

Issue Brief



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AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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Too Soon to Tell: Deciphering Recent Trends in Youth Violence

BY JEFFREY A. BUTTS AND HOWARD N. SNYDER

Mayors and police chiefs recently sounded an alarm about rising crime in the United States. Their apprehensions were sparked by predictions of law enforcement advocates who argue that new crime statistics indicate a “gathering storm” of violent crime (Police Executive Research Forum, 2006). In heeding these warnings, elected officials across the country are debating policy changes to address what they believe is a growing crime problem. Media coverage of the issue has focused the nation’s attention on violent crime, especially violent youth crime.

Predictions of a coming crime wave are premature at best. Crime remains at or near a 30-year low. An American’s chances of being the victim of a violent crime are still lower than at any point since the 1970s. According to surveys conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice, the odds of being a violent-crime victim dropped nearly 60 percent since 1994, and those odds have not increased in recent years.

Of course, there are always reasons to be concerned about violent crime. Horrific crimes continue to occur throughout the country, but the rate at which they occur has increased only slightly. The number of arrests for violent crimes grew 2 percent between 2004 and 2005. According to the most recent data released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), arrests for several key offenses are up, including murder, robbery, and weapon offenses. Other serious crimes, however, continue to decline.

Viewed in proper perspective, the recent increases in violent crime are quite small. Compared with the scale of violent crime seen during the past 30 years, a 1-year increase of 2 percent is not enough to suggest the country is entering a new era of rising crime. America’s decade-long crime decline may be coming to an end, but it is too early to predict a new surge of violent crime and it is inappropriate to imply that future increases are inevitable.

The Crime Decline May Be Over

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, violent crime in the United States soared to levels higher than at any time since the beginning of modern-day crime statistics. Then, suddenly and dramatically, rates of violent crime began to descend, falling continuously through 2004.

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According to national data tabulated by the FBI, 1.9 million Violent Index crimes were reported to police agencies in 1991, representing a rate of 758 crimes per 100,000 Americans.¹ By 2004, the number of Violent Index crimes dropped 28 percent to 1.36 million, for a rate of 463 crimes per 100,000.

We may never know the exact reasons for the crime decline, but researchers have tested a number of credible hypotheses. The strongest factors in the crime drop appear to be the growing prison population (accounting for about one-fourth of the total decline), improved economic conditions, greater access to housing and employment, changing cultural standards of behavior, various effects of the illegal drug market, gun laws, community policing, and other criminal justice innovations (Blumstein and Wallman, 2006). Retrospective analyses suggest that each of these factors played a part in the crime decline, but it is impossible to isolate the independent effects of such a broad array of social forces.

1. The FBI defines Violent Index crimes to include murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

Growing concern about violent youth crime

Florida Searches for Root of Surge in Violent Crime
Headline in *USA Today*, November 1, 2006

Violent Crime Up in State, Especially for Kids
Headline in *Miami Herald*, October 18, 2006

"Robberies have spiked in recent years in the Washington region and many other parts of the country, as the number of juvenile offenders and the availability of guns grows, police officials said."

The Washington Post, October 13, 2006

With Arrests Way Up, Some Fear Crime Wave Among City's Youth

Headline in *New York Sun*, September 20, 2006

"So much of the uptick in crime in Minneapolis ... was among younger teenagers," said City Council Member Don Samuels, who agreed with [Police Chief Tim] Dolan's assessment that police are getting a better handle on the problem. "You have to concentrate on kids if you're going to address the crime issues."

Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune, September 18, 2006

Methods

This report describes national crime trends calculated with data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). Two forms of UCR data are used in the report: the number of crimes reported to police and the number of arrests that result from those crimes. Arrest data provide the only means of analyzing crime across different age groups, as the age of an offender cannot be verified before an arrest has occurred.

National arrest estimates (as well as per capita rates based upon those estimates) are calculated using UCR data released in September 2006. The FBI collects annual information on arrests made by law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. 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 cover all arrests for a minimum number of months during the year. For 2005, the jurisdictions that participated fully represented 73 percent of the U.S. population.

Nearly all of the arrest 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 jurisdictions 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 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.

