



National Juvenile Justice Network

Is There a New Juvenile Crime Wave on the Horizon? Overview of Recent Reports and Responses May 29, 2007

Media Reports Growing Crime Wave

Preliminary FBI Uniform Crime Report statistics for the first half of 2006 showed an increase in violent crime over the preceding year¹ and two reports from the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) warned of a growing crime wave², drawing considerable media attention. Of particular concern for juvenile justice advocates was the attention focused on the increasing numbers of juvenile arrests for murder and robbery. More recently, Attorney General Gonzalez talked about the Department of Justice's plans to combat violent crime and he talked specifically about youth violence.³ The stories about rising juvenile crime are disturbing reminders of the (false) reports of a coming wave of super-predators that had dire consequences for the juvenile justice system in the 1990s. Is there any factual basis for the fears that are being fueled by these latest news reports?

Experts Say: Crime Wave Evidence is Murky

Jeffrey Butts of the Chapin Hall Center for Children and Howard Snyder of the National Center for Juvenile Justice;⁴ Marc Mauer of The Sentencing Project⁵; and the Justice Policy Institute⁶ have all analyzed recent crime statistics and found the evidence for the start of a new crime wave to be far from clear. The overall assessment that these experts reach is:

It's Too Early to Tell:

- It is premature to predict a coming wave of serious violent crime after only one full year of increase.⁷

There's No Evidence for Targeting Youth:

- Many categories of serious juvenile crime, including rape and burglary, continued to decline in 2005.⁸
- Even if the 2004 – 2005 rate of increase continued, it would be another 19 years before the juvenile violent crime rate reached the 1994 rate again.⁹
- Adults represent 84 percent of all violent crime arrests – the percentage of total arrests of juveniles for violent crimes is unchanged between 2004 and 2005.¹⁰

More Prisons and Police Never Work:

- Research has found little or no effect on crime from increased funding of police.¹¹
- Programs that focus on prevention and treatment have been found to be more effective and cost effective in reducing juvenile crime.¹²

Even the Police and the Attorney General Are Calling For More Prevention Programs:

- Gonzales emphasized that “prevention is the real solution to crime among our youngest citizens” and said that the federal role should not be heightened enforcement but helping communities “to work on prevention and other positive alternatives to crime, violence and gang membership.”¹³
- The first PERF report quotes police chiefs calling for better social programs and prevention programs to reduce juvenile crime.¹⁴





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Recent Reports and Responses Analyzed What is Happening Behind the Headlines?

The Data

Crime Rates in the Last Decade

The period 1994 – 2004 saw an unprecedented drop in crime rates for both adults and juveniles. By 2004 serious violent crimes had reached the lowest levels ever recorded and homicides were down to levels not seen since the 1960s. The number of serious violent offenses committed by persons ages 12 to 17 declined 61% from 1993 to 2004, based on victimization reports of the estimated age of the offender, and murder arrests for juveniles were at a 30-year low.¹⁵ Similar sharp declines were seen in property offenses by young people.

Since 2004, this rapid crime decrease has slowed and slight increases have been seen in some categories.

Recent Crime Data

The FBI has published crime statistics for 2005 and preliminary numbers for the first half of 2006 based on the Uniform Crime Reports. The 2005 statistics include arrest data by age. Everyone arrested under the age of 18 is considered a juvenile regardless of the age of jurisdiction in the state.

FBI data shows that arrests of juveniles for murder climbed 19.9% in 2005 compared with 2004; for robbery, arrests of juveniles rose 11.4%. However, of all those arrested for murder in 2005, fewer than 1 in 10 were juveniles and for all those arrested for robbery approximately 1 in 4 was a juvenile. As juveniles are much more likely than adults to commit crimes in groups, several juvenile arrests may be linked to only one murder or robbery.

