

Data Reveals Violence Among Youth Under 18 Has Not Spiked in the Pandemic

Throughout the pandemic, a flurry of alarming news coverage and inflammatory rhetoric from politicians have appeared in national¹ and local² media highlighting serious violent crimes by youth. The issue has generated considerable political attention in Congress³ and across the country, and it has fueled calls to scale back youth justice reforms enacted in many states and to derail proposed reforms in others.⁴

This report explains why these calls for a return to get-tough youth justice policies are misguided, based on a false narrative regarding recent trends in youth crime and what actually works to prevent delinquency and promote youth success.

Our nation must always take vigilant action steps to increase public safety, starting with common sense gun regulations to limit access to deadly weapons. But the nation must be clear-eyed about the nature and dimensions of youth violence and cannot allow media-fueled concerns over crime or election-year political posturing to distract attention from efforts to mobilize urgently needed social, emotional, and mental health support for young people in their schools and communities.⁵

The Sentencing Project's review of the available data about youth violence during the pandemic finds

scarce evidence of a youth-led crime wave. Rather, most of the data suggest that youth violence has been flat or declining.

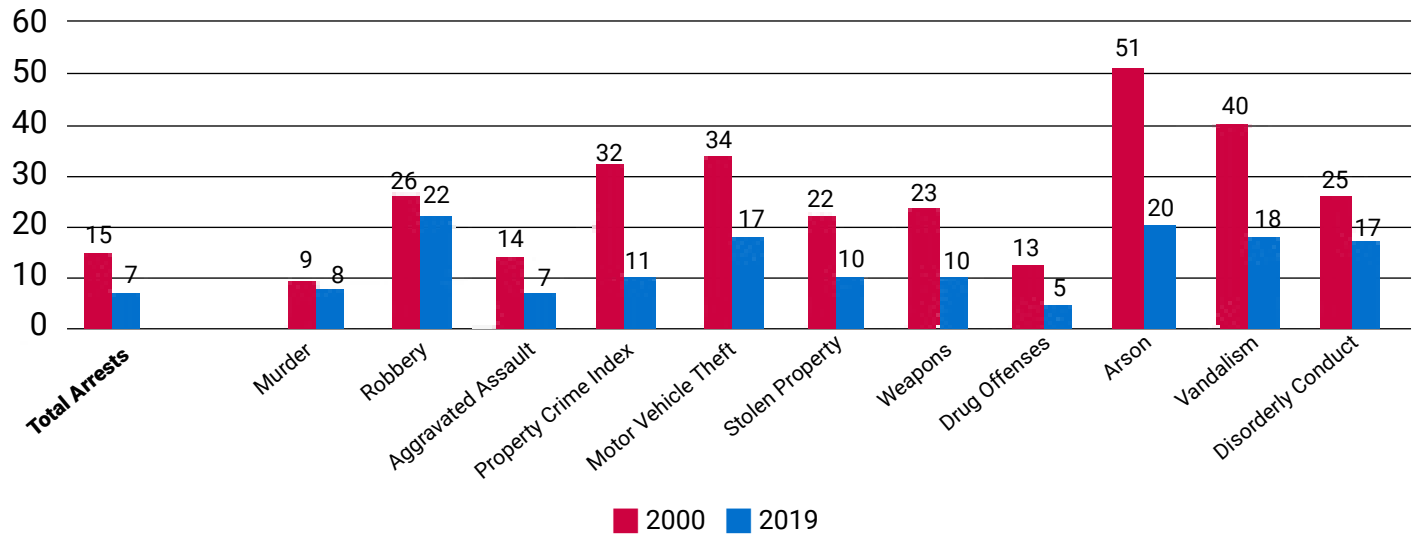
The share of crimes in the U.S. committed by youth has fallen by more than half over the past two decades, and it continued to fall for all major offense categories in 2020 (the most recent year for which data are available). The overall number of serious violent offenses (murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) committed by youth also declined in 2020. While the number of homicides committed by youth increased as part of a worrisome national spike, 7.5% of homicide arrests in 2020 involved youth under 18 – a slightly smaller share than in previous years.⁶ Meanwhile, media coverage highlighting youth involvement in carjacking has often gone well beyond the known facts or omitted critical context.