The causes of the crime decline may be debated, but the fact of plummeting crime rates is not disputed. Americans have enjoyed good news about crime for most of the last decade. The drop in youth crime was particularly welcome. Plunging rates of youth violence fueled growing optimism about the effectiveness of youth crime policies and programs, including detention reform, family treatment, and substance abuse interventions.

The crime drop may now be ending. For the first time in a decade, several of the most serious violent crimes tracked by national crime statistics increased between 2004 and 2005. Murder arrests of adults jumped 6 percent, while robbery arrests involving adults climbed 1 percent. Among juveniles, or youth under age 18, the increase in violent crime arrests was proportionally greater.² Juvenile arrests for murder grew 20 percent between 2004 and 2005. Robbery arrests involving juveniles rose 11 percent in the same time period. The new crime statistics have drawn the attention of elected officials and other policymakers who are increasingly worried about youth violence.

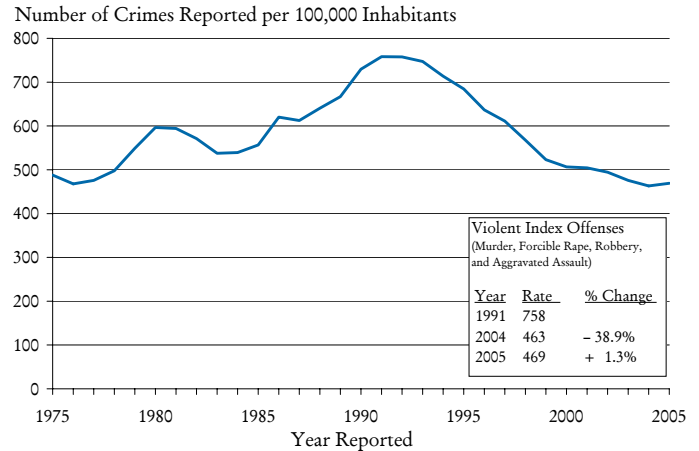
2. This report uses the term *juvenile* as a synonym for youth under age 18. Of course, the precise legal meaning of the term varies from state to state. In Connecticut, New York, and North Carolina, juvenile court jurisdiction ends on a youth's sixteenth birthday. A dozen states—including Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Texas—begin criminal responsibility at age 17, limiting the status of juvenile to youth age 16 and younger.

National Trends Reflect Smaller Local Changes

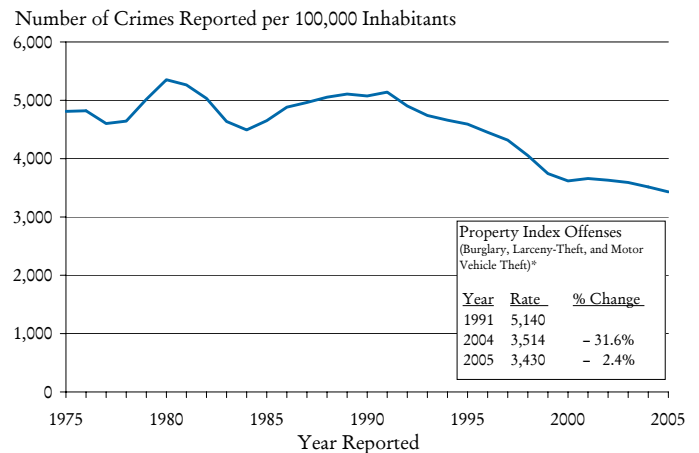
The 20-percent increase in juvenile murder arrests nationwide between 2004 and 2005 translates into about 200 more arrests. If this increase were distributed evenly across state and local jurisdictions according to the size of their populations, the number of additional arrests experienced by any one area would be relatively small. For example, the State of Indiana (with 2 percent of the U.S. population) could expect to see four additional juvenile arrests for murder, with one new arrest in Indianapolis. With roughly 6 percent of the population, the State of Florida could expect to see 12 new arrests overall, with Miami accounting for two of those arrests. Other areas would see comparable increases, including one additional arrest in Detroit, two added arrests in Dallas, and two new arrests in San Diego.

