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Arresting Children:  
*Examining Recent Trends  
in Preteen Crime*

JEFFREY A. BUTTS  
HOWARD N. SNYDER

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## **Arresting Children: Examining Recent Trends in Preteen Crime**

### **Authors**

Jeffrey A. Butts

*Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago*

Howard N. Snyder

*Consultant, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

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of Chicago

1313 East 60th Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60637  
773/753-5900 (phone)  
773/753-5940 (fax)  
[www.chapinhall.org](http://www.chapinhall.org)

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## Introduction

Children younger than age 13 are involved in a small and stable proportion of all crimes committed by juveniles. The age profile of juvenile offenders as a whole has not changed substantially in recent decades.<sup>1</sup> Since 1980, changes in preteen crime have followed the pattern of changes in crime exhibited among older youth, even though juvenile crime has fluctuated substantially, especially from 1994 to 2004, when rates of overall youth violence fell from a 30-year high to a 30-year low. In a few offense categories, however, increases in preteen crime have outpaced increases among older juveniles, particularly sexual offenses, assaults, and weapons possession (not necessarily firearms). The fact that school authorities and family members often report these offenses suggests a possible hypothesis to explain increasing preteen crime: The juvenile justice system today may be dealing with child behavior problems that were once the responsibility of social welfare agencies, schools, and families.

### What do police data tell us about the characteristics of young offenders?

The public often believes that today's juvenile offenders are younger than those of 20 or 25 years ago. This common perception influences juvenile justice policy. Has the age profile of juvenile delinquents in fact changed? Are young offenders getting increasingly younger, or is this comparison between the delinquents of today and yesterday misunderstood?

This analysis explores these questions by examining data collected by law enforcement agencies across the country. The analysis tracks juvenile crime patterns from 1980 through 2006, the most recent year for which complete police data are available, and it examines the case characteristics of crimes involving very young children. The first part of the analysis focuses on national arrest estimates created from data provided through the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program and published annually in *Crime in the United States*. The second half relies on data from the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System (or NIBRS).

Our analysis answers three general questions:

- What proportion of all juvenile crime is committed by children under age 13, and has that proportion changed since 1980?
- How do the trends in arrests of preteens compare with arrest trends for older youth?

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<sup>1</sup> The term *juvenile* is used here to mean below the age of 18, although the actual definition of juvenile status varies according to the state laws that govern the upper age of original juvenile court jurisdiction.

- What are the characteristics of the crimes committed by preteens, and how do they compare with crimes committed by older youth?

The following are some results of the analysis:

- In 2006, preteen offenders accounted for 6 percent of all juvenile arrests for the FBI's Violent Crime Index offenses, compared with 5 percent in 1980.
- Preteens account for a small and relatively stable proportion of all juvenile crime. In most offense categories, the age profile of juvenile offenders in 2006 differed little from 1980.
- The number of violent crime arrests involving preteens was small compared with those of older youth, but the increase in preteen arrests between 1980 and 2006 outpaced the increase in arrests of older youth (41% versus 9%).
- Increases in preteen offending focused largely on a handful of offense types, including simple assault, aggravated assault, and weapons law violations.
- Trends in preteen arrest rates between 1980 and 2006 were very similar to those among older youth, indicating that much of the change in preteen arrests is best characterized as a general change in juvenile arrests—not a change unique to preteens.

### **The proportion of juvenile arrests involving preteens changed very little between 1980 and 2006.**

If young people are committing crimes at younger and younger ages, an analysis should find that preteen offenders represent a larger proportion of juvenile arrests today than they did in the 1980s or 1990s. To determine whether this is the case, we examine the age profile of youth arrested for criminal law violations each year between 1980 and 2006.

The majority of juvenile arrests from 1980 through 2006 involved youth age 15 or older. In 2006, these older teens were involved in 71 percent of all juvenile arrests for the FBI's four Violent Crime Index offenses (murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault), and 68 percent of juvenile arrests for the four Property Crime Index offenses (burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson).<sup>2</sup> Youth over age 14 accounted for 92 percent of juvenile arrests for murder and more than 80 percent of arrests for forgery, embezzlement, driving under the influence, and liquor law violations.

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<sup>2</sup> The FBI uses these eight offenses as its "Crime Index" because they are more consistently defined than other offenses across the various state and local jurisdictions that report information to the UCR program.

## Data Methods

The arrest data described in this report are from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). The FBI collects annual information on arrests made by law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. Arrest data provide the only means of analyzing crime across different age groups, as the age of an offender cannot be verified until arrest. National arrest estimates (as well as rates based upon those estimates) are calculated through 2006. The UCR data are collected from jurisdictions containing a majority of the U.S. population, typically between 60 and 90 percent of residents nationwide. The primary publication of UCR data, *Crime in the United States*, is based upon data from those police agencies able to participate fully in the UCR program each year. Full participation requires that agencies submit their data to the FBI on time, and their data must cover all 12 months of the calendar year. For 2006, the jurisdictions that participated fully represented 72 percent of the U.S. population. Nearly all of the statistics generated by the UCR program are based on this sample. They are not national estimates. The FBI does not calculate national estimates for different age groups. To examine national arrest estimates for various groups and to calculate per capita arrest rates for those groups, this report relies on the FBI's estimate of total arrests for each major offense. It uses the data reported by UCR-participating agencies to determine the proportion of arrests for each offense that involved individuals of various ages. That proportion is then applied to the FBI's national arrest estimate for each offense. Arrest rates are determined by dividing each national arrest estimate over appropriate population estimates obtained from the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

To investigate juvenile offending in greater detail, the study relies on a second dataset from the FBI: the National Incident-Based Reporting System (or NIBRS). The study analyzes NIBRS data about offenses against persons that were reported to law enforcement agencies in 2005. The data come from law enforcement agencies in 31 states. The 2005 NIBRS sample includes information about more than 1.24 million alleged offenders in incidents involving at least one of the following offenses: murder/nonnegligent manslaughter, kidnapping/abduction, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, or simple assault). These data are not known to be representative of the entire United States, but they describe the characteristics of crimes reported to a large sample of law enforcement agencies from states across the country.