Despite the increase in number of arrests, the 2005 figure is 46.8% lower than the number of juvenile arrests for murder in 1996, at the beginning of the crime decline. For robbery, the number of arrests has dropped by 33.7% since 1996.¹⁶

FBI numbers for the first half of 2006 show a slight increase in murders (1.4%) and a larger increase in robbery (9.7%) but those are overall numbers including adults and juveniles.

What Recent Reports Have Said

The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) Reports

Following release of the 2005 FBI data, PERF convened a Violent Crime Summit with police chiefs and mayors from 50 cities. The report released after this Summit paints a grim picture of rising violent crime, even while conceding that in some cities the rates appeared to be declining again in 2006 after rising in 2005. The report talks about the increase in juvenile crime particularly in certain



neighborhoods and about a “culture of violence” which is drawing in more young people. It expresses concern about kids who have been in detention or incarcerated and are returning to the streets to commit more crimes because nothing has been done to rehabilitate them or prepare them for reentry. The report speaks repeatedly of the need for social programs and prevention programs to reduce juvenile crime. Nonetheless it is full of dire warnings about the consequences of inaction – likening the situation to ignoring signs of terrorism before 9/11 – and calling for more resources to act now.

The second report from PERF looks at crime in 56 jurisdictions using statistics collected from those cities at the end of 2006 (the report says that PERF considered the situation too urgent to wait for the official FBI statistics for the full year). There are no statistics or discussion about juvenile crime specifically.

Both PERF reports and the FBI statistics received considerable press coverage. For example, *USA Today* in a story headlined “Police tie jump in crime to juveniles”, said, “Police in cities across the USA are linking the recent jump in the nation's violent-crime rate to an increasing number of juveniles involved in armed robberies, assaults and other incidents.”¹⁷ Another *USA Today* story on the release of the first PERF report began, “Violent crime continued to increase in the first six months of this year, highlighted by a growing trend of teenagers shooting robbery victims even if they surrender their valuables”.¹⁸ The media response to the Department of Justice initiative also focused on the involvement of juveniles in violent crime. Although the announcement of the initiative talked about all aspects of violent crime and serious repeat offenders, the media reported it as a story about rising juvenile crime.¹⁹

How the Experts Have Responded

While PERF expressed concern that the response to increasing crime will be too slow as it was when crime rates began to rise in the 1990s, others are more concerned that uncritical media reporting of the increase will lead to more of the harsh and counterproductive juvenile crime policies that were seen throughout the US in that decade.

In order to provide advocates with information to share with media and policy makers, experts acted quickly to provide their informed analysis of the trends.

In *Too Soon to Tell: Deciphering Recent Trends in Youth Violence*, Jeffrey Butts and Howard Snyder, noted:

- It is premature to predict a coming wave of serious violent crime after one year of increase
- Recent changes in violent crime are small in comparison to the major shifts over the past 30 years
- If the same rate of increase from 2004 to 2005 continued, it would take another 19 years before the juvenile violent crime rate reached the 1994 rate again.
- Many categories of serious juvenile crime, including rape and burglary, continued to decline in 2005
- National trends reflect small local changes, for example, the 20% increase in juvenile murder arrests means about 200 more arrests spread across the states. Based on the size of their population Miami and San Diego might each see 2 additional arrests and Detroit an additional one.



The Justice Policy Institute notes that:

- Adults represent 84 percent of all violent crime arrests – the percentage of total arrests of juveniles for violent crimes is unchanged between 2004 and 2005.
- It is difficult to get a clear picture of a trend in violent crime by studying only 56 jurisdictions out of 17,000 nationwide as the second PERF report does
- Crime rates are volatile and a trend cannot be established with a short-term change.
- An increase in police funding (called for by PERF, the US Conference of Mayors and others) may not be the most effective way to meet public safety goals.

Marc Mauer of The Sentencing Project looks at the issue of crime rates without differentiating between adults and juveniles. He notes that within the 56 states reported by PERF

- Half the cities reporting saw crime rates decline during the second year.
- 35 of the 56 jurisdictions experienced a statistically significant increase in homicides over the two-year period, but half of these had an increase during one of those years and a decrease during the other.