Violent Crime & Property Crime Rates, 1975-2005

Violent Crime Index



Property Crime Index



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (2005). Crime in the United States. Table 1. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice.

* Arson is not included in the FBI's tabulation of Property Index arrest rates.

It Is Too Soon to Predict a Violent Crime Rebound

In 2005, U.S. law enforcement agencies made an estimated 14 million arrests for all types of criminal offenses. Juveniles were involved in 15 percent or 2.1 million of those arrests, which represented 3 percent fewer juvenile arrests than in 2004. Many categories of serious juvenile crime declined between 2004 and 2005. Juvenile arrests for forcible rape, for example, fell 11 percent between 2004 and 2005, while aggravated assault arrests dipped 1 percent, burglary arrests dropped 5 percent, and juvenile arrests for larceny-theft and motor vehicle theft each decreased 9 percent.

Some of the offenses included in the Violent Crime Index, however, grew between 2004 and 2005. The entire increase was attributable to two offenses: robbery and murder. The 11-percent increase in juvenile robbery arrests followed a 44-percent decline in the previous decade. Murder arrests

among juveniles rose 20 percent between 2004 and 2005, after a previous drop of 63 percent. The larger number of juvenile murder arrests in 2005 was equivalent to approximately 200 additional arrests nationwide.

The recent changes in violent crime merit our attention, but it is important to consider the relative size of the changes. Between 1975 and 1987, the per capita rate of juvenile violent crime arrests remained close to 300 arrests per 100,000. In the next 7 years, from 1987 through 1994, the rate increased more than 60 percent to just over 500 arrests per 100,000. After the appearance of the crime decline in 1994, the violent arrest rate for juveniles fell to 271 per 100,000 by 2004, or roughly the level that predominated in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Between 2004 and 2005, the violent crime arrest rate for juveniles increased 1 percent, reaching 283 arrests per 100,000. The increase of 12 arrests per 100,000 was about one-twentieth the amount it would take for the arrest rate

Violent Crime Arrests, 1995-2005

	Adult Arrests (Age 18 and Older)			Juvenile Arrests (Under Age 18)		
	2005 Arrests	Percent Change (%)		2005 Arrests	Percent Change (%)	
		1995-04	2004-05		1995-04	2004-05
All Offenses	11,950,500	- 1	1	2,143,700	- 22	- 3
Violent Crime Index:	508,200	- 14	2	95,300	- 31	2
Murder	12,800	- 25	6	1,300	- 63	20
Forcible rape	21,600	- 17	- 1	3,900	- 22	- 11
Robbery	85,700	- 14	1	28,900	- 44	11
Aggravated assault	388,100	- 13	2	61,200	- 23	- 1
Property Crime Index:	1,190,800	- 14	- 1	418,500	- 40	- 8
Burglary	220,800	- 10	3	78,000	- 39	- 5
Larceny-theft	851,800	- 16	- 2	294,900	- 38	- 9
Motor vehicle theft	109,800	- 1	1	37,700	- 53	- 9
Arson	8,400	- 23	6	7,900	- 34	1
Selected Other Offenses:						
Other assaults	1,053,500	- 7	1	247,900	8	- 1
Weapons	148,600	- 27	8	44,800	- 29	7
Drug abuse violations	1,654,600	26	5	191,800	- 4	- 2
Driving under the influence	1,354,100	- 5	- 2	17,800	20	- 9
Liquor laws	471,400	15	- 4	126,400	- 4	- 3
Disorderly conduct	476,800	- 23	1	201,400	- 2	- 1
Vandalism	175,500	- 8	1	104,100	- 32	- 1
Curfew / loitering	--	--	--	140,800	- 15	2
Runaways	--	--	--	109,000	- 46	- 5

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

Source: Analysis and weighting of sample-specific data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Crime in the United States, annual. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice.

to return to the level of 1994. In other words, arrests would have to grow at the same pace for 19 more years before the juvenile violent crime arrest rate would be as high as it was in 1994.

The same pattern occurred among young adults between the ages of 18 and 24. The violent crime arrest rate among young adults grew consistently between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, reaching a high of 849 arrests per 100,000. The rate then dropped sharply through 2004 to 575 per 100,000.

