers. From a study of the secure care decision-making process operating in the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services (DYS), some progress has been made toward developing a more thorough profile of the serious juvenile offender population (Isralowitz, 1977). The purpose of this article is to provide: (1) a brief construct of the serious juvenile delinquent based on delinquency literature in general and the limited information available on serious delinquency in particular; (2) an operational definition of the serious juvenile offender for research study purposes; and, (3) the unique characteristics of youths identified by DYS regional caseworkers as serious juvenile offenders in need of secure care services.

The Serious Juvenile Offender: A Theoretical Overview

Based on the body of knowledge pertaining to juvenile delinquency, it may be generally concluded that a male² juvenile delinquent who has evidenced serious offensive behavior comes from a deteriorated neighborhood and low socioeconomic status (Shaw and McKay, 1931, 1942; Lander, 1954; Clinard, 1970). It is expected, however, that some serious juvenile offenders may be from middle- and upper-class environments (Short and Nye, 1957; Schur, 1969; Scott and Vaz, 1969; Clark and Wenninger, 1970). If both parents are present, which is not likely to be the case, the home is characterized as being tense, hostile and abusive. Parenting of the youth is poor, marked with inconsistent discipline, lack of affection, and rejection (Bandura and Walters, 1959; McCord, et al., 1959; Glueck, et al., 1966; Elder, 1968; Merton, 1969; Staub, 1971). The youth is likely to have adopted the criminally-oriented norms and values of his parents and/or peers (Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958; Kvaraceus and Miller, 1958; Cloward and Ohlen, 1960; Sutherland and Cressey, 1966; Yablonsky, 1969; Matza and Sykes, 1969; Erickson and Empey, 1969). He is frequently absent from school, has had few successful experiences there and has a low level of academic functioning (Robeson, 1936; Kvaraceus, 1945; Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1965; Reiss, 1965; Rhodes and Reiss, 1970). He is an aggressive youth with assaultive tendencies, who initiates fights, and exhibits cruelty, defiance of authority, malicious mischief, and inadequate guilt feelings. Because of his lack of internal

inhibitions, he has a poor frustration tolerance and he is impulsive and quick to act aggressively in a violent manner. He has a poor sense of morality and is not inhibited from injuring or causing suffering upon others. He has a group of friends ranging from one or two to being part of a gang unless he is an "unsocialized loner" (Hewitt and Jenkins, 1946; Jenkins, 1957, 1973; Peterson, et al., 1959; Berkowitz, 1962; Dollard, et al., 1963; Singer, 1971; Miller, 1975; Hardman, 1976). He is easily influenced by certain stimuli, such as violence on television or in the movies, which appeals to his "primitive" instincts and stimulates his drive to commit violent and/or serious offensive behavior (Berkowitz, 1962; Singer, 1971). And finally, he is usually a repeat offender who has had previous encounters with the police and juvenile authorities which serve to strengthen and reinforce his negative behavior (Tannenbaum, 1938; Wolfgang, et al., 1972; Schrag, 1973; Mann, 1976; Isralowitz, 1977).

Serious Juvenile Delinquency: An Operational Research Definition

For purposes of examining serious juvenile delinquency from a research perspective, the term is defined as: (1) the commitment of those offenses that can be categorized as being of a violent nature, i.e., the various types of homicide, forcible rape and child molestation, armed robbery, aggravated assault that involves the intent to kill or do bodily harm, kidnapping, and arson when it endangers the

lives of people; and/or, (2) the repeated violation (5 or more times)³ of offenses that have the potential for causing serious injury to another person(s). Offenses of this nature may encompass various types of larceny (e.g., auto theft, breaking and entering to steal, robbery from a person, etc.).⁴

Caseworkers' Perceptions of the Serious Juvenile
Offender: A Statistical Assessment

In order to develop a profile of the serious juvenile offender population, the differences between youths who have been labeled serious juvenile offenders by Massachusetts DYS caseworkers and those youths who represent the "general" DYS delinquent population were examined. Group differences were studied in terms of: (1) social factors--age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family composition and family stability; and (2) legal variables--number of DYS recorded offenses, number of most serious offenses,⁵ number of violent offenses, seriousness of last offense, detention and secure detention history, history of commitment by juvenile courts to the DYS for services, and DYS placement "treatment" history.

