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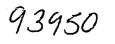
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# **Facts About Violent Juvenile Crime**

#### by

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# **FACTS ABOUT VIOLENT JUVENILE CRIME**

Violent crime is one of America's severest social problems, and it is particularly shocking when such crimes are committed by youths who seem to have no understanding of the serious harm they have caused.

Sometimes, especially in the wake of heinous and highly publicized crimes, the public becomes convinced that large numbers of our young people are predatory criminals who think nothing of killing or maiming innocent victims. At times like these citizens clamor for protection against young lawbreakers, and public officials respond with stiffer penalties for those offenders who are caught and convicted.

the best available information.

About rates of violent youth crime...



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But this periodic cycle of public outrage followed by harsher punishment apparently has not reduced violent juvenile crime. Nor has it diminished the public's fear of such crimes. Therefore, it is now appropriate to reexamine our assumptions about youth violence to determine if our responses to the problem are based on

The purpose of this booklet is to summarize the latest research on violent juvenile crime, and to describe an important new demonstration project that should extend our knowledge of the best ways to respond to the youths who commit these crimes.

# A. The nature of violent juvenile crime.

One common method of measuring crime is to look at arrest rates (although this method is imperfect because suspects who are arrested may not be representative of all those who commit crimes). The latest Uniform Crime Reports-which are compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation based on statistics from local police departments-show that persons under 18 accounted for 19 percent of the 1980 arrests for the most serious violent offenses: murder, non-negligent manslaughter, rape, robbery and aggravated assault. Among the two million arrests of juveniles in 1980, some 4 percent were for these serious violent crimes.<sup>1</sup>

The federal government also sponsors annual National Crime Surveys in which interviewers ask a representative sample of citizens about their experiences as victims of crime. In the survey for 1979, the latest from which we have data, victims attributed about 25 percent of the rapes, robberies, assaults and larcenies to offenders under 18 years old.<sup>2</sup>

However, even though they commit fewer violent crimes than adults, because juveniles are a relatively small part of the United States population as a whole their rate of committing such crimes is higher than the rate for adults, though it is lower than the rate for persons aged 18 to 20.3

While juvenile offenders account for a relatively small proportion of violent crimes, they are more apt to engage in property crimes. The 1980 Uniform Crime Reports show that juveniles accounted for 45 percent of the arrests for burglary and motor vehicle theft, 44 percent of the arrests for arson and 38 percent of the arrests for larceny.<sup>4</sup> Juvenile court statistics confirm the conclusion that juvenile offenders are much more likely to commit property crimes than violent offenses. Of the 1.3 million cases processed by the nation's juvenile courts in 1979, 4.6 percent involved serious violent crimes, 37.8 percent were serious property offenses, 37.8 percent were less serious offenses such as vandalism and assaults without weapons or injuries, and 19.8 percent involved noncriminal behavior such as truancy and running away from home.<sup>5</sup>

#### About trends in youth violence...

**ASSUMPTION:** Violent juvenile crime is increasing sharply. FACT: Violent juvenile crime did increase substantially during the 1960's and early 1970's, but the best available evidence sug-

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few years.

Between 1976 and 1980 the number of juvenile arrests for violent crimes increased by a relatively small 2.5 percent (as compared to a 17.4 percent rise for adults), and in 1980 the number of juvenile arrests for violent offenses dropped 1.8 percent.<sup>6</sup> And the National Crime Surveys for 1973 to 1977 showed slight decreases in the number of rapes, assaults and larcenies involving physical contact with victims that were attributed to juveniles.<sup>7</sup>

# result in death or serious injury. the victims.

Most juvenile crimes that are categorized as violent cause little physical harm to the victims. National Crime Surveys have indicated that 72 percent of the rapes, robberies and assaults committed by juveniles caused no injuries, 22 percent caused injuries that did not require medical attention, and 7 percent did require medical attention.<sup>8</sup> A study of 811 Columbus, Ohio youths with at least one violent crime on their records showed that 73 percent had neither threatened nor inflicted significant physical harm during those crimes.9

Nevertheless, all violent crime must be taken seriously because even those victims who escape physical injuries often suffer psychological harm from being victimized.<sup>10</sup>

gests that it has stabilized and may have even declined in the past

About the seriousness of youth violence...

ASSUMPTION: Violent crimes committed by juveniles usually

FACT: Fortunately, the overwhelming majority of violent crimes committed by juveniles do not cause serious physical injuries to

About use of weapons in juvenile crime...

ASSUMPTION: Juveniles are usually armed with guns or knives when they commit violent crimes.