A 3-percent increase between 2004 and 2005 brought the violent crime arrest rate for young adults back up to 591 per 100,000, or roughly 6 percent of the amount that would be necessary for the rate to return to the levels of the mid-1990s. Again, these increases would have to continue beyond the year 2020 for crime rates to be as high as they were in the mid-1990s.

Similar trends were seen among all age groups in the last 30 years, but the greatest volatility in violent crime was associated with the behavior of young people between the ages of 15 and 24. Arrest rates for all youth (ages 15 to 24) were generally higher than arrest rates for other age groups throughout the period between 1975 and 2005. The increase in murder arrests, robbery arrests, and weapon offense arrests was particularly striking for offenders between the ages of 15 and 20, at least half of whom are under the jurisdiction of the adult justice system.

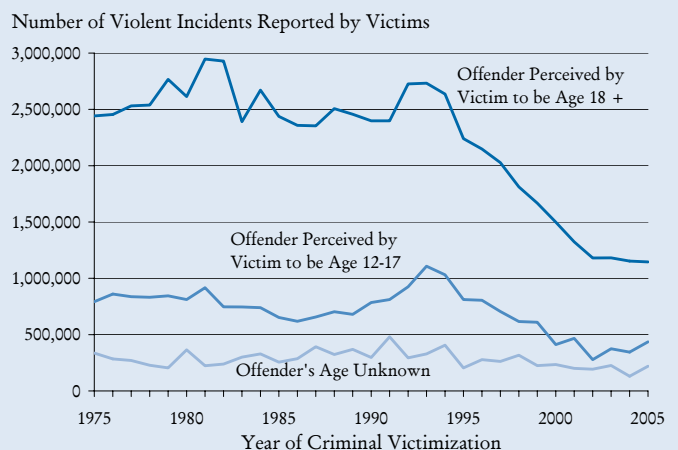
Recent Trends Are Not Due Only to Police Activity

Because they depend at least in part on police resources and levels of enforcement, data about the number of crimes reported and the number of arrests made are an imperfect measure of crime. Victim surveys are another important source of information, although the information they produce about offenders may be less precise. In addition, national surveys cannot measure crime trends at the state or local level.

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) has been administered by the U.S. Department of Justice since 1973. The NCVS shows no recent increase in the overall rate of violent crime in the United States (violent victimizations per 1,000). The rate of violent crimes dropped steeply after 1994 and has not increased in recent years. There was an increase, however, in the number of violent crimes in which the victim believed the offender was younger than age 18. The number of these incidents grew 57 percent between 2002 and 2005, from 278,000 to 436,000 crimes. The number of under-18 crimes in 2005, however, was still 60 percent lower than the 1.1 million reported in 1993.

Source: National Crime Victimization Survey (2006). Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. [<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/cvictgen.htm>]

Violent Victimization, 1975-2005



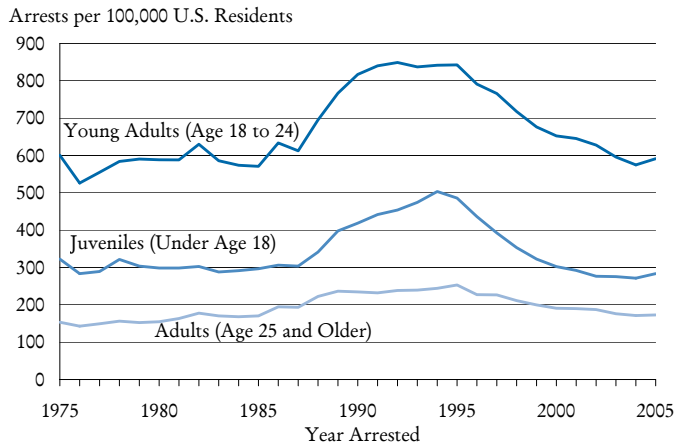
Policy Should Focus on Youth Crime, not Juvenile Crime

When policymakers turn their attention to violent crime, the discussion quickly focuses on violent youth crime. This is appropriate. Violent crime is disproportionately associated with young people, but *young* in this context means under age 20 or even below age 25. It is not accurate to describe violent youth crime as *juvenile* crime (i.e., below age 18).