The data for this assessment were gathered from Massachusetts DYS case records of youths who had received services during the 15-month period, January 1976 to March 1977. One study group consisted of a random sample of 80 cases drawn from the population of approximately 1400 youths committed or referred by juvenile courts to the DYS for services but who had never been considered by DYS caseworkers

as serious juvenile offenders needing secure care services. This group represented the DYS "general" population. The second group, which represented the DYS "serious juvenile offender" population, consisted of all youths (N = 100) considered by DYS caseworkers to be serious juvenile delinquents during the time of this study.

Findings

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for each group, the general delinquency population and the serious delinquency population. For the social variables, the sole apparent difference between the two populations was family composition. Delinquents from the general population were more likely to come from a two-parent family, whereas serious delinquents were more likely to come from a one-parent family. For the legal variables, there appeared to be more differences between populations. Serious delinquents were likely to have more DYS recorded offenses, more serious offenses, more violent offenses, more detentions and secure detentions, more commitments to DYS for services, and more "treatment" placements than youths in the general delinquent population.

Bivariate Analysis

The next step was to determine which social and legal independent variables were related to the DYS "general" and "serious" offender

populations (dependent variables). Through the use of chi-square scores it was determined which variable characteristics most differ between the two offender populations. Since the chi-square statistic only indicates whether the variables in the study are independent or related to the serious juvenile offender population, it was necessary to use appropriate measures of association (i.e., lambda, gamma, and tau b and c) to learn the strength of the significant relationships. Table 2 provides these statistics for all social and legal variables.

The findings at this level of statistical analysis revealed that among social variables--older youths, black youths and youths from single-parent families were more likely to be viewed as serious juvenile offenders by DYS caseworkers. Among the legal characteristics used in this study, the number of recorded offenses, number of violent offenses, number of most serious offenses, level of seriousness of last offense, number of detentions and secure detentions, number of commitments, and number of "treatment" placements were significantly related to the identification of the serious offender population.

At the bivariate level of analysis, then, it is clearly evident that, while some social variables contribute to caseworkers' identification of serious juvenile offenders, legal variables exerted more influence on this process.

Multivariate Analysis⁶

Generally, it may be concluded from an examination of juvenile delinquency research studies that the introduction of appropriate statistical controls often alters the findings observed at the bivariate level of analysis. Thus, after assessing the bivariate relationships among the data, multivariate statistical techniques were used to determine whether multivariate relationships differ from bivariate findings. The procedure used was multiple regression which controls for the effect variables have on each other in order to assess the unique contribution of each specific independent variable on the dependent variable--DYS caseworkers' identification of serious juvenile offenders.

In order to determine which social variable(s) was most influential on caseworkers' determination of whether certain youths were serious juvenile offenders, legal variables were allowed to predict as much of the determination outcome, variance, as they could and the F test (a test of statistical significance) was used to see if the addition of each social variable added significantly to the determination. When legal variables were controlled and each social variable examined, only family composition was a significant indicator. This means that youths from single-parent families were more likely to be identified as serious juvenile offenders by DYS caseworkers than youths from two-parent families. While it may have been believed