Arrests of younger teens, those ages 13 and 14, accounted for an additional 22 percent of juvenile arrests in 2006. Although they made up 8 percent of juvenile murder arrests, they were involved in more than 25 percent of arrests for other offenses, including forcible rape, arson, simple assault, vandalism, other sex offenses (i.e., sex offenses other than forcible rape and prostitution and commercialized vice), and disorderly conduct.

Just 6 percent of all juvenile arrests in 2006 involved children under age 13 (Table 1). The proportion of arrests involving preteen children varied for different types of offenses. In 2006, preteens were responsible for 6 percent of juvenile arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses and 7 percent of arrests for Property Crime Index offenses. Preteen children accounted for just 1 or 2 percent of juvenile arrests for some offenses, such as murder, fraud, and drug abuse violations, but they were responsible for 20 percent of arson arrests, 13 percent of arrests for other sex offenses, 11 percent of vandalism arrests, and 10 percent of simple assault arrests. Other offenses with sizeable proportions of preteens included disorderly conduct (9%) as well as forcible rape, larceny-theft, and weapons offenses (8% each).

Table 1  
 For Most Offense Types, the Age Profile of Juvenile Arrests Changed Very Little Between 1980 and 2006.

	Preteens as a Percentage of All Juvenile Arrests	
	1980 (%)	2006 (%)
<b>Total</b>	7	6
<i>Violent Crime Index Offenses</i>		
Murder / nonnegligent manslaughter	1	1
Forcible rape	4	8
Robbery	4	6
Aggravated assault	6	8
<i>Property Crime Index Offenses</i>		
Burglary	8	7
Larceny-theft	12	8
Motor vehicle theft	3	2
Arson	19	20
<i>Non-Index Offenses</i>		
Simple assault	9	10
Forgery and counterfeiting	3	2
Fraud	4	2
Embezzlement	3	1
Stolen property offenses	5	4
Vandalism	16	11
Weapons offenses	5	8
Prostitution and commercialized vice	1	1
Other sex offenses	8	13
Drug abuse violations	1	2
Gambling	1	1
Offenses against the family & children	8	7
Driving under the influence	0	0
Liquor law violations	1	1
Drunkenness	1	1
Disorderly conduct	6	9
Vagrancy	3	6
Other nontraffic offenses	6	5
Suspicion	6	3
Curfew & loitering	4	4
Running away	7	5

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States 2006* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007).

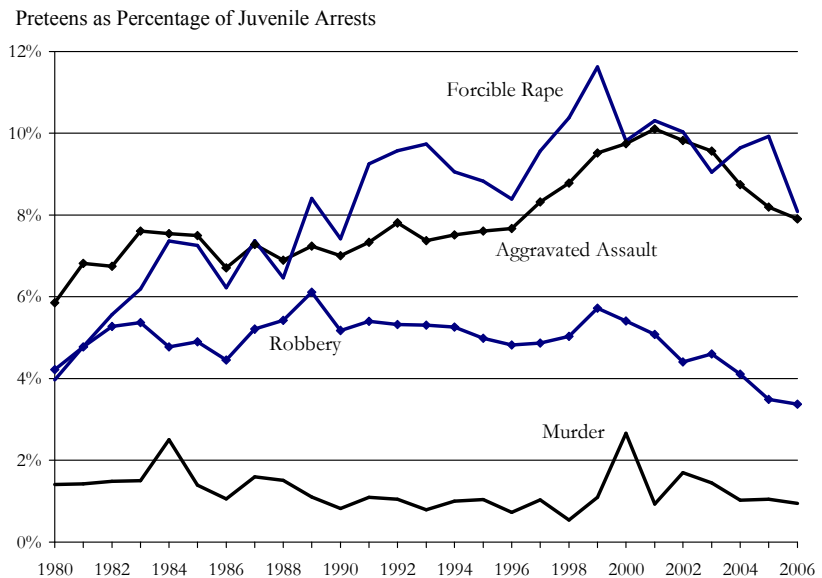
In most offense categories, the proportion of 2006 arrests that involved preteens was nearly the same as it had been in 1980 (Figure 1). The 2006 proportions were within one or two percentage points of the 1980 figures in most of the Crime Index offenses, including murder, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, and arson. The same was true for arrests involving charges of simple assault, stolen property, drug abuse violations, curfew, and running away.

On the other hand, the proportion of preteen arrests was higher in 2006 than it was in 1980 for some offense categories. For example, the preteen proportion of juvenile arrests for forcible rape was twice as large in 2006 as it was in 1980, growing from 4 percent in 1980 to 8 percent in 2006. A similar increase occurred in juvenile arrests for other sex offenses, where the proportion of preteen arrests grew from 8 percent to 13 percent.

**Preteen arrests for most offenses were lower in 2006 than in 1980.**

Beyond the proportionate representation of preteen children among all juvenile arrests, the common perception that young children are committing more crimes may be prompted by the sheer number of such children being arrested across the country. Even if they do not account for a larger proportion of juvenile arrests, what are the overall trends in the national number of arrests involving preteens?

**Figure 1**  
**Since 2000, Preteen Children Have Accounted for a Declining Proportion of Juvenile Arrests for Violent Crime.**



Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports: Crime in the United States 1980 – 2006*.

The total number of juvenile arrests involving youth between the ages of 13 and 17 increased 6 percent between 1980 and 2006, to more than 2 million nationwide (Table 2). In contrast, the total number of arrests involving preteen children fell 10 percent during the same time period. This pattern did not hold true for Violent Crime Index arrests. Although the number of violent crime arrests involving teens increased 9 percent between 1980 and 2006, violent crime arrests of preteens grew 41 percent.