Mauer also notes that two years of increase after such a long rate of decline provides at best a “murky” picture of what is happening and warns against a repeat of past mistakes when short-term changes have resulted in drastic policy initiatives, such as mandatory minimums, that have been hard to undo. He calls instead for responses that have been demonstrated to be more cost-effective.

At a Senate Judiciary Hearing on the Increase in Violent Crime held in May, representatives from police organizations and Senators emphasized the reduction in funding for the COPS program as part of the reason for rising crime. Mauer casts doubts on that claim, citing recent studies that suggest that the COPS program had little effect on reducing crime rates²⁰.

At the Senate Hearing, criminologist James Fox, while expressing some alarm at increasing juvenile crime, also called for more focus on prevention and in particular for programs that work with young children to encourage positive youth development and reduce the likelihood that young people will be drawn to gangs.²¹

Summary

- Despite signs of an increase in some areas of juvenile crime over the past year and a half, it is unclear if this is the beginning of the end of the very low rates of the past decade or simply a minor blip.
- There is wide-spread agreement, even among those fearful of a new crime wave, that prevention and treatment are the cost-effective ways to reduce youth crime.
- Advocates will need to be sure that policy makers are reminded of these points if increasingly punitive measures are proposed in response to changes in crime rates.

¹ 2006 Preliminary Semiannual Uniform Crime Report, FBI, December 2006 at www.fbi.org

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- ² *A Gathering Storm: Violent Crime in America*, PERF, October 2006 and *Violent Crime in America, 24 Months of Alarming Trends*, PERF, March 2007, both at www.policeforum.org
- ³ Department of Justice [press release](#), May 15, 2007
- ⁴ Butts, Jeffrey A., and Snyder, Howard N., *Too Soon to Tell: Deciphering Recent Trends in Youth Violence*, Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago, November 2006, www.chapinhall.org.
- ⁵ Mauer, Marc, Executive Director, The Sentencing Project, [What Wave?](#) American Prospect on-Line, March 27, 2007
- ⁶ *Concerns Over Rising Crime in Context*, Justice Policy Institute, March 2007, on line at www.justicepolicy.org.
- ⁷ See Butts and Snyder (note 1 above), Mauer (note 2 above) and Justice Policy Institute (note 3 above)
- ⁸ See Butts and Snyder (note 1 above)
- ⁹ See Butts and Snyder (note 1 above) and Justice Policy Institute (note 3 above)
- ¹⁰ See Butts and Snyder (note 1 above) and Justice Policy Institute (note 3 above)
- ¹¹ See Mauer (note 2 above) and Justice Policy Institute (note 3 above)
- ¹² See Butts and Snyder (note 1 above), Mauer (note 2 above) and Justice Policy Institute (note 3 above)
- ¹³ Attorney General Alberto Gonzales' [prepared remarks](#) at Press Club launch of new violent crime initiative.
- ¹⁴ *A Gathering Storm: Violent Crime in America*, PERF, October 2006 (link at note 2 above)
- ¹⁵ Snyder, Howard H. and Sickmund, Melissa, *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report*, US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, March 2007, on line at www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org.
- ¹⁶ *Crime in the United States 2005* at www.fbi.gov.
- ¹⁷ [USATODAY.com - Police tie jump in crime to juveniles](#)
- ¹⁸ [USATODAY.com - Violent crime on the rise, summit participants say](#)
- ¹⁹ For example, [MSNBC's](#) headline was *Rising crime blamed on youth violence, gangs: Justice Department to spend nearly \$50 million to fight gangs and guns*.
- ²⁰ Worrall, John L. and Kovandz, Tomislav V., "COPS Grants and Crime Revisited," *Criminology*, Volume 45 Issue 1, Journal of the American Society of Criminology, February 2007.
- ²¹ Testimony of James Fox to the Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing on May 23, 2007 at www.judiciary.senate.gov

