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THE YOUTH CRIME INDEX:  
TOWARD A MORE COMPLETE MEASURE OF JUVENILE CRIME

by

Burk Foster and Craig Forsyth  
The University of Southwestern Louisiana  
Lafayette, LA 70504

In a February 3, 1987, New York Times article, Peter Applebome discussed recent trends in juvenile crime. The gist of his article is summed up nicely in his title: "Juvenile Crime: The Offenders are Younger and the Offenses More Serious."

Interviewing juvenile court officials in New York City, Newark, Fort Worth, San Antonio, Orlando and officials of the National Center for Juvenile Justice in Pittsburg, Applebome found that the ages of juveniles referred to court after committing serious crimes had declined in recent years, that juveniles 13 and under are much more frequently involved in gun crimes and other violent offenses than they were a few years ago, and "that while the number of youthful offenders may not be rising, there is no question that the severity of the crimes is increasing." (Applebome, 1987).

Applebome's article drew an immediate response from Barry Krisberg, President of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. In his February 5, 1987, letter to the editor, Krisberg spoke to the "myth . . . that today's young people are worse than those of previous generations." He pointed out that juvenile arrest figures had declined steadily from the mid-1970s until 1984 (as had the number of teenagers in the population),

and that only for the crime of rape had the 1985 arrest rates of those younger than 15 shown a marked increase, in comparison to 1976.

What bothered Krisberg the most was not the juvenile crime problem itself, it was the increased number of juveniles in confinement. He suggested in conclusion that "expanded incarceration of juveniles does not protect public safety and may actually increase rates of serious youth crime." (Krisberg, 1987).

Dialogues of this sort have occurred often over the past 30 years, as America has tried to come to grips with a serious juvenile crime problem. At the risk of oversimplification, the discussants have often divided themselves into two opposing camps--the "getting worse" and the "not getting worse." Those in the first group, most often concerned citizens (including victims of violent juvenile crime), journalists and some juvenile justice practitioners, tend to argue that the criminality of today's juveniles is much more serious than that of the young people of 30 or 20 or even 10 years ago. Those in the second group, consisting mostly of professors, social workers and some researchers, argue the contrary: that today's juveniles are no more threatening or no more criminal than those of earlier times, and may in fact be even less so. Or, as the "irresistible force/immovable object" proposition was posed by a student in one of the writers' classes recently, "How can we be warned that juvenile criminals are getting much worse, on the one hand, and

encouraged that juvenile crime is going down, on the other? It doesn't make sense."

In attempting to provide a sensible answer to this question, we began with a conventional starting point--juvenile arrest statistics of the Uniform Crime Reports. Since 1930 the Federal Bureau of Investigation has collected and disseminated national crime figures. Beginning with a base population of about 20 million in the early 1930s, the population covered in these police-generated statistics had increased to over 200 million by the 1980s.

The reliability of these figures prior to 1960 has been highly suspect, primarily because of wide variations in how police recorded citizens' reports of crime and how these reports were tabulated to be forwarded to the FBI for inclusion in the national figures. Since the early 1960s, however, most authorities believe that the quality of police reporting practices is much improved, in terms of both inclusiveness and accuracy.

We chose 1963 as the starting point of our examination of juvenile arrest statistics. By 1963 over two-thirds of the American public was policed by agencies contributing statistics to the UCR system. Most crime rate experts also believe that by 1963 the post-World War II "baby boom" was beginning to make its impact on reported crime and arrest figures, beginning the sharp increase in the crime rate that would continue on into the 1970s.

We took juvenile arrest figures from Crime in the United States, the annual compilation of UCR reports, every five years from 1963 to 1988. These figures are shown in Table 1. The FBI has followed a consistent format in reporting juvenile arrest