The increase in preteen arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses was confined to two offenses: forcible rape and aggravated assault. Arrests for aggravated assault doubled among preteens between 1980 and 2006, while rape arrests increased by 60 percent. In contrast, preteen arrests for the other two Violent Crime Index offenses declined between 1980 and 2006. Preteen murder arrests fell 54 percent, and preteen arrests involving charges of robbery dropped 36 percent. A somewhat similar pattern occurred among older teens. Between 1980 and 2006, murder arrests and robbery arrests also fell among youth ages 13 and older (down 29% and 19%, respectively). Like preteens, aggravated assault arrests climbed among youth ages 13 and older (up 47%). However, unlike arrests of preteens, arrests for forcible rape among teens dropped 25 percent.

**Table 2**  
Total Arrests among Preteens Declined Between 1980 and 2006, but Arrests for Some Offenses Increased, Including Rape, Other Sex Offenses, Assaults, and Weapons Offenses.

	Preteens (Age 12 & younger)		Teenagers (Age 13–17)	
	Estimated 2006 Arrests	Percent Change 1980–2006 (%)	Estimated 2006 Arrests	Percent Change 1980–2006 (%)
<b>Total</b>	133,800	–10	2,067,400	6
<i>Violent Crime Index Offenses</i>				
Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter	10	–54	1,300	–29
Forcible rape	300	60	3,300	–25
Robbery	1,200	–36	33,800	–19
Aggravated assault	4,800	101	55,400	47
<i>Property Crime Index Offenses</i>				
Burglary	5,500	–70	77,400	–62
Larceny-theft	21,200	–58	254,500	–33
Motor vehicle theft	900	–57	33,700	–44
Arson	1,500	8	6,100	4
<i>Selected Non-Index Offenses</i>				
Simple assault	25,000	232	221,300	187
Weapons offenses	3,900	235	42,800	78
Other sex offenses	2,000	110	13,500	29
Drug abuse violations	3,100	97	193,200	79

Note: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis of data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports: Crime in the United States 1980* and *Crime in the United States 2006*.



Juvenile arrest trends for the FBI's four Property Crime Index offenses were similar for both age groups. Arrests for the three largest property offense categories (burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft) rose and then dropped sharply for both groups. The relative decline was larger among preteens, however, than among older youth. The exception to the declining trend in Property Crime Index offenses occurred in the number of arrests for arson. Between 1980 and 2006, arson arrests increased slightly for both preteens and for teens.

In some of the other offense categories (i.e., those not included in the FBI Crime Index), arrests of preteens increased more than arrests involving older youth. A comparison of arrests in 1980 and 2006 shows that arrests for weapons offenses (possessing, buying, and selling) increased far more among preteens (235%) than for juveniles age 13 and older (78%). Of course, the number of preteen weapons arrests was still relatively small. Even with the larger increase in preteen weapons arrests between 1980 and 2000, more than 90 percent of all juvenile arrests for weapons violations in 2006 involved youth age 13 or older. Similarly, the number of arrests involving preteen children charged with other sex offenses in 2006 was also relatively small (2,000), even after a 110 percent increase in these arrests between 1980 and 2006. Arrests of older youth for these offenses grew just 29 percent between 1980 and 2006, but the number of such arrests increased from 10,500 to 13,500.

### **Arrest rates for preteens remain far lower than for older juveniles.**

The recent increases in the number of arrests involving preteen children may indicate a significant change in social conditions compared with previous decades, or they may simply reflect a growing population. Analyzing per capita arrest rates removes the effect of the changing population and clarifies the comparison of arrest trends over time. The authors' calculations of age-specific arrest rates using data from the U.S. Census Bureau show that the 2006 preteen arrest rate for Violent Crime Index offenses (52 preteen arrests per 100,000 preteens in the general population) was one-eighth the rate for older juveniles ages 13 to 17 (437 per 100,000) (Table 3). Changes in the rate varied by age group and by offense. Compared with 1980, the Violent Crime Index arrest rate in 2006 was 26 percent higher for preteen children while the 2006 rate for juveniles age 13 and older was essentially equal to the rate in 1980. The increase in the arrest rate for violent crimes among preteen children was entirely due to increases in aggravated assault (up 79%) and forcible rape (up 42%). Preteen arrest rates for murder and robbery declined between 1980 and 2006 (down 59% and 43%, respectively).

**Table 3**  
**Increases in Arrests Rates for Preteens Outpaced Older Youth in Cases Involving Charges of Rape, Aggravated Assault, Simple Assault, Weapons, and Sex Offenses.**