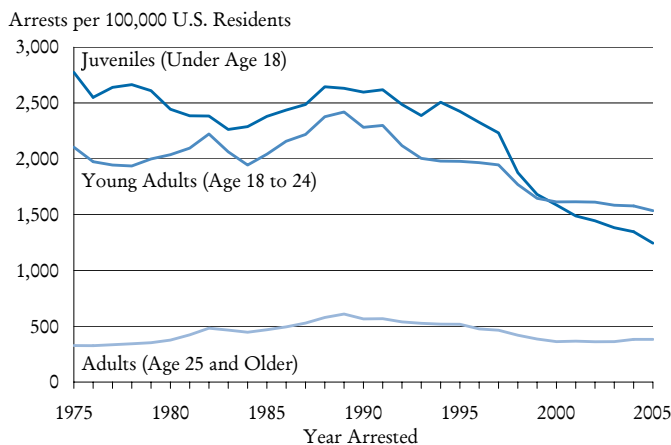
Of all violent crime arrests in 2005, 16 percent (or 2 million arrests) involved juveniles under age 18, but 29 percent (or just over 3 million arrests) involved young adults between ages 18 and 24. Together, all young people through age 24

Violent Crime Arrest Rates, by Age

Violent Crime Index



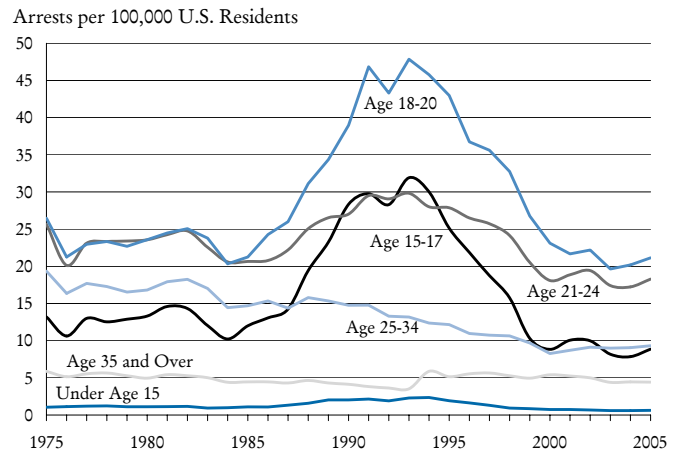
Property Crime Index



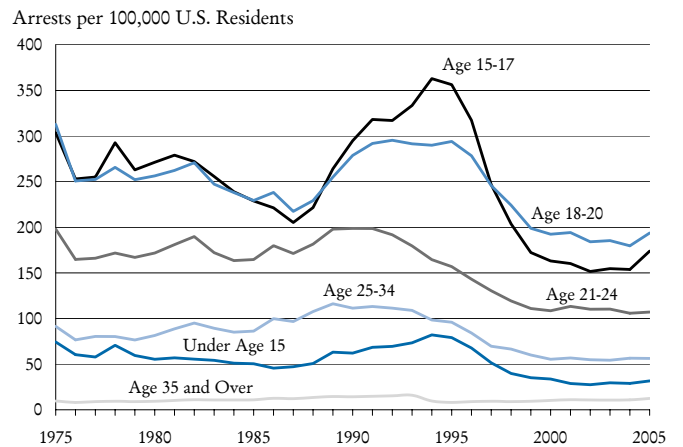
Source: Analysis and weighting of sample-specific data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Crime in the United States, annual. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice.