Especially now, after all of the hardship and trauma and disruption youth have endured during the pandemic, it would be foolhardy to return to outdated, overly punitive responses to youth offending that exacerbate racial disparities and contradict the known evidence about adolescent brain development and about what works to promote youth success and protect public safety.

Available data suggest youth violence has been flat or declining during the pandemic.

Over the past 20 years, the share of U.S. crime committed by youth has plummeted.

FIGURE 1. Juvenile Share of Total Arrests in the U.S.: 2000 vs. 2019



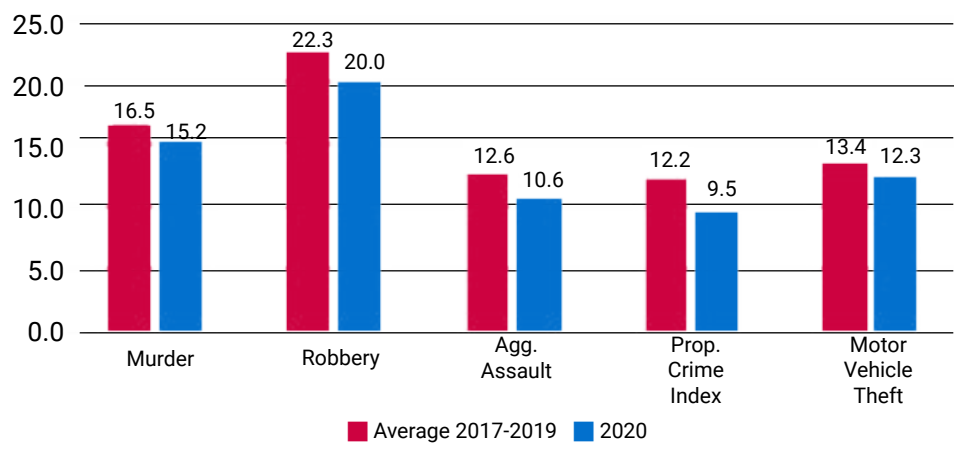
Back in 2000, 15% of all arrests nationwide were people under age 18. By 2019, the last year for which nationally representative arrest data are available, the youth share of arrests had fallen to 7% – a drop of more than half. This decline in youth’s share of arrests spans every major crime category. (See Figure 1).

Over the past 25 years, arrest rates have declined far more quickly for youth than adults. For instance, the combined youth arrest rate for all serious violent crimes (homicide, rape, robbery and aggravated assault) fell 72% from 1994 to 2019 – far greater than the decline for any adult age cohort.⁷

The share of crime committed by young people continued to decline in 2020.⁸

Data from the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports show that the under-18 share of arrests was lower in 2020 than in the previous three years for each of the four violent index offenses, and in other major crime categories as well. Likewise, National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) data show that the share of offenses committed by youth ages 10-19⁹ was also smaller in 2020 than the previous three years in every major crime category. (See Figure 2.)

FIGURE 2. Share of Reported Crimes in the U.S. Committed by Youth Ages 10-19: Pre-Pandemic vs. 2020



Serious violent offenses committed by youth decreased in 2020.