that age (as of March 31, 1977) was a significant predictor of serious juvenile delinquency, this was not the case at the multiple regression level. This result was not surprising, however, because age is highly correlated with the most important legal predictors. The oldest youths in the DYS system were most likely to be involved with the greatest amount of delinquency and contact with the juvenile justice system. As the analysis of legal variables shows, they are very strong indicators of which youths are identified as serious juvenile offenders by caseworkers. Thus, any social variable closely associated with the legal variables is likely to be the strongest social indicator of serious juvenile delinquency. This is what appears to have happened with the age variable; in other words, age seems to reflect the strong influence of legal variables and consequently when it is included in certain types of statistical analysis procedures it overshadows the impact of other social characteristics. Finally, it is interesting to note that when all social variables are examined as a group, a significant relationship exists between them and whether youths are identified as serious juvenile offenders by DYS caseworkers ($F = 2.77$; $R^2 = .10$; $p < .05$). Table 3 reviews the relationship of each social variable and caseworkers' identification of serious juvenile offenders.

Legal characteristics were examined in the same manner as social variables; that is to say, social variables were allowed to predict as much as they could and then the F test was used to see if the addition of each legal variable added significantly to caseworkers'

identification of serious juvenile offenders. When social variables were controlled and each legal variable examined, all legal variables were found to be significantly related to the identification of serious offenders. Table 4 shows the relationship between legal variables and the identification process. Based on beta scores which are standardized regression coefficients computed to access the direct effect of each independent variable in the analysis, those variables most affecting the identification of serious juvenile offenders by caseworkers were: (1) number of recorded offenses; (2) number of most serious offense violations; and, (3) level of seriousness of last offense.

Summary

The purpose of this article is to provide a theoretical and statistical overview of the serious juvenile offender population. From a statistical perspective, by comparing serious juvenile offenders' social and legal attributes to those youths found in the Massachusetts DYS "general" population, a distinct profile of the serious juvenile offender as seen by DYS caseworkers has been developed. Bivariate analysis of the data reflects, in part, the conventional wisdom found in much delinquency literature by indicating that older youths, black youths and youth from single-parent families are likely to receive a more severe negative labeling status--in this case being identified as serious juvenile offenders--by juvenile justice decision makers.

Multivariate regression analysis, however, shows that the only social variable attributed to caseworkers' identification of serious juvenile offenders is family composition, i.e., youths coming from single-parent families. Regarding legal characteristics, serious juvenile offenders, as compared to other juvenile delinquents, have: (1) more recorded offenses; (2) more serious offenses; (3) more violent offenses; (4) committed a more serious last offense; (5) been detained and securely detained more often; (6) been committed by juvenile courts to the youth authority for services more often; and, (7) been placed in "treatment" facilities more often.

Throughout this research study it was evident that the most significant problem reflected by both populations of youthful offenders i.e., "serious" offenders and "general" offenders, was the degree of chronicity or recidivism (defined as those youths who have committed five or more of the most serious offenses). For example, 84 percent of the "serious offender" population and 37 percent of the "general" population consisted of chronic offenders.

Regarding the issue of violent delinquency, statistical data pointed out that as much as 63 percent of the "serious offender" population and 20 percent of the "general" population consisted of youths who have committed at least one violent offense.⁷

Footnotes

¹This article is the result of a study supported by the Office of Criminal Justice Education and Training, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions stated in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

²Male serious juvenile offenders are referred to because there were no female serious juvenile offenders identified by Massachusetts Department of Youth Services caseworkers as needing secure care services during the time this study was conducted.

³The method of defining serious juvenile offenders in terms of chronicity or recidivism is based on the Marvin Wolfgang, et al. longitudinal study, Delinquency in a Birth Cohort (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972) of delinquency in Philadelphia, where youths with records of five or more offenses were classified as "chronic recidivists" (see "Intervening With Convicted Serious Juvenile Offenders" by Dale Mann, U.S. Department of Justice, LEAA, 1976).

⁴In order to determine the most serious offense violations, a total of 89 offenses were arranged in random order and instructions were provided members of the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services Secure Care Review Team to rate each offense on a scale ranging

from one to nine, with one being the least serious and nine being the most serious offense. Using the ratings from the DYS team members, a mean score was calculated for each of the 89 offenses. All offenses were then ordered from high to low in terms of their average scores. The most serious offense, non-negligent murder, received an average score of 9 and the least serious offense, obstructing a sidewalk, received an average score of 1.66.