Table 1  
Juvenile Arrests, 1963-1988

	<u>1963</u>	<u>1968</u>	<u>1973</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1988</u>
Reporting Population (in millions)	125.760	145.306	155.995	207.060	200.692	188.928
Arrests Under Age 15						
Total	307,584	564,343	614,716	728,198	564,983	526,421
As % of all arrests	6.6%	10.0%	9.5%	7.4%	5.5%	5.2%
Arrests by offense:						
Murder/Manslaughter	69	164	216	244	157	201
Forcible Rape	291	489	813	1,102	1,332	1,372
Robbery	3,657	8,231	11,015	13,086	9,203	6,470
Aggravated Assault	2,848	5,974	8,200	11,508	10,148	11,345
Burglary	39,754	67,267	73,139	93,652	59,400	42,376
Larceny/Theft	83,060	133,897	146,910	194,680	168,095	152,952
Auto Theft	13,791	20,547	17,736	20,146	8,628	15,870
Arrests Under Age 18						
Total	788,762	1,457,078	1,717,366	2,279,635	1,725,746	
1,634,790						
As % of total arrests	17.5%	25.9%	26.4%	23.3%	16.8%	16.1%
Arrests by offense:						
Murder/Manslaughter	477	1,027	1,497	1,735	1,345	1,765
Forcible Rape	1,656	2,559	3,772	4,517	4,388	4,118
Robbery	9,963	22,876	34,374	48,088	35,219	24,337
Aggravated Assault	9,473	17,590	26,270	41,253	33,730	38,536
Burglary	85,151	140,229	170,228	250,649	159,192	111,284
Larceny/Theft	160,089	250,503	310,452	454,994	377,435	351,133
Auto Theft	54,417	75,988	66,868	77,534	36,497	61,301

Source: Crime in the United States, 1963, 1968, 1973, 1978, 1983, 1988

figures for the past 30 years. Arrests are reported for each Index offense (now called Part I offenses) and broken down by under-15 and under-18 age groups; within these two age categories, juvenile arrests are also described as a percentage of all arrests reported for that year, and the reporting population (which would be the population of the local and state law enforcement jurisdictions participating in the UCR system) is given in millions.

This format has remained consistent for the survey period, except for the addition of arson as a Part I crime in 1979. We left arson out of our tables but counted arrests for the other seven Part I crimes going back to 1963.

A brief look at the figures of Table 1 tends to support the main points made by the critics of the "juvenile crime wave" theory. Arrests went up sharply, in both absolute numbers and as a percentage of all arrests, for all crimes through the late 1960s and on through 1973 and 1978, except for auto theft, which levelled off in the early 1970s before the others did. By the early 1980s, juvenile arrests were in decline for every offense. The arrests of under-18s--as a part of the total--had fallen from 26.4% in 1973 to 16.8% in 1983, a drop of almost 10 points in 10 years.

What was happening, it was explained at the time, was that the bulge of baby-boomers was beginning to be passed along. Crime was not going down, exactly, it was just flattening out, and an increasing number of arrests were being made of people in

their late teens through late twenties, those who had been in the big bulge of baby boomers a few years earlier.

These juvenile arrest statistics, covering the period 1963-1988, provide the base for our research. There are two main objections that can be made to our use of these figures:

1. They are incorrect, because of human error in tabulation and reporting to the UCR system. This is a common and no doubt somewhat valid criticism of all UCR figures, based as they are on reports from over 10,000 mostly local law enforcement agencies across the United States.

2. They do not reflect changes in police operational practices, such as handling more juveniles informally--without arresting them--at an earlier time and changing to a more formal approach emphasizing arrest after the 1960s. This criticism is also valid, except that we would point out that the Part I offenses counted in Table I tend to be the more serious crimes (mostly felonies, except for larceny) for which arrests have always been more likely in the first place. We recognize that police practices in dealing with minor delinquent acts and status offenses have changed considerably--and not always in the direction of leniency, as is evident in the much greater percentage of juveniles waived along to the adult criminal court--over the last 30 years; we suggest only that police practices resulting in arrests of juveniles for Part I crimes have not undergone as much change as have police juvenile procedures

overall; they have certainly not undergone enough change to invalidate this comparison over time.

Table 2 shows the population distribution of youths in various age group categories from 1963 to 1988. These figures, derived from the Census Bureau's estimates in their annual Population Reports, show that the American population was indeed very young at one point in our recent history, and that we've gotten older fast. In 1963, 36.36% of the American population was under 18; 25 years later that ominous number (ominous in terms of its potential impact on culture) had dropped to 25.92%.

The age group we were most interested in was the 10- to 17-year-old category. This category would include those who are legally juveniles, for arrest purposes, in most states, and who are also in their peak arrest years. The Report to the Nation on Crime and Justice (1988), points out that property crime arrest rates peak at age 16, while violent crime arrest rates peak at age 18. Very few arrests, less than 1% of all arrests included in the UCR annually, involve children under the age of 10.

