Violence and Today’s Youth

Felton J. Earls

Issue Editor’s Note

The violent behavior of adolescents in our society is a topic of enormous interest and concern, limited data and knowledge, and, unfortunately, substantial misinformation and distortion. In 1990, some 16.3% (1,749,343) of the total number of arrests in the United States were of youth 17 years of age or younger, and 5.5% (95,677) of these arrests were for violent crimes. Of incarcerated youth (fewer than 100,000 of all prisoners), about one quarter have committed crimes against persons. Although the overall magnitude of this problem is often distorted by the media, these numbers, which have increased over the past decade, do mask the substantially higher rates in extremely poor, populous urban communities. In addition, on a national survey, about 20% of adolescents reported having engaged in one violent incident by 18 years of age. Other youths are the predominant victims of violent behavior by adolescents.

Many environmental, psychologic, and biologic risk and protective factors and population indicators have been related to violent behavior and, in various combinations, increase or decrease the likelihood of its occurrence. However, no one theory or combination of variables allows prediction of which individuals will commit violent acts or what interventions will prevent these acts initially or reduce the incidence of repeated offenses. Few, if any, of the individual therapeutic techniques, promising state or community-based programs, or traditional law enforcement and judicial approaches have been adequately evaluated to determine whether they are effective in reducing violent incidents in schools and neighborhoods. The juvenile courts have become increasingly punitive, more youths are being transferred to adult criminal courts, and increasing numbers of adolescents are being incarcerated at a national average cost of about $35,000 per youth per year. Nevertheless, despite our lack of certainty about what will work to decrease violence among youth, we do know enough to take a number of practical steps that are likely to ameliorate the situation. These include a combination of activities directed toward improving the quality of life in areas of extreme poverty in large cities, and reforming the juvenile justice system.

— R.E.B.

A 15-year-old boy is back in a Boston public school after being convicted of fatally stabbing a neighborhood boy in retaliation for an April Fools’ Day prank. The victim is a member of a gang that has threatened and assaulted other youths in the neighborhood. While the 15-year-old awaits sentencing by the juvenile court, a matron trails him to keep him separated from members of the victim’s gang.1
School officials, their attorneys, and many parents are understandably concerned about the safety of students, and opinions abound as to how the school, the district attorney and courts, and society should respond to this type of incident. The district attorney believes that the convicted student should not return to school, but he is stymied by a Massachusetts law requiring that “no student shall be suspended, expelled, or otherwise disciplined on account of conduct which is not connected with any school-sponsored activity.” The school district appealed the juvenile court’s order to keep the student in school while he was awaiting sentencing. The district lost. Friends of the convicted student, anticipating a sentence that probably would return the youth to the custody of his parents and permit him to attend school, staged a protest to prevent the student’s forcible transfer to another school.

This incident happens to be the news for today, but it will almost certainly be eclipsed by tomorrow’s news of another episode of juvenile violence. Nevertheless, this incident exemplifies the central concern of this article and of a rising public debate: how best should society respond to violence by juveniles? Fueling public debate is a feeling that old solutions to the problem of juvenile violence have not worked and that we face today an acceleration and intensification of violence among youth, in part because today’s youthful offender is a new “breed”—detached, remorseless, and armed with a gun. Determining how best to respond to today’s violence requires an understanding of the prevalence and causes of juvenile violence and of available preventive and treatment alternatives. As will be seen, available evidence indicates that today’s juveniles are not a new breed, yet they are committing more frequent violent acts, at least in particular communities. There is much we do not yet understand regarding the fundamental causes of this violence, but there is also much that we do know and much that we can and should be doing.

This article is divided into five sections. The first reviews what is known about the problem of youth violence: its frequency, trends over time, the perpetrators, and the settings in which it occurs. The second section reviews the theories and causal models that have been proposed to explain why violence occurs. The third section discusses the effectiveness of interventions available to criminal justice, school, and mental health authorities, as well as the potential of new treatment initiatives. The last two sections include recommendations for future policy-making and research.

What Do We Know About Juvenile Violence?

Answering questions about the nature and extent of juvenile violence depends on reliable sources of data. This section reviews the sources for and conclusions based on data that are often used to estimate frequency and prevalence of juvenile violence among various groups and in various settings.

Sources of Data on Rates of Juvenile Violence

There are four main sources of data on juvenile violence: the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), the National Crime Survey, the Uniform Crime Reports (UCRs), and the National Youth Survey (NYS). Some (for example, NCHS) profile victims of violence. Others (for example, UCRs and NYS) profile perpetrators of violent crimes. Most are imperfect, either because they are limited in scope or because they rely on reporting mechanisms that may under or overestimate true rates of violence. Nevertheless, these are the best data available and, when used in combination with one another, can help draw a picture of the extent of violence by juveniles in the United States.

The National Center for Health Statistics

The National Center for Health Statistics compiles data annually on numbers and rates of homicide, based on reports of
medical examiners. Although homicide represents only a small fraction of all violent crimes (slightly more than 1%), these figures are quite accurate; therefore, these data are perhaps the most accurate available to gauge trends in the prevalence of violence across population groups, settings, and time. The major source of error in compiling these statistics is the variation in the judgments of medical examiners.

**The National Crime Survey**

The National Crime Survey, organized by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and conducted by the Census Bureau, gathers interview data on a probability sample of U.S. households to yield a reliable estimate of victimization for nonfatal violence