The next step was to group the 89 offenses into five levels of seriousness. The grouping was done by subtracting the lowest mean score (the least serious offense) from the highest mean score (the most serious offense) and dividing the difference by five. In actual numbers this process reflects $(9 - 1.66) \div 5 = 1.46$. Each level, then, had an interval width of approximately 1.46.

Level 1, the least serious offenses, included scores 1.66 (obstructing a sidewalk) to 3.08 (rude and disorderly behavior); Level 2, 3.16 (driving without a license) to 4.58 (escaping from DYS jurisdiction); Level 3, 4.66 (failure of a motorist to stop at a stop sign) to 6.00 (breaking and entering to commit a crime); Level 4, 6.05 (falsely reporting a bomb) to 7.25 (unlawful possession of heroin); and Level 5, 7.66 (possessing a fire bomb) to 9.00 (murder, non-negligent). An offense's mean score determined which level of seriousness it fell into.

⁵Those offenses categorized as level 3, 4 or 5 offense violations were viewed as the most serious offenses. Violent delinquency--level 5 offense types--was defined in terms of whether a youth committed any one of the following violations: various types of homicide, forcible rape, child molesting, armed robbery, kidnapping, arson (when it endangers the lives of people), and aggravated assault including assault and battery with a deadly weapon and assault and robbery.

⁶In order to determine which social and legal variables were associated with Massachusetts DYS caseworkers' identification of serious juvenile offenders, in terms of multiple regression analysis, the following F ratio equation (written in general form) was used:

$$F = \frac{(R^2_{y.12\dots k_1} - R^2_{y.12\dots k_2}) / (k_1 - k_2)}{(1 - R^2_{y.12\dots k_1}) / (N - k_1 - 1)}$$

where $R^2_{y.12\dots k_1}$ = the squared multiple correlation coefficient for the regression of Y on k_1 variables (the larger coefficient); and $R^2_{y.12\dots k_2}$ = the squared multiple correlation coefficient for the regression of Y on k_2 variables, where k_2 = the number of independent variables of the smaller R^2 . Calculating R^2 s in this manner and using the F test to evaluate the statistical significance of increments to identification, as it were, is a powerful method of analysis (Kerlinger and Pedhauzer, 1973:71).

⁷While careful attention was given to the interpretation of case record data in determining the extent of each youth's social and legal background, it is recognized that to a limited but certain extent these statistics reflect inappropriate offense labeling and case record entries. This "labeling" problem was evident in a few case records examined for this study, whereby youths' offense charges were the result of subjective labeling at the intake level and subsequently filtered through the system as permanent case record entries. In more than one case, for example, youths' offense records reflected charges of assault and battery with a deadly weapon--a violent offense--when in fact the deadly weapon was a shoe, stick or foot.

TABLE 1

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR THE DYS GENERAL POPULATION AND
THE DYS SERIOUS JUVENILE OFFENDER POPULATION

	General Offender Population	Serious Offender Population
<u>Social Variables</u>		
Age as of 3/31/77 ^{a,c}	16.01	16.07
Age--first offense ^{a,c}	12.11	12.06
Ethnicity ^b	white	white
Socioeconomic status ^b	< \$7,000	< \$7,000
Family composition ^b	two parents	one parent-mother
Family stability ^b	unstable	unstable
<u>Legal Variables</u>		
# of DYS recorded offenses ^a	5 (SD=3.195)	10 (SD=5.395)
# of violent offenses ^a	0 (SD=0.636)	1 (SD=1.311)
# of most serious offenses ^a	4 (SD=0.277)	8 (SD=4.457)
Level of seriousness of last offense ^b	3	3
# of detentions ^a	4 (SD=4.213)	6 (SD=4.200)
# of secure detentions ^a	2 (SD=3.004)	4 (SD=3.143)
# of commitments ^a	2 (SD=0.869)	3 (SD=2.004)
# of "treatment" placements ^a	4 (SD=2.439)	5 (SD=3.550)

^aMean score is reported.