FACT: Most violent crimes committed by youths do not involve the use of weapons, although the use of guns and knives may be increasing.

Researcher Marvin Wolfgang and his colleagues examined the police records of all boys born in Philadelphia in 1945 who lived in that city between their tenth and eighteenth birthdays. (This type of statistical grouping is known as a "birth cohort.") The records showed that weapons were used in 263 of the 9,934 offenses known to police.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, a Vera Institute of Justice study of juvenile court records in three New York and New Jersey counties showed that weapons were present in fewer than 17 percent of the violent juvenile crimes.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, an analysis of data collected in the federal government's National Crime Surveys indicated that juvenile offenders used weapons in 27 percent—and guns in fewer than 5 percent—of the rapes, robberies, assaults and larcenies described by victims.<sup>13</sup>

About violent delinquents and the elderly...

ASSUMPTION: Juvenile delinquents tend to commit their violent crimes against the more vulnerable members of society, particularly the elderly.

FACT: Most violent juvenile crime is committed by males against other young males. The elderly are the least likely age group to be victimized by juveniles, but crimes involving the elderly seem to be somewhat more serious.

Data from the National Crime Surveys indicate that juveniles are seven times more likely to commit rapes, robberies, personal larcenies and assaults against other juveniles than against any other age group. (Purse snatching is the one crime where the victims are more likely to be elderly and female.)<sup>14</sup> Data from police records also show that young males, as a group, are by far the most likely

victims of violent youth crime. <sup>15</sup> However, when victimizations of the elderly do occur, they tend to be slightly more serious than for any other age group. Thus, even though their chances of being victimized are statistically far lower, the elderly are often more affected by crime, and the fear of crime is more likely to cause a disruption in their way of life.<sup>16</sup>

### About violent crime in the schools...

ASSUMPTION: Schools are afflicted with a breakdown of discipline which includes frequent incidents of violence. FACT: Some schools, particularly in large urban areas, are plagued by disorder and even violence, but most have not experienced serious juvenile violence.

Public concern about crime in the schools increased markedly in the 1970's. Most disturbing of all, a 1977 study conducted by the National Institute of Education indicated that 20 percent of students feared being hurt or bothered at school at least sometimes and 4 percent had even stayed out of school to avoid such confrontations. The study estimated that 8 percent of all schools have a serious crime problem.17

Evidence from several studies indicates that school crime increased in the 1960's and leveled off after the early 1970's. Violent incidents, though statistically rare, do occur, especially in poorer urban areas. For most schools, however, the main crime problem is petty theft. Larcenies without contact between victims and offenders - e.g., theft of items left unattended - comprised 81 percent of the offenses taking place in schools, according to National Crime Survey data from 26 American cities.18 The National Institute of Education survey confirmed that theft was the most common offense committed in schools. Although teenagers' risk of being subjected to violence was higher in school that elsewhere (taking into account the amount of time spent in school), 96 percent of the attacks in school did not cause injuries serious enough to require medical attention.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, a Pennsylvania study estimated that fewer than 6 percent of the juveniles referred to court for a violent offense in 1977 committed the offense on school grounds.<sup>20</sup>

#### About repetitive youth violence...

**ASSUMPTION:** Once a youth has committed a violent crime he will probably commit more of them, and the crimes are likely to become increasingly serious.

FACT: If a juvenile offender commits one violent crime he is not necessarily prone to commit more such crimes, nor to commit increasingly serious violent offenses:

About one-quarter of the youths in a Columbus, Ohio cohort study – all of whom had been arrested for at least one violent crime before the age of 18 - had committed a serious violent offense. Of the 218 youths who had committed at least one serious violent offense, 90 percent had not committed more than one such crime.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, a study of 282 Pennsylvania youths referred to juvenile court in 1977 for violent offenses found that two-thirds had no subsequent offenses during the follow-up period.<sup>22</sup>

Studies of juvenile crime records in Philadelphia, Columbus, Minnesota, New York, and New Jersey found no uniform tendency among delinquents to escalate from less serious to more serious offenses.23

# B. The causes of violent juvenile crime.

About family influences on violent delinquency...

ASSUMPTION: Broken families, where only one parent is present, are largely responsible for spawning violent juveniles, FACT: The consensus among scholars is that the quality of the parent-child relationship, not the number of parents in the household, is related to juvenile violence.