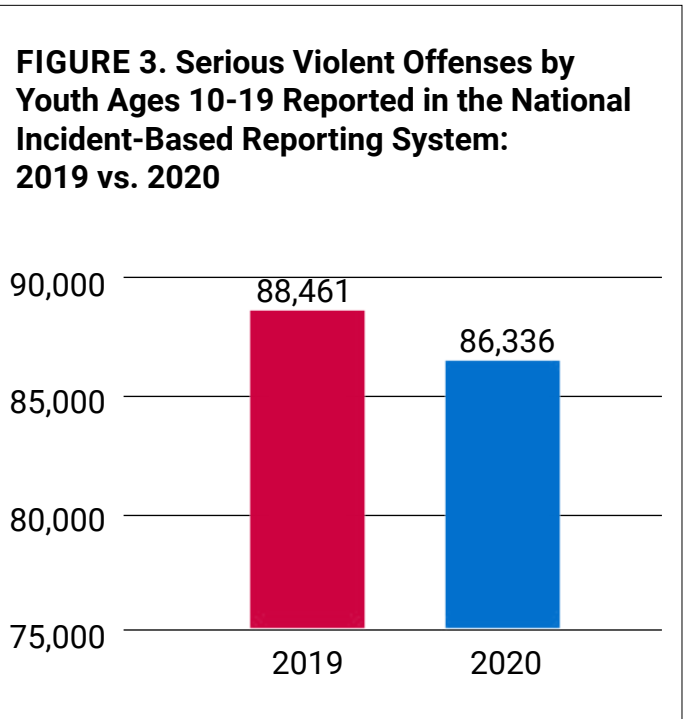
Contrary to most media portrayals – youth offending rates in most crime categories were stable or decreasing in 2020 compared to prior years. The total number of reported arrests for youth under age 18 fell by half from 2017 to 2020, while reported juvenile arrests for rape, robbery and aggravated assault all fell by at least 38%. Homicide arrests fell by a more modest 8%. Trends for youth offending in the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) were also encouraging in 2020.¹⁰ Indeed, the total number of serious violent offenses by 10-19 year-olds documented in the NIBRS system was lower in 2020¹¹ than in 2019.¹² (See Figure 3.)

Despite the decrease in violent offenses by youth in 2020, media coverage continues to highlight particular violent crime trends allegedly associated with youth – often sensationalizing atypical anecdotes or citing unfounded speculation about the causes and dimensions of adolescent offending. For information on how journalists can improve their crime and criminal justice coverage and better inform the public and policymakers about public safety policy, see The Sentencing Project’s media guide, [10 Crime Coverage Dos and Don’ts](#).

CARJACKING

Much of the news coverage around youth violence has focused on young people’s role in carjackings, and many of the stories about carjacking have been sensationalized or skewed.¹³

Overwhelmingly, the coverage has advanced a narrative suggesting that carjackings have risen to unprecedented levels nationwide and that youth are responsible. Yet, because the federal government does not publish data specifically on carjackings, the extent to which the isolated spikes in carjackings



Below we look at the available evidence regarding incidents of carjacking and homicides involving youth.

reported in a select number of cities are indicative of a national trend is unknown. The data do show that total robberies by youth – of which carjackings are a subcategory – declined in 2020.¹⁴

Meanwhile, because few carjacking cases are ever solved, there are no reliable data on the age profile of those committing carjacking offenses. While youth under age 18 have been a large share of those arrested for carjacking in several cities, an estimated 85 to 90% of carjacking cases remain unsolved.¹⁵ In

Chicago, where many stories in the national media have focused, police made arrests in just 5% of carjacking cases in 2020.¹⁶ Some experts, such as Stephanie Kollmann at the Northwestern School of Law, have questioned whether youth are behind the carjacking surge. Police are most likely to solve cases where offenders fail to plan carefully, commit crimes in large groups, and lack strong driving skills, Kollmann has explained, all hallmarks of youth.¹⁷ Other experts argue that young people likely are responsible for a substantial share of carjacking offenses.¹⁸

HOMICIDE¹⁹

There is also little evidence that youth under age 18 have played a major part in our nation's most worrisome crime trend in the past two years – the sizable increase in homicides. Rather, the most plausible explanations point to other factors.