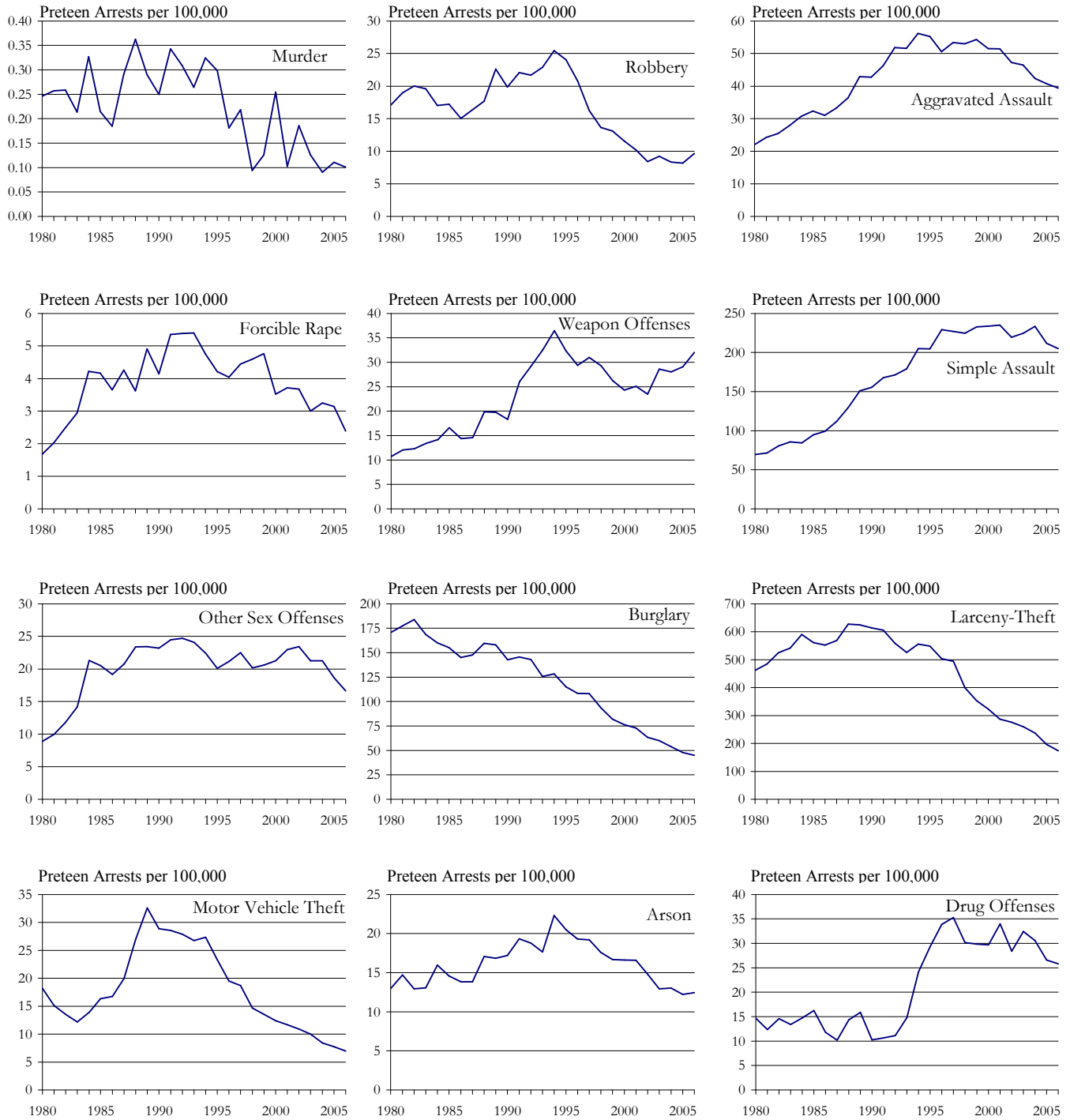
	Preteens (Age 12 & younger)		Teenagers (Age 13–17)	
	Arrests per 100,000 in 2006	Percent Change 1980–2006 (%)	Arrests per 100,000 in 2006	Percent Change 1980–2006 (%)
<i>Violent Crime Index Offenses</i>	52	26	437	1
Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter	0.10	–59	6	–34
Forcible rape	2	42	15	–31
Robbery	10	–43	158	–26
Aggravated assault	39	79	258	35
<i>Property Crime Index Offenses</i>	238	–64	1,735	–47
Burglary	45	–74	361	–65
Larceny-theft	174	–62	1,188	–38
Motor vehicle theft	7	–62	157	–48
Arson	12	–4	29	–4
<i>Selected Non-Index Offenses</i>				
Simple assault	205	196	1,033	165
Weapons offenses	32	199	200	64
Other sex offenses	17	87	63	19
Drug abuse violations	26	76	902	65

Source: Authors' analysis of crime data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports: Crime in the United States 1980* and *Crime in the United States 2006*, along with age-specific population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Although arrest rates for property crimes fell among both age groups, the magnitude of the decline among preteens was larger in most categories than the drop among teens. Between 1980 and 2006, the Property Crime Index arrest rate fell 64 percent among preteen children while declining 47 percent for youth age 13 and older. Arrest rates plummeted more among preteens than among older youth for burglary (down 74% and 65%, respectively), larceny-theft (down 62% and 38%, respectively), and motor vehicle theft (down 62% and 48% respectively). Only in arrests for arson were the 1980–2006 changes similar for preteens and older youth, both declining a relatively small 4 percent.

Increases occurred between 1980 and 2006 in preteen arrest rates for some non-Index offense categories (Figure 2). The preteen arrest rate for simple assault grew 196 percent through 2006, more than the increase among older youth (165%). The arrest rate for weapons offenses increased far more among preteens (199%) than for youth ages 13 and older (64%). The 2006 rate of preteen arrests for other sex offenses (17 per 100,000) was up 87 percent compared with 1980, while the rate of other sex offenses for older youth in 2006 (63 per 100,000) was just 19 percent greater than in 1980. In all categories in both 1980 and in 2006, preteen arrest rates were far smaller than arrest rates for older youth.

**Figure 2**  
**Preteen Arrest Rates for Violent Offenses and Property Offenses Fell Sharply During the Last Decade, but Weapons Offense Rates Increased, and Arrest Rates for Simple Assault and Drug Offenses Remain at Levels Far Higher Than the Rates of the 1980s.**



Note: Vertical scales of individual graphs vary considerably. Caution should be used in comparing arrest rates for different offenses.

Source: Authors' analysis of crime data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports: Crime in the United States 1980 and Crime in the United States 2006*, along with age-specific population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau.

**With the exception of assault offenses and weapons charges, preteen arrest rates generally follow the patterns for those of older youth.**