In Violent Delinquents, a study conducted by the Vera Institute of Justice, researcher Paul Strasburg concludes:

The presence of two parents may reduce a child's chances of becoming delinquent and may play some role in limiting the number of offenses committed if the child does become delinquent. But it has little impact on

whether the child will become violent. Other facts appear to outweigh family structure in that regard. Among those other factors, an important one may be the strength of the relationship between the parent (or parents) and the child. Studies have shown that a singleparent home in which the child and parent have a good relationship may offer more protection against delinquency than a two-parent family in which relationships are strained.24

Several other studies support Strasburg's conclusion. It has been found that juveniles who commit homicide come from violent, chaotic families,<sup>25</sup> and that young murderers have been deprived of parental affection.<sup>26</sup> Turbulent family relationships have been associated with juvenile violence of all types.27 And there is a substantial amount of research showing that many delinquents are victims of parental child abuse.28

That violent delinquency is related more to the quality of family relationships than to the number of parents in the home is particularly important because single-parent households are increasingly common in our society. Writing about delinquency and the changing American family, J.W.C. Johnstone suggests:

It is likely that many single-parent families, and in particular black families with extended kinship, are a great deal more effective than they are often assumed to be . . . The tendency to look only at family structure, and to ignore the quality of life in the family, has led to grave injustices and inequalities in juvenile justice. The issue is of critical importance today in view of the changing structure of the American family.29

About mental illness and youth violence...

ASSUMPTION: Most violent juvenile offenders are seriously disturbed mentally. Why else would they commit violent crimes? FACT: The majority of juveniles who commit violent crimes are not psychotic or otherwise seriously mentally disturbed.

In the Vera Institute study of three New York and New Jersey

counties, only 14 of 143 delinquents with psychiatric histories were labeled psychopathic or one of its equivalents. Seriously disturbed youths made up a small part of the delinquent population.<sup>30</sup>

In early 1976, New York State established a special program for juveniles who were involved in serious violent behavior and who were also diagnosed as mentally ill. During a one-year period, 66 juveniles were referred to the program for screening; only 20 were considered disturbed enough to be accepted.<sup>31</sup>

Certain personality traits are often discussed in the literature on violent offenders. As summarized by Paul Strasburg they include "strong repressed feelings of rage, low self-esteem, inability to form bonds of feeling (or empathy) with other persons, limited control over impulses, and low thresholds of frustration."<sup>32</sup>.

However, some scholars suggest that these traits, along with violent behavior itself, may represent adaptations to the poverty and deprivation in which most violent offenders are reared.<sup>33</sup>

About drug abuse and youth violence...

ASSUMPTION: Drug abuse starts teenagers on the path to violent crime. 🐨

FACT: It is likely that drug abuse is linked to economically rewarding crime, but not directly to criminal acts of violence.

A recent summary of the research attributed a substantial amount of juvenile crime to substance abuse during adolescence. But the link between drug abuse and crime did not hold true for depressants, stimulants and hallucinogens. And the abusers who turned to crime did so for financial gain - in committing larcenies, burglaries and robberies they almost never resorted to violence.<sup>34</sup>

About alcohol abuse and violent delinquency...

ASSUMPTION: Alcohol abuse is an important cause of violent juvenile crime. FACT: Although the use of alcohol can be a direct stimulus to

#### violent behavior in some cases, the relationship between alcohol abuse and violent juvenile crime is still unclear.

A recent review of the literature found evidence that alcohol abuse stimulates violent behavior under some conditions. But the evidence was insufficient to determine how much violent juvenile crime is attributable to alcohol abuse.<sup>35</sup>

#### C. Responses to violent juvenile crime.

ASSUMPTION: Locking up more juvenile offenders would teach them a lesson and discourage them from committing additional crimes.

FACT: The bulk of the evidence suggests that incarceration does not deter delinquents from committing additional crimes after they are released from confinement.

The Columbus cohort study found that after being released from incarceration delinquents committed additional crimes at a faster rate than they had before.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the Philadelphia cohort study concluded:

Not only do a greater number of those who receive punitive treatment (institutionalization, fine or probation) continue to violate the law, but they also commit more serious crimes with greater rapidity than those who experience a less constraining contact with the judicial and correctional systems. Thus, we must conclude that the juvenile justice system, at its best, has no effect on the subsequent behavior of adolescent boys and, at its worst, has a deleterious effect on future behavior.<sup>37</sup> One interpretation of these findings is that judges were correctly selecting for incarceration those youths most likely to commit further crimes after release.<sup>38</sup> Another interpretation is that the experience of incarceration itself encourages further delinquency because prisons and jails serve as "schools for crime." Biographical

About deterring crimes by young offenders.

reports and fiction such as Clifford Shaw's The Jack-Roller, Claude Brown's Manchild in the Promised Land, and John Allen's Assault with a Deadly Weapon do depict youths learning to become hardened criminals in such institutions.