Fluctuations in Arrest Rates, by Age

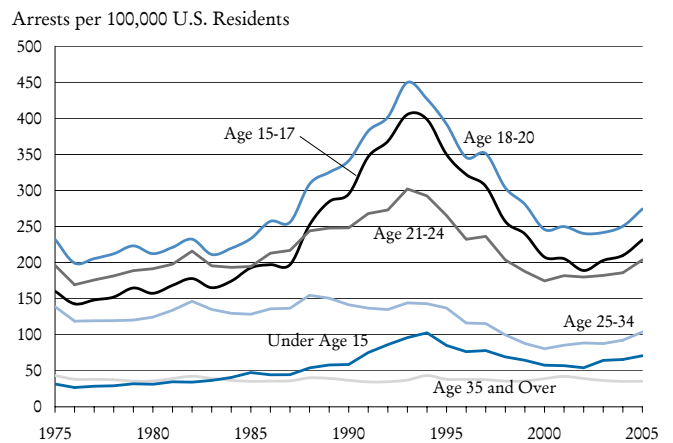
Murder



Robbery



Weapon Offenses



Source: Analysis and weighting of sample-specific data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Crime in the United States, annual. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice.

accounted for 45 percent of violent crime arrests, 50 percent of murder arrests, and 62 percent of robbery arrests.

When changing crime rates are disaggregated by age, identical patterns appear among young adults (ages 18 to 24) and juveniles (under age 18). This suggests that efforts to curb violent crime should not be restricted to either the juvenile or adult justice system. Reducing youth crime requires policies and programs that cut across the legal boundaries of court jurisdiction to address all youth, those over age 18 as well as those below age 18. Furthermore, because young adults are already under the jurisdiction of the criminal (adult) court and their crime numbers tend to move in the same direction as those of older juveniles, few benefits would be gained by moving larger numbers of juvenile offenders into criminal court.

Crime Problems Are Not Shared Equally

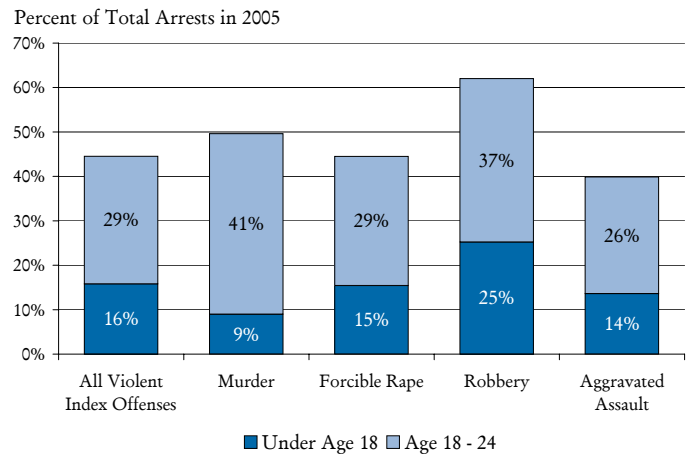
Violent crime does not affect all communities equally. Even small increases in violence tend to have stronger effects on the nation's poorest neighborhoods and among minority communities and families. A closer look at recent trends in juvenile arrest rates reveals that this characteristic of crime is occurring today.

Violent crime arrest rates increased less for white youth than for black or African American youth between 2004 and 2005. The violent crime arrest rate for white juveniles dipped 3 percent between 2004 and 2005, but the rate for black juveniles increased 14 percent. In each of the offense categories where juvenile arrest rates increased in recent years, the increase among black youth outpaced growth among white youth.

Specifically, the murder, robbery, and weapons arrest rates for white juveniles each increased less than 5 percent between 2004 and 2005, but the same arrest rates among black juveniles increased more than 20 percent during the same period. Similarly, whereas the aggravated assault arrest rate for white juveniles fell a few percentage points, aggravated assault arrests among black juveniles increased 10 percent.