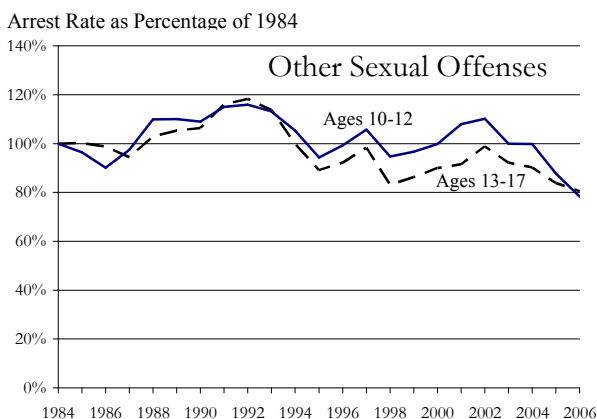
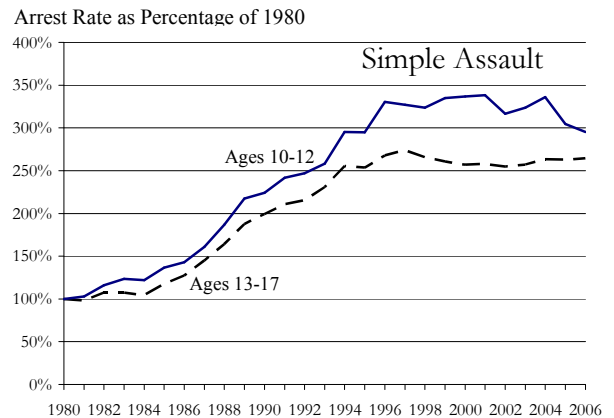
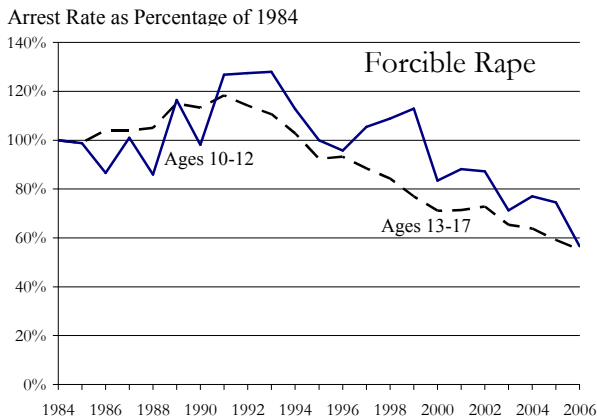
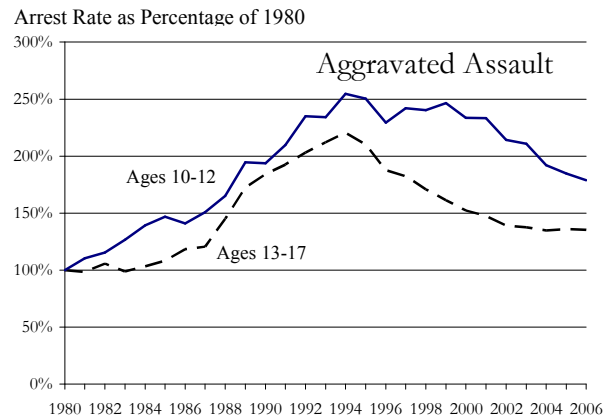
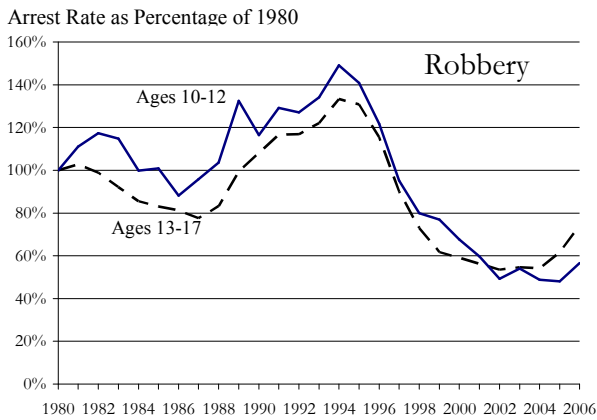
Arrest rates fluctuated dramatically in both age groups over the period from 1980 to 2006. Even though the actual values of the annual arrest rates were far lower for preteens in all offense categories, the pattern of change in most offense-specific arrest rates was similar for preteens and for older youth. To display these patterns, arrest rate trends are graphed as a percent change from their 1980 rate (Figure 3).

A comparison of the robbery arrest rates, for example, finds that the magnitude and direction of change between 1980 and 2006 are virtually identical for both preteens and older youth over this period. In other words, changes in robbery arrest rates relative to 1980 are the same, regardless of age. Arrest rates generally increased between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s. In 1994, the preteen arrest rate for robbery was nearly 50 percent higher than it had been in 1980, while the arrest rate for 13- to 17-year-olds was more than 30 percent higher than in 1980. By 2004, robbery arrest rates were half those of 1980, both for preteens and older youth. In 2006, arrest rates were up slightly among both age groups, but they remained far below the levels they had reached a decade earlier.

When arrest rate trends are similar for two groups, it is fair to conclude that the factors driving these trends (e.g., changes in behavior, changes in societal rules, changes in law enforcement behavior) are affecting both groups similarly, and that whatever distinguishes the two groups (e.g., age) may not be directly related to the underlying change in arrest rates. In other words, the changes in preteen arrest rates for robbery between 1980 and 2006 probably had little to do with the age of the offenders given that similar robbery arrest trends appeared among older youth. The arrest rate trends for preteens and teens were also similar in cases involving charges of forcible rape and other sex offenses. The patterns of change were less dramatic than those seen in robbery, but the arrest rates generally declined by similar amounts for both groups after the early 1990s.

Comparable arrest patterns for both preteens and older youth are visible in arrest rates for simple assault. As a percentage of 1980, arrest rates for simple assault accelerated somewhat more among preteens and than among older youth through the mid-1990s before leveling off and remaining essentially constant through 2006. As a result of somewhat larger increases prior to the mid-1990s, the simple assault arrest rate in 2006 for preteens was 195 percent larger than the 1980 rate, while the arrest rate increase among older youth was slightly lower, at 165 percent.

**Figure 3**  
 Since 1980, Preteen Arrest Rates Have Paralleled Those of Older Youth in Offenses Such as Robbery, but in Other Offenses Arrest Rates of Preteens Have Increased More.



Note: Vertical scales of individual graphs vary considerably. Caution should be used in comparing arrest rates for different offenses. Because of inconsistencies in reporting of preteen arrests during the early 1980s, percentage change in arrest rates for forcible rape and other sex offenses are calculated using 1984 as the base year.

Source: Authors' analysis of crime data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports: Crime in the United States 1980 and Crime in the United States 2006*, along with age-specific population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau.

The general pattern of arrest rate trends for weapons offenses is also strikingly similar among preteens and older youth, but the impact of a series of larger increases among preteens during the early 1990s remained visible through 2006. Compared with arrest rates in 1980, the weapons arrest rate in 2006 was relatively higher among preteens (299% above its 1980 rate) than among youth ages 13 to 17 (164% above its 1980 rate).