Table 2  
Population Distribution  
1963-1988

	<u>1963</u>	<u>1968</u>	<u>1973</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1988</u>
Total U.S. Population (as of July 1, in millions)	189.417	201.166	209.600	220.467	234.496	246.329
Population under 15 (in millions)	58.861	59.670	56.160	51.955	51.588	53.111
% of Population under 15	31.08%	29.66%	26.79%	23.57%	22.00%	21.56%
Population under 18 (in millions)	68.863	70.813	68.726	64.752	62.575	63.846
% of Population under 18	36.36%	35.20%	32.79%	29.37%	26.68%	25.92%
Population 14 to 17 (in millions)	13.507	15.052	16.828	16.923	14.633	13.983
% of Population 14 to 17	7.13%	7.48%	7.90%	7.68%	6.24%	5.68%
Population 10 to 17 (in millions)	28.039	31.374	33.596	31.717	28.768	27.362
% of Population 10 to 17	14.80%	15.59%	16.03%	14.39%	12.27%	11.11%

The representation of 10-to-17-year-olds in the American population was fairly stable through the 1960s and 1970s, peaking at 16.03% in our study year of 1973 and beginning to decline after that. Fifteen years later there were 6,000,000 fewer 10-to-17-year-olds in the United States, a percentage decrease of almost five points to 11.11%.

Table 3 reflects changes in the reporting base from which juvenile arrest figures are compiled. During the 1960s and 1970s the number of law enforcement agencies taking part in the UCR

system increased steadily. In the early sixties, as we noted earlier, two-thirds of the American population was included in the base from which arrest statistics were drawn. By the end of the seventies, the base had climbed to almost 94%. But just when you thought we were approaching perfection, total participation resulting in a truly all-inclusive crime statistics network, participation began to fall off. In the decade from 1978 to 1988, the percentage of the public covered in arrests statistics fell by 17 percentage points.

Table 3  
Crime Reporting

	<u>1963</u>	<u>1968</u>	<u>1973</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1988</u>
Total U.S. Population (as of July 1, in millions)	189.417	201.166	209.600	220.467	234.496	246.329
UCR Base Population for Total Arrests	125.760	145.306	154.995	207.060	200.692	188.928
% of Population Reporting	66.39%	72.23%	73.95%	93.92%	85.58%	76.70%

This sudden, sharp decline in the arrest base most likely resulted from the increased effort on the part of the FBI to heighten the credibility of its statistics. Many municipal police and sheriff's departments, especially those serving smaller towns and rural areas, could not meet stricter reporting requirements and ceased to send in arrest statistics. In numbers of people not included, the increase was from 13,000,000 not counted in 1978 to over 60,000,000 ten years later. This is a huge increase, one that by itself would throw off the reliability

of any analysis of juvenile arrest trends that failed to take it into account.

Table 4 lists the age group and base-arrest population variables we have already identified and arranges them according to the five-year intervals of our study. The two key percentages are the percentage of the population covered by UCR arrest statistics for each year, and the percentage of the population in the 10- to 17-year-old age group.

Table 4  
Youth Crime Index Variables

	<u>1963</u>	<u>1968</u>	<u>1973</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1988</u>
Total U.S. Population (as of July 1, in millions)	189.417	201.166	209.600	220.457	234.496	246.329
UCR Base Population for Total Arrests	125.760	145.306	154.995	207.060	200.692	188.928
% of Population Reporting	66.39%	72.23%	73.95%	93.92%	85.58%	76.70%
Population 10 to 17 (in millions)	28.039	31.374	33.596	31.717	28.768	27.362
% of Population 10 to 17	14.80%	15.59%	16.03%	14.39%	12.27%	11.11%

Table 5 is what we have been headed toward all along--the Youth Crime Index. The YCI starts with juvenile arrests (which is our term for the UCR category of arrests under age 18) for each Part I crime. We then divide by percentage of population covered by arrest statistics, to make up for what is missing, and by the percentage of persons age 10 to 17 in the population. The result of these manipulations is a more comprehensive picture of

juvenile crime: it shows us, over time, what arrests rates would be if all arrests were reported and if all criminals were arrested at the same rate as 10- to 17-year-olds.

Our position is that the YCI is a more realistic way of considering the true state of juvenile crime. Most people commenting on juvenile crime look simply at arrest statistics. Some make reference to the declining percentage of juveniles in the population, usually without reference to specific numbers illustrating the decline (over 30% fewer 10- to 17-year-olds in 1988 than in 1973, for example) or without suggesting what this means in understanding the level of juvenile criminality today.

Table 5  
Youth Crime Index

	<u>1963</u>	<u>1968</u>	<u>1973</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1988</u>
Murder/Manslaughter	4,855	9,120	12,628	12,838	12,809	20,713
Forcible Rape	16,854	22,725	31,820	33,422	41,788	48,326
Robbery	101,397	203,150	289,974	355,810	335,398	285,600
Aggravated Assault	96,410	156,208	221,609	305,237	321,217	452,228
Burglary	866,613	1,245,300	1,436,016	1,854,587	1,516,018	1,305,940
Larceny/Theft	1,629,285	2,224,586	2,618,923	3,366,563	3,594,391	4,120,617
Auto Theft	553,822	674,810	564,088	573,685	347,568	719,380

Note: The Youth Crime Index is calculated by taking the raw number of juvenile arrests for each crime in a given year, dividing by the percentage of arrests reported (to account for that portion of the population not counted in UCR arrest totals), and then dividing by the percentage of the population made up by of 10 to 17 year olds; the result is a crime-specific, age-specific index of per capita arrest rates.