Nationwide, the homicide rate increased about 30% from 2019 to 2020.²⁰ While national data for 2021 are not yet available, a review of 2021 crime trends in 27 U.S. cities found that homicides rose a more modest 5% in 2021.²¹

Data from NIBRS show that, as part of this rise, the number of homicides by youth ages 10-19 did increase in 2020, however 10-19 year-olds' share of total homicides continued to decline from 2019 and prior years.²² The vast majority of individuals arrested for homicide in 2020 (92.5%) were adults, a higher share than in any of the prior three years.²³

While the causes of rising homicide rates remain a subject of intense study and speculation, the most likely factors identified to date include the strains imposed on the U.S. population by the COVID-19 pandemic;²⁴ a surge in gun sales that began in 2020;²⁵ and a worsening of police-community relations in the

wake of George Floyd's murder and the subsequent clashes between police and protesters.²⁶

In a widely circulated January 2022 report examining recent violent crime trends nationwide, the nonpartisan Council on Criminal Justice did not identify youth crime as a critical focus to combat the nation's violence problem.²⁷ Likewise, when the Council's Violent Crime Working Group released a report in early 2022 identifying "Ten Essential Actions Cities Can Take to Reduce Violence Now," none of its recommendations focused on children and youth or urged changes in youth justice policy.²⁸

NO MATTER THE SHORT-TERM TRENDS IN YOUTH OFFENDING, HARSH RESPONSES WON'T IMPROVE PUBLIC SAFETY

Future data may reveal that rates of youth violence did increase during the pandemic – at least to some degree, in some crime categories. But even if it is ultimately confirmed, a pandemic-era increase in youth offending should not be used as a rationale to scale back recent reforms in youth justice or to promote punitive policies against youth.

A temporary rise in adolescent lawbreaking would not be surprising given the severe trauma and disruption young people have experienced during the pandemic. The pandemic has caused a sharp increase in mental health problems among adolescents,²⁹ including sharp increases in anxiety disorders, depression, and self-harm.³⁰ These pandemic-fueled problems cannot be solved with harsher punishments in the court system.

There is now overwhelming evidence that punitive responses in the youth justice system don't work. Transfer to adult court,³¹ heavy reliance on detention and confinement,³² and criminalization of routine adolescent misbehavior in school³³ all tend to heighten delinquency, worsen youth outcomes and undermine public safety.

DO WHAT WORKS TO COMBAT YOUTH VIOLENCE, PROMOTE YOUTH SUCCESS AND KEEP COMMUNITIES SAFE

Overwhelming evidence shows that what works to improve adolescent development outcomes and to minimize youth offending are: (1) carefully measured, well-calibrated, evidence-informed interventions for youth who commit delinquent acts;³⁴ and (2) broad societal investments in young people's healthy development and in the wellbeing of their families, schools, and communities.³⁵ Specifically, the evidence makes plain that it is more effective to:

- hire counselors rather than police officers in public schools, and – as detailed in The Sentencing Project's [Back-to-School Action Guide](#) – address youth misbehavior at school with restorative justice or emergency mental health interventions rather than suspensions, expulsion or arrests;³⁶
- divert young people accused of less serious offenses into restorative justice and other community-led diversion programs rather than adjudicating their cases in juvenile court;³⁷
- keep young people at home and in school

following arrest in the vast majority of cases, rather than placing them in locked detention cells;³⁸

- provide evidence-based interventions and positive youth development opportunities in the community for youth adjudicated delinquent, including many who have committed serious offenses, rather than placing them into correctional facilities;³⁹
- process all youth in juvenile court, rather than charging and punishing youth as if they were adults.⁴⁰

Over the past 20 years, justice systems across the country have made steady if uneven progress toward most of these goals. Much work remains in youth justice reform to close the gap between common practice and best practice.

We cannot allow a wave of alarming and often sensationalized reporting about youth violence to distract us from decades of experience and research on what actually helps kids and communities thrive, nor to unravel the encouraging bipartisan cooperation on youth justice issues that has fueled recent progress.