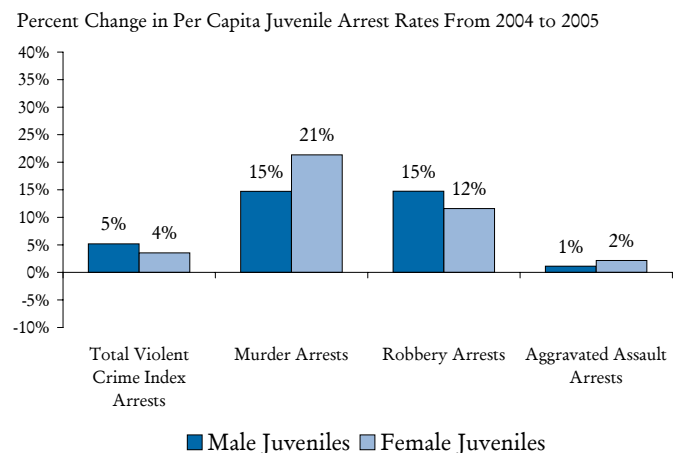
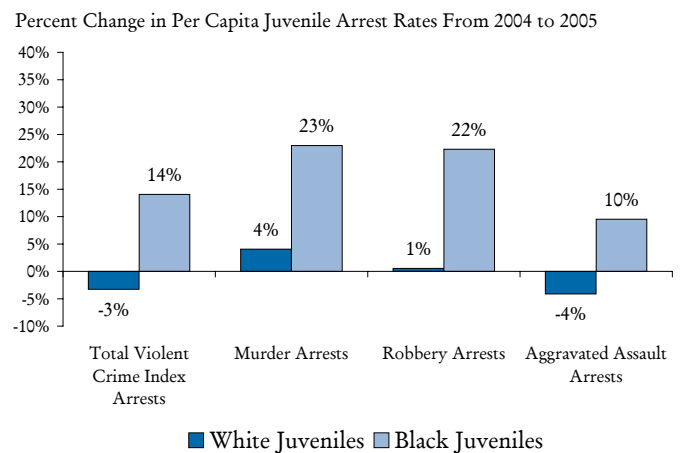
The differing rates of increase in violent crime arrests among youth of color underscore the origins of crime in social, community, and neighborhood factors. Crime-prevention efforts should focus on communities where youth are the most at-risk for involvement in crime and delinquency.

Violent Crime Arrests: Juveniles and Young Adults



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation (2005). Crime in the United States. Table 38. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice.

Juvenile Violent Crime Arrests, by Race and Gender



Source: Analysis and weighting of sample-specific data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Crime in the United States, annual. Washington, DC: FBI, U.S. Department of Justice.

Conclusion

Although violent crime rates remain at or near their lowest point since the 1970s, any increase in crime generates concern. Law enforcement organizations have expressed deep concern about a recent rise in violent crime statistics. Some of these concerns are well-founded, but others are exaggerated.

The recent changes in violent crime are small compared with the scale of shifting crime over the past 30 years. It is premature to predict a coming wave of serious violent crime after 1 year of increase. It is incorrect to assume that future increases in violent crime are inevitable, and it is inappropriate to lay the blame for any increase that does occur on “juveniles.”

Crime-prevention strategies should focus on at-risk youth between the ages of 15 and 24, and most of these young people are not under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system. To prevent violent crime, policymakers must support community-based strategies that can reach all young people, especially those who are disconnected from school, work, and family and those who are from distressed and impoverished neighborhoods.

Chapin Hall Center for Children

Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago is a policy research center dedicated to bringing sound information, rigorous analysis, innovative ideas, and an independent multidisciplinary perspective to bear on policies and programs affecting children. Chapin Hall's focus takes in all children, but devotes special attention to children facing significant problems, including abuse or neglect, poverty, and mental or physical illness. It takes a broad view of children's needs, including their potential as well as their problems, and addresses the services and supports—public and private—aimed at fostering child and youth development.

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Analyses of Crime Trends Should Use Complete Data

The FBI's national crime information takes almost a year to compile and release. The UCR report for 2005, for instance, was released in September 2006. This means that even an expedited analysis of crime trends at the national level is based on information that is nearly a year old. It may be tempting to analyze crime trends using monthly or quarterly data from local police departments in order to report more recent information, but doing so can lead to erroneous conclusions. Violent crime occurs in intermittent and unpredictable patterns. Criminal incidents are not smoothly distributed across the calendar. Fluctuations that appear large when crime data are examined in small increments of time can turn out to be less significant when viewed over a longer period of time. Especially when crime data are released via the news media, it is always the unexpected increase that receives the most attention. If a city has more homicides than expected during the first few months of a year, the data will be covered as news. If a neighboring city has fewer murders than expected, the public is unlikely to hear about it. The best way to judge the significance of crime trends is to wait for fully processed annual data from a large number of jurisdictions.

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