For aggravated assault arrests, however, juvenile arrest rates were similar for preteens and older youth during the 1980s and early 1990s, but after the mid-1990s, the pattern in arrest rates diverged. The preteen arrest rate for aggravated assault dropped between 1994 and 2006 just as it did for youth ages 13 to 17, but the decline was not as steep for preteens. As a result, the 2006 aggravated assault arrest rate for preteens was 80 percent higher than it had been in 1980, while the arrest rate among older youth was just 35 percent higher than in 1980.

In summary, a comparison of arrest rate trends between 1980 and 2006 generally finds similarities between preteens and older youth, implying that many of the changes found in preteen trends over this period were not unique to this age group. However, the diverging arrest rate trends for aggravated assault, simple assault, and weapons law violations suggest that there may be factors uniquely related to preteens that are influencing changes in their arrest trends.

### **Preteen offenders differ from their older peers.**

Thus far, this analysis has examined national arrest estimates created from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports. This information is helpful in identifying long-term trends in the age of juvenile offenders and the offenses involved in their arrests, but an analysis of arrest trends provides very little detail about other characteristics of offenders, their victims (if any), and the places and times of the crime incidents that led to each arrest. Without such detail, it is difficult to make any inferences about the potential causes of recent changes in preteen crime.

Detailed information about the characteristics of preteen crime can be analyzed using data from the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System (or NIBRS). This data series is relatively new and cannot be used to construct long-term trends, but within single years, it offers much greater detail than any other source of crime data about the characteristics of juvenile offenders and their offenses.

In 2005, alleged offenders between the ages of 7 and 12 represented 2.4 percent of all offenders reported to law enforcement for offenses against persons, both juveniles and adults (Table 4). Preteen offenders were very rarely involved in murder incidents (less than 0.1% of all murder offenders). They accounted for 0.5 percent of kidnapping and 0.6

percent of robbery offenders, 1.7 percent of aggravated assault offenders, 2.4 percent of simple assault offenders, and 6.1 percent of sexual assault offenders.

Preteens represented 14 percent of juvenile offenders reported to law enforcement in 2005 for offenses against persons. The proportion of preteens varied substantially within specific offense categories. Preteen offenders were 1 percent of juvenile murder offenders, 4 percent of juvenile robbery offenders, 7 percent of juvenile kidnapping offenders, 11 percent of juvenile aggravated assault offenders, and 14 percent of juvenile offenders involved in simple assaults that were reported to law enforcement. In contrast, preteens accounted for a relatively large share (25% or 1 in 4) of the juveniles reported to law enforcement for sexual assault.

Information from NIBRS combines four offenses under the general heading of sexual assault—forcible rape, forcible sodomy, sexual assault with an object, and forcible fondling. A closer look within the sexual assault category reveals that preteen offenders were involved in relatively few (12%) juvenile crimes involving forcible rape, but they accounted for about one-third of juvenile offenders involved in incidents of sexual assault with an object (28%), forcible fondling (29%), and forcible sodomy (34%). In terms of raw numbers, 62 percent of preteen sexual assault offenders were referred to law enforcement for forcible fondling (including child molestation), 19 percent were referred for forcible sodomy, and 14 percent were referred for forcible rape. These proportions differ from those of older juvenile sexual assault offenders, who were less likely than preteen offenders to be reported to law enforcement for forcible fondling (50%) and forcible sodomy (12%), but more likely to be reported for forcible rape (33%).

**Table 4**  
**Preteens Accounted for 1 of Every 40 Person Offenders Reported to Law Enforcement Agencies in 2005.**

	Proportion of Offenders in Age Group					Total (%)
	Age 7–12 (%)	Age 13–17 (%)	Age 18–24 (%)	Age 25–49 (%)	Age 50+ (%)	
All Person Offenses	2.4	15	26	50	7	100
Murder <sup>1</sup>	<0.1	8	38	48	7	100
Kidnapping/abduction	0.5	6	30	58	5	100
Sexual assault	6.1	19	23	43	9	100
Robbery	0.6	17	43	37	2	100
Aggravated assault	1.7	14	29	49	7	100
Simple assault	2.4	15	24	52	7	100

1. Includes nonnegligent manslaughter.

Note: Detail may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis of criminal incident data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS).

A relatively large proportion of the sexual assaults handled by law enforcement in 2005 involved preteen offenders. This is likely related to the fact that a high proportion of the victims in these incidents was also very young. Reporting of these victimizations is a high priority (often a legal requirement) for professionals such as health-care workers, social workers, and educators.

### **Crimes committed by preteens differ in several ways from those of older youth.**

Criminal incidents with the same offense characteristics (e.g., robbery) may have substantially different attributes (victim characteristics, victim harm, presence of a firearm, number of offenders, the likelihood of arrest, etc.). The NIBRS data enable the development of a more detailed picture of the characteristics of crimes that were known to law enforcement. Comparing preteen offenders with older juvenile offenders, this analysis shows that preteen offenders in person-offense incidents were

- Less likely to be female (23% vs. 30%)
- Less likely to commit their offense with other offenders (36% vs. 43%)
- Less likely to be in possession of a firearm (2% vs. 6%)
- Less likely to cause the victim injury to the degree that medical attention is needed (43% vs. 48%)
- More likely to commit their offense on a school day (69% vs. 61%)
- More likely to commit their offense in school (29% vs. 19%), less likely to commit their offense on streets and roads (17% vs. 19%), and less likely to commit their offense in a residence (34% vs. 39%)
- Far less likely to victimize an adult (24% vs. 43%)
- Far more likely to victimize children under age 7 (9% vs. 2%) or ages 7 to 12 (51% vs. 9%) and far less likely to victimize older juveniles ages 13 to 17 (16% vs. 46%)
- Much less likely to commit their offense against a stranger (18% vs. 27%), less likely to have victimized a family member (16% vs. 20%), and far more likely to commit their offense against an acquaintance (71% vs. 56%)
- Less likely to be arrested (29% vs. 37%)

In summary, compared with the crimes of older juveniles, person-offense crimes committed by preteens are generally less serious (i.e., less injury, less-frequent possession of firearms, more single-offender incidents), more likely to occur in and near schools, more likely to involve younger victims and victims who are acquaintances rather than strangers, and resolved less often by a youth's arrest.