Few researchers have apparently noticed or commented on the increased and, later, decreased population from which juvenile arrest statistics are drawn. Lamar Empey and Mark Stafford are notable exceptions here. Their book, American Delinquency: Its Meaning and Construction, describes the influence of both youth population fluctuations and changes in the arrest reporting base and uses a formula to compensate for that portion of the population not counted in arrest figures. They stress the need for comparing rates, rather than simple numbers extracted from a very complex social context.

Recent FBI analyses of juvenile crime have begun to employ arrest rates (per 100,000) as a measure of change in juvenile criminality over time. The Youth Crime Index simply re-combines these rates with actual arrest statistics to get what can be called an "extrapolated" picture of juvenile crime--a table that in the end can be compared with composite arrest statistics for all age groups (and FBI estimates that include populations served by agencies not reporting) to see how juveniles "match up" with other offenders.

What does the Youth Crime Index say about juvenile crime in the United States over the last 30 years? It says, first of all, we would be much worse off if all our criminals were as active as those in the 10- to 17-year-old age group. It is one thing for us to know that arrest rates peak out at 16 or 18; it is something more scary to think that our overall Crime Index would be two-and-a-half times higher (6.95 million YCI arrests in 1988

versus 2.88 million estimated arrests in the 1988 Crime in the United States).

The Youth Crime Index shows that the intensity of juvenile crime continues to increase. The murder rate, for instance, which levelled off from 1973 to 1983, jumped abruptly over the next interval, so that by 1988 it was more than four times what it had been in 1963. The forcible rape and robbery rates had tripled, and aggravated assault had more than quadrupled over the same 25 year period.

Of the seven Part I offenses, the 1988 Index was the highest ever for five; only robbery and burglary had peaked out in earlier years, both in 1978, and then gone into decline over the next decade. The most rapid increases in the 1980s were in the two crimes of personal violence, murder and aggravated assault, which tends to reflect what observers of urban life have suggested about the influence of gangs, drugs and guns on crimes of violence in big city neighborhoods, and the property crime of auto theft, which had been stable for a long time, declined, and suddenly shot up again.

How would we answer our student's question, then, the one about juvenile criminals getting worse while juvenile crime is going down. We would say, first, that juvenile crime, as reflected in arrest figures, is not going down at all, except for burglary and robbery. Apparent declines in other offenses are the result of changes in police reporting practices (or FBI

validating practices), so that a much smaller percentage of the population is included in arrest figures.

The agencies that continue to contribute juvenile arrest statistics are generally the larger agencies serving urban populations; we recognize that the missing figures are mostly from less urban areas where the crime rate and the arrest rate are both likely to be much lower than in the cities. Our YCI figure is going to be inflated accordingly, though how much as we compensate for unreported arrests we can't say.

We would say, second, that the only reason our juvenile crime problem hasn't gotten a lot worse is that there are so many fewer 10- to 17-year-olds around to be criminals now than there were 15 or 20 years ago. If there were as many now as there were then, and the arrest rate remained constant, we would have 50% more juveniles being arrested each year. This would place an even greater burden on our juvenile justice system and would almost surely result in a further increase of habitual juvenile offenders being waived to the adult criminal courts.

We would say, third, to those practitioners and researchers cited in such articles as "Juvenile Crime Increases," "Violent Crimes by Juveniles Soar," "Street-Gang Violence Epidemic" and "Children Are Killing More Than Ever," that there is nothing wrong with your perceptions: today's juveniles are more violent and more criminal in general than any that have preceded them. Whether than heightened level of criminality and violence, what has come to be termed "intensity," is spread generally across the

country or whether it is focused in the most socially-disadvantaged neighborhoods of our big cities is beyond the scope of our inquiry.

We would say, finally, that two years from now we will have another five-year interval to add to our tables. If the statistics from 1993 show a worsening of the rate of juvenile crime, the consequences may be the cause of more than ordinary concern. At some point, we know, the percentage of young people in the 10 to 17 age group will begin to increase again, and if they in fact turn out to be even more crime-prone than this present generation, their impact on a disorganized society may be more negative than anything we have seen in modern times.

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