ENDNOTES

¹ Examples include: Nickeas, P. and Krishnakumar, P. (2022, Jan. 23). 'It's a Disturbing Trend.' Cities See Large Increases in Carjackings During Pandemic. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/23/us/carjackings-rise-major-cities-pandemic/index.html>; Corley, C. (2021, Feb. 10). Juveniles Part of a Huge Increase in Carjackings. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/964609023/juveniles-part-of-a-huge-increase-in-carjackings-across-the-country>; Pagones, S. (2021, Apr. 8). Kids Committing More Carjackings and Violent Crimes Amid Remote Schooling, Court Slowdowns. *Fox News*. <https://www.foxnews.com/us/carjackings-crimes-juveniles-remote-schooling-court-slowdowns>; Campbell, R. (2022, Mar. 1). 'I Honestly Believe It's a Game.' Why Carjacking is on the Rise Among Teens. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/01/us/car-theft-teens-pandemic.html>.

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⁶ Author's calculation, using data from FBI Crime Data Explorer, available at <https://crime-data-explorer.app.cloud.gov/pages/explorer/crime/arrest>.

⁷ OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book. Age-Specific Arrest Rate Trends. Available: <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/qa05301.asp?qaDate=2019>. Released on November 16, 2020.

⁸ Unfortunately, the quality of national crime data is less than optimal currently. The federal government is in the midst of a major transition in how crime statistics are monitored – replacing the FBI's long standing Uniform Crime Reports with a new and more informative incident-based reporting system. Just 60% of police agencies nationwide reported arrest data in 2020, down from 74% in 2017, while the share of population living in areas covered by the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) grew from 33% to 53% – a substantial increase, but still far short of a nationwide sample.

⁹ The NIBRS data do not provide a breakdown on offenders 17 and under.

¹⁰ Whereas the share of population covered in the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) database increased by about 60% from 2017 to 2020, the number of 10-19 year-olds identified as perpetrators in most crime categories grew substantially less. Specifically, compared with 2017, the number of aggravated assaults committed by youth ages 10-19 was up 41% in the NIBRS data; robberies were up 31%; rapes were up 0.3%; and property index crimes were down 6%, whereas the share of US population covered by the NIBRS data increase by 60%.

¹¹ This decline in the number of serious violent offenses captured in the NIBRS data came even as the share of the U.S. population covered by NIBRS increased from 47% in 2019 to 53% in 2020.

¹² Trend of Violent Crime from 2010 to 2020. Federal Bureau of Investigation: Crime Data Explorer. [Data set]. <https://crime-data-explorer.app.cloud.gov/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend>.

¹³ For instance, many recent media stories have highlighted anecdotes in which very young children were involved in carjacking, and many have cited unfounded speculation tracing the rise in carjacking to purportedly insufficient punishments in the juvenile justice system. However, there exists no evidence to suggest that 11- and 12-year-olds are playing a significant role in carjacking, nor that the severity of punishments available in juvenile courts is motivating youth to engage in carjacking or any other type of offending.

¹⁴ FBI Uniform Crime Report data show that robbery arrests for youth under 17 declined 33% nationwide in 2020, and National Incident-Based Reporting System data indicate that robbery incidents involving 10-19 year-olds declined 9%.

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¹⁹ The following data on homicides all refer to incidents of murder and non-negligent manslaughter, but do not include negligent manslaughter.

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²² Again, the NIBRS data do not provide a breakdown on offenders 17 and under.

²³ Author's calculation. Trend of Violent Crime from 2010 to 2020. Federal Bureau of Investigation: Crime Data Explorer. [Data set]. <https://crime-data-explorer.app.cloud.gov/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend>.

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The Sentencing Project promotes effective and humane responses to crime that minimize imprisonment and criminalization of youth and adults by promoting racial, ethnic, economic, and gender justice.