The person offense category contains a variety of offenses in which the attributes noted above vary, so it may be informative to examine the attributes of incidents involving preteen and older juvenile offenders controlling for the specific offense (Table 5). For example, compared with those of older juvenile offenders, robbery incidents involving preteens were less likely to involve firearms and less likely to include multiple offenders. The robbery victims of preteen offenders were far more likely to be other young children, with close to half (44%) being under age 13. Also, victims in preteen robberies were far less likely to be strangers to the offender and more likely to be acquaintances. The locations of robberies involving preteen offenders were more likely than those of older juveniles to be schools and less likely to be stores.

**Table 5**  
**Person Offenses by Preteens are Generally Less Serious and More Likely to Occur in School.**

Crime Type Age of Offender	<u>All Offenses</u>		<u>Robbery</u>		<u>Sex Assault</u>		<u>Aggravated Assault</u>		<u>Simple Assault</u>	
	Under age 13 (%)	Age 13 & older (%)	Under age 13 (%)	Age 13 & older (%)	Under age 13 (%)	Age 13 & older (%)	Under age 13 (%)	Age 13 & older (%)	Under age 13 (%)	Age 13 & older (%)
<b>Characteristics of Incident</b>										
Multiple offenders	36	43	76	81	24	23	36	50	37	40
Firearm involved	2	6	20	45	0	1	13	18	0	0
Victim injured	43	48	30	31	11	14	52	59	48	52
Occurred on school day	69	61	50	51	47	55	60	54	74	64
Female offender	23	30	5	6	13	6	18	25	26	35
Female victim	48	47	19	22	63	80	41	35	47	49
Juvenile victim	76	57	62	31	99	95	73	51	73	57
<b>Location of crime</b>										
Residence	34	39	13	14	74	68	38	39	27	40
School	29	19	9	3	10	12	19	11	34	23
Store	1	3	7	11	0	1	1	2	1	2
Highway/street/road	17	19	49	45	3	4	22	29	18	16
<b>Age of victim</b>										
Under age 7	9	2	2	0	48	18	4	1	3	1
Ages 7 to 12	51	9	42	5	43	28	49	7	53	8
Ages 13 to 17	16	46	18	26	7	49	20	43	17	49
<b>Victim-offender relationship</b>										
Stranger	18	27	70	83	11	14	21	35	17	21
Otherwise known	71	59	35	19	55	65	68	58	75	63
Family members	16	20	1	1	38	26	16	17	12	22
Offender arrested	29	37	29	29	19	28	36	42	30	37

Note: Detail may not add to 100 because individual offenders may belong to more than one category and/or not all categories are displayed.

Source: Authors' analysis of criminal incident data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS).

Aggravated assaults involving preteen offenders were generally less serious (i.e., involving less injury, less-frequent firearm possession, more single offenders) compared with aggravated assaults involving older juveniles. Over half (53%) of the aggravated assault victims of preteen offenders were under age 13, compared with just 8 percent of the victims of older juveniles. Aggravated assaults involving preteen offenders were also more likely to occur in or near school (19% vs. 11%), more likely to involve victims who were acquaintances as opposed to strangers, and less likely to be resolved with an arrest (36% vs. 42%).

As noted above, preteen offenders were involved in a relatively large proportion of the juvenile sexual assault incidents reported to law enforcement in 2005. In sexual assault incidents, preteen and older juvenile offenders were equally likely to commit their crimes alone and were both rarely in possession of firearms. The victims of both were almost all juveniles (99% vs. 95%). Although the sexual assaults of preteen and older juvenile offenders were both very likely to occur in a residence, incidents involving preteens were more likely to be in residence (74% vs. 68%). A major difference between the victims of preteen and older juvenile offenders in sexual assault incidents was that almost half (48%) of the victims of preteen offenders were under age seven compared with just 8 percent of the sexual assault victims of older juveniles. Similarly, 91 percent of the victims of preteens were themselves under age 13, compared with just 46 percent of the victims of older youth.

The victims of preteen sexual assault offenders were more likely to be family members (38% vs. 26%) and less likely to be acquaintances (55% vs. 65%). Sexual assault incidents involving preteens were less likely to occur on school days. The victims of preteen sexual assault offenders were less likely than the victims of older juveniles to be injured to the degree that they need medical attention (11% vs. 14%), and the victims of preteens were far more likely to be male (37% vs. 20%). Finally, preteen offenders in sexual assault incidents were less likely to be arrested for their behavior than were older juvenile offenders (19% vs. 28%). Sexual assault incidents involving preteen offenders were more likely to involve young victims and family members. They were more likely to occur in residences and less likely to result in victim injury.