^bMode is reported.

^cAge is reported in years and months.

TABLE 2^a

SOCIAL AND LEGAL VARIABLES INFLUENCING MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT
OF YOUTH SERVICES CASEWORKERS' IDENTIFICATION OF SERIOUS
JUVENILE OFFENDERS

BIVARIATE ANALYSIS

Independent Variable	Chi-Square	Lambda	Gamma	Tau C
<u>Social</u>				
Age as of 3/31/77	8.54**	0.13	0.29	0.19
Age as of first offense	5.74	--	--	--
Ethnicity	10.42***	0.06	0.17	0.08 ^b
Socioeconomic status	1.12	--	--	--
Family composition	7.32**	0.07	0.37	0.20
Family stability	1.75	--	--	--
<u>Legal</u>				
# of DYS recorded offenses	53.59***	0.42	0.67	0.59
# of violent offenses	38.88***	0.33	0.72	0.47
# of most serious offenses	38.71***	0.40	0.76	0.45
Level of seriousness of last offense	37.96***	0.24	0.71	0.48
# of detentions	14.68*	0.17	0.33	0.29
# of secure detentions	30.86***	0.27	0.49	0.42
# of commitments	33.01***	0.27	0.47	0.35
# of placements	22.57***	0.21	0.23	0.20

^aMeasures of association are not reported for independent variables indicating no relationship to caseworkers' decision to refer youths to the SCRT.

^bTau b is reported.

p < .01.

**
p < .05.

*
p < .10.

TABLE 3

SOCIAL VARIABLE RELATIONSHIPS TO THE IDENTIFICATION OF SERIOUS
JUVENILE OFFENDERS BY MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF
YOUTH SERVICES' CASEWORKERS

MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS

	F ^a	Significance Level ^b	Beta ^c	R ² Change ^d
Family composition	5.372	p < .05	-0.138	0.026
Age of first offense	3.472	p > .05	0.123	0.006
Socioeconomic status	1.409	p > .05	0.070	0.001
Age as of 3/31/77	1.216	p > .05	0.067	0.038
Ethnicity	0.602	p > .05	-0.048	0.017
Family stability	0.525	p > .05	0.043	0.014

^aThe F score is a test of statistical significance.

^bThe multiple regression significance level is set at the .05 level.

^cBeta weights are standardized regression coefficients computed to assess the direct effect of each independent variable in the analysis.

^dR² Change indicates the amount of variation in the dependent variable that can be statistically accounted for by a specific predictor variable.

TABLE 4

LEGAL VARIABLE RELATIONSHIPS TO THE IDENTIFICATION OF
 SERIOUS JUVENILE OFFENDERS BY MASSACHUSETTS
 DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH SERVICES' CASEWORKERS

MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS

	F ^a	Significance Level ^b	Beta ^c	R ² Change ^d
# of DYS recorded offenses	45.380	p < .01	0.546	0.20
# of most serious offenses	45.675	p < .01	0.524	0.20
Seriousness of last offense	45.221	p < .01	0.458	0.20
# of violent offenses	23.091	p < .01	0.364	0.12
# of commitments	23.474	p < .01	0.351	0.12
# of secure detentions	14.766	p < .01	0.292	0.08
# of placements	12.300	p < .01	0.284	0.07
# of detentions	9.642	p < .01	0.246	0.05

^aThe F score is a test of statistical significance.

^bThe multiple regression significance level is set at the .05 level.

^cBeta weights are standardized regression coefficients computed to assess the direct effect of each independent variable in the analysis.

^dR² Change indicates the amount of variation in the dependent variable that can be statistically accounted for by a specific predictor variable.

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