Contrary to the findings above, a study of Chicago's UDIS (Unified Delinquency Intervention Services) program found that both incarceration and community-based programs reduced subsequent arrest rates. (Some scholars have attributed this finding to allegedly faulty research methods, but others defend the study.)39

Whatever the effects of incarceration on future criminality, there is abundant evidence that such institutions cause long-lasting psychological damage to many youths.40

# About putting violent juveniles behind bars...

ASSUMPTION: Even if locking up violent kids doesn't deter them from future crimes, at least they can't commit crimes while they are behind bars.

FACT: It would take a vast increase in the number of juveniles incarcerated to produce even a small drop in crime, and the human and financial costs would be extremely high.

Data from the Philadelphia cohort study indicate that putting twice as many juvenile offenders behind bars would result in a 1 to 4 percent reduction in theft, property damage and sexual assaults.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, an Ohio study concluded that large increases in the incarceration of adult and juvenile offenders would have only minimal impact on the crime rate.42

In deciding how often to resort to incarceration, the benefits must be balanced against the high human and financial costs. It costs an average of \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year to incarcerate each youth, which is up to ten times more than the cost of community-based programs such as restitution and community service work.43 Thus, a study prepared for Congress proposed that secure confinement ought to be treated as a "scarce resource" to be used only when all other possibilities have been exhausted.44

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#### About getting tough with delinquents...

# punish them for a change.

safety.

In the Vera Institute study of violent delinquents in three New York and New Jersey counties, Paul Strasburg concluded that, "From the point of view of public safety, the number of delinquents who require isolation in locked institutions is probably much smaller (perhaps by as much as 50 to 95 percent) than the number being placed in such settings."45

Similarly, a Missouri Law Enforcement Council report found that of 575 delinquents in state institutions in May 1971 only about onequarter were rated dangerous to the community.<sup>46</sup>

Nationwide, another study estimates that at least half of the 450,000 juveniles held in detention each year could be released to supervised non-secure settings without endangering public safety if recognized national detention standards were enforced.47

Along with the research evidence, there are also the practical experiences of several jurisdictions where juvenile institutions have been closed without a subsequent increase in juvenile crime. The primary example is Massachusetts, where all state training schools (juvenile prisons) were closed in 1972. Most youths who previously would have gone to institutions were assigned to programs run without locked confinement; only a very small number of delinquents were housed in secure facilities. Yet, this dramatic change in policy has not caused a crime wave in Massachusetts.<sup>48</sup> Nor did Pennsylvania's 1975 decision to stop sending juvenile offenders to Camp Hill, its most secure facility for delinquents, cause a crime explosion.49

About predicting youth violence...

ASSUMPTION: It ought to be possible to identify youths who are likely to become violent and to nip their criminal careers before they do serious damage.

ASSUMPTION: Courts should stop coddling these kids; it's time to

FACT: There is no objective standard to determine whether a sentence is too lenient or too harsh, but there is evidence that more juveniles are placed in institutions than is necessary for public

#### FACT: It is true that a small proportion of youths commit a large part of the violent crime, but it is very difficult, if not impossible, to predict which youths will become repeat offenders.

When scholars examine juvenile arrest records they can identify relatively small groups of juveniles who appear to be responsible for a disproportionately large number of crimes. But, while researchers can find these chronic delinquents after they have developed substantial arrest records, it has not been possible to identify them before they have committed multiple crimes.

Using data from the Philadelphia cohort study, Blumstein and Moitra showed that even among juveniles who have been arrested several times it is extremely difficult to predict who will be arrested again, much less to foresee who will commit acts of violence.<sup>50</sup> Friedman and Mann found that correctional facility staff members were unable to accurately predict whether a youth with whom they had worked would be violent or nonviolent during the first two years after release from institutional confinement.<sup>51</sup>

Violent crimes are particularly difficult to predict because they represent a statistically small part of delinquency. Thus, there is a strong tendency to "over-predict" that a delinquent will commit a violent crime in the future. For example, Monahan's report on violence prediction studies showed that from 54 to 99 percent of offenders labeled "violence-prone" would not actually have committed a violent crime.52

About punishing juveniles like adults...

ASSUMPTION: If they're old enough to kill and rob like adults, violent juveniles should be punished like adults. FACT: Treating juvenile offenders like adult criminals has proven to be largely ineffective and unjustified.

Many states now permit certain categories of juvenile offenders to be transferred or waived into adult court, where they can be treated like adults. The results are questionable.