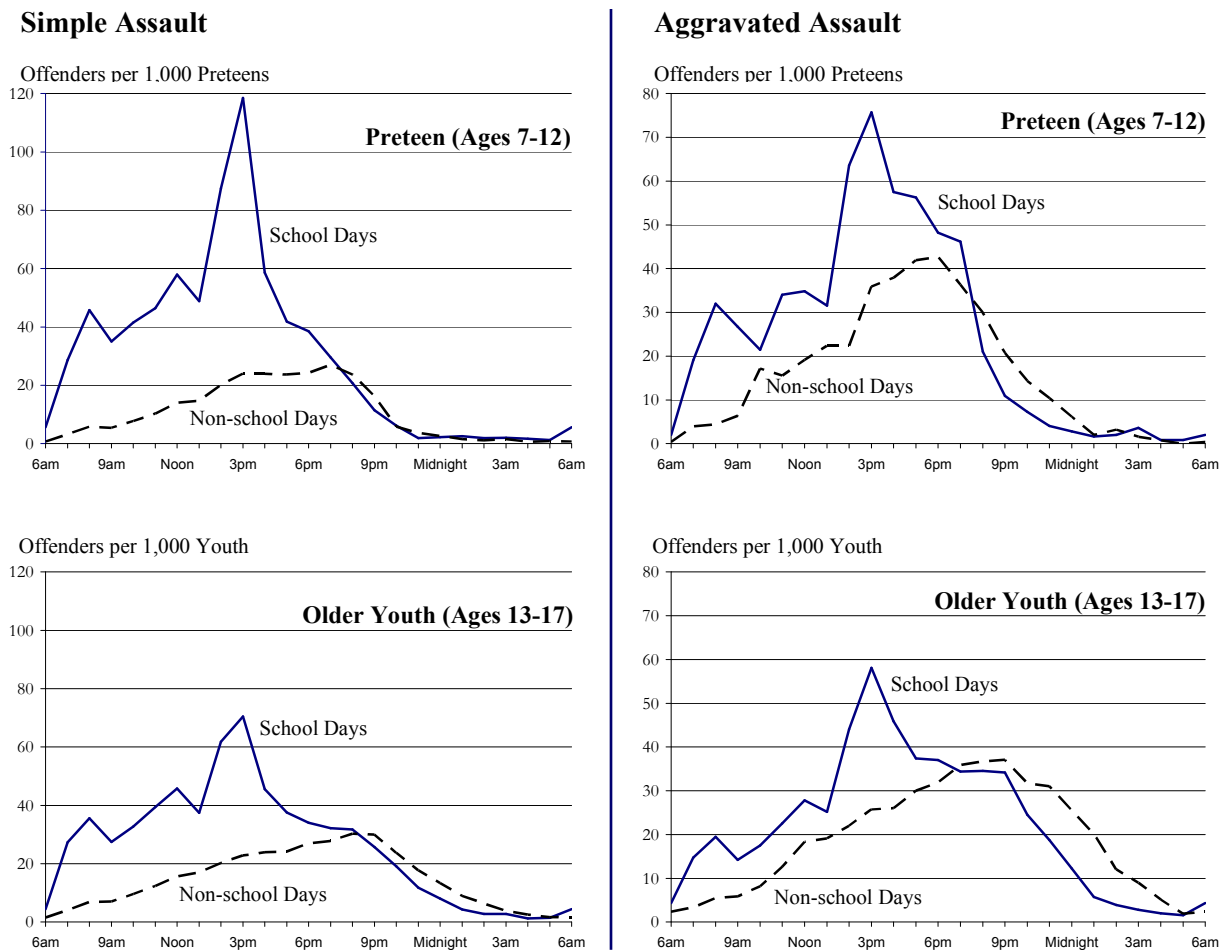
### **The peak time of day for crime incidents varies by the age of juvenile offenders.**

Most aggravated assault incidents (60%) and simple assault incidents (74%) involving preteen offenders occurred on school days in 2005 (Figure 4). On school days, aggravated and simple assaults involving preteen offenders peaked in the late afternoon, between 3:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m. On nonschool days (i.e., weekends and summer months), aggravated assaults peaked in the afternoon and early evening between 3:00

p.m. and 8:00 p.m., while the peak time for simple assaults was between 3:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. and incident levels were relatively constant during that time period.

Compared with time-of-day patterns among preteen offenders, incidents of aggravated and simple assault involving offenders ages 13 to 17 were less likely to be concentrated on school days, but the incidents that did occur on school days still peaked between 3:00 and 4:00 p.m. On nonschool days, simple assault incidents involving older juvenile offenders peaked between 6:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m., later in the evening than was true for simple assaults involving preteen offenders. Aggravated assault incidents involving older juvenile offenders peaked on nonschool days between 7:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m., much later in the evening than incidents involving preteen offenders.

**Figure 4**  
 Person Offenses Involving Preteens are More Often Associated with School Attendance, Occurring Disproportionately during School Hours and on School Days, Relative to Older Youth.



Source: Authors' analysis of criminal incident data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS).

### **If juvenile offenders are not getting younger, why does it seem that way?**

This analysis shows that juvenile offenders today are not significantly younger than were juvenile offenders in the 1980s and 1990s. Although the rate and severity of juvenile crime has fluctuated in recent decades, especially before and after the dramatic wave of youth violence that peaked in 1994, the behavior of preteen offenders generally follows the pattern exhibited by older youth. With few exceptions, the age profile of juvenile offenders has not changed substantially in the past 20 to 25 years. Yet many juvenile justice professionals would assert that it has, and that the youth coming into police stations and courthouses across the country seem to be getting younger and younger every year. What explains this discrepancy?

Three factors are likely involved. First, people working in the juvenile justice system tend to accumulate memories of exceptional cases. Every 12-year-old killer is remembered, even though such cases have always been rare. After many years of handling cases of sometimes shocking juvenile crime, it may seem to an experienced professional that the problem of very young offenders has become worse.

Second, the news media continue to increase their coverage of violent crime, especially when stories involve very young offenders. Today, we hear about every such crime, whether it happened in a different town or on a different continent, and we hear about each crime many more times because of the relative ease with which we can access news and information. As we hear more often about crimes committed by very young children, we naturally start to think that these crimes are happening more frequently, even though an analysis of juvenile crime trends suggests otherwise.

Finally, this analysis relies entirely upon official law enforcement data. Not all juveniles who violate the law are reported to the police and subsequently arrested. The likelihood of arrest depends on the characteristics of the offenders, their criminal acts and the settings in which they occur, the motivation and attitudes of victims, and the standards and practices of law enforcement and the courts. When juvenile justice professionals assert that juvenile offenders are getting younger, they may be partly right. This analysis suggests that to the extent preteen crime has increased, a substantial portion of the increase is concentrated in those offenses more likely to occur at home and at school. It may be that the justice system today is asked to deal with far more family problems and school behavioral problems than it was 20 or 30 years ago and that this could explain the commonly reported perception of a rising number of preteen offenders.

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CHAPIN HALL  
CENTER FOR CHILDREN  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Chapin Hall Center for Children  
at the University of Chicago  
1313 East 60th Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60637  
773/753-5900 (phone)  
773/753-5940 (fax)

[www.chapinhall.org](http://www.chapinhall.org)