For example, since 1978 New York State's Juvenile Offender Law

has given adult courts initial jurisdiction over 13- to 15-year-olds arrested for murder, rape, robbery and arson. However, of the first 3,898 youths arrested for crimes subject to prosecution in adult court fewer than 8 percent actually received adult sentences. The majority of cases were sent to juvenile court, or were dismissed on legal grounds. This suggests that even among the more serious felonies committed by juveniles, the courts and district attorneys found relatively few juveniles whose crimes warranted adult penalties.53

ly completed.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, in a recent poll a majority of citizens who had an opinion supported the view that juveniles, being less able to understand the consequences of their actions, should not be tried in adult courts or given sentences equivalent to adult punishments.55

Just as there is no single cause of juvenile delinquency, there is no single effective treatment for all youths who break the law. But the consensus of the recent research is that some programs do steer some youths away from criminality.56

It is not true that a judge must either lock up a delinquent or let him or her go free; there are many alternatives between these extremes. In addition to receiving educational, vocational and psychological services to help them find positive roles in society, young offenders can learn responsibility by paying restitution to their victims or by performing work that benefits the community as a whole.

This result is not surprising because juveniles tend to commit less serious offenses than adults. Violent crimes committed by juveniles are less likely to cause injury or to involve the use of a gun, they cause less property damage, and they are less likely to be successful-

#### About what works with violent youths...

ASSUMPTION: It seems that nothing works with these delinquent kids so the best we can do is lock them up. FACT: Some approaches have worked with some kinds of delinquents, although there is no panacea.

#### D. A new approach to working with violent juvenile offenders.

#### About a new program for violent delinquents...

ASSUMPTION: There is little reason to hope that violent juvenile offenders can ever become productive citizens.

FACT: The national Violent Juvenile Offender Research and Development Program (Part I) is designed to test the most promising approaches to reducing criminal behavior among juveniles convicted of serious violent offenses.

The \$4 million program, funded by the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and coordinated by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, builds upon extensive research into the causes of and solutions to violent behavior. Individual projects started in early 1982 in Boston, Memphis, Newark, and Phoenix, and will continue for at least 18 months. To be accepted for participation in one of these projects a youth must have been found guilty of murder, forcible rape or sodomy, aggravated assault, kidnapping, armed robbery or arson at an occupied structure.

The Violent Juvenile Offender Program aims to protect public safety while equipping juveniles convicted of violent crimes with the skills and attitudes needed to function constructively in free society. After being convicted, each youth is sent to a secure facility where he, and, if possible, his family, participate in planning for his eventual reintegration into the community. A contract is developed in which the juvenile agrees to meet specified behavioral goals in exchange for a widening range of privileges.

Unlike traditional approaches, where an offender is passed from one youth worker to another, in this experimental program each client is assigned a single case manager who stays with the case from beginning to end. The case manager is responsible for ensuring that the youth receives needed services: medical and mental health care; individual, group or family counseling; educational and vocational training; job placement; and recreational activities.

As a youth progresses in achieving his behavioral goals — and poses less of a danger to the community - his living arrangements change accordingly. The goal is to move the youths through a

smooth and consistent transition from secure confinement to progressively less restrictive and more normal environments, thereby preparing them to live in free society after their release.

Because the program includes a scientifically rigorous evaluation component, it should yield a great deal of new information about the most effective ways to deal with violent juvenile offenders. Part II of the Violent Juvenile Offender Research and Develop-

ment Program is a separate component concentrating on prevention of violent crimes committed by juveniles. It is being coordinated for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention by L. Miranda and Associates, a minority-owned firm based in Bethesda, Maryland.

#### Where do we go from here ...

In order to respond most effectively to violent juvenile crime it is necessary to keep the problem in proper perspective. The facts outlined above show that most delinquency does not involve violence.

Nevertheless, it is clear that a relatively small proportion of juvenile lawbreakers do pose a serious threat to the safety of society. They need special attention from the juvenile justice system - intensive programs run by highly qualified staff. In some cases they need secure custody, but it should not be dehumanizing.

The juvenile justice system has limited resources. As long as it is swamped with hundreds of thousands of cases involving minor and even noncriminal offenses, it will not be able to deal adequately with the frightening but numerically small problem of violent juvenile delinquency.

Yet, broad demands to "get tough" with juvenile offenders often make it more difficult for the juvenile justice system to concentrate its limited resources on violent offenders. The "get tough" philosophy is so diffuse that it affects almost all youths who come Only when the juvenile justice system deals more efficiently with

into contact with the juvenile justice system. Harshness increases for both petty offenders and serious ones. The system soon finds its institutions crowded with young people who should not be in them. the large numbers of less serious offenders will it be able to respond more effectively to the serious dangers posed by repeat and violent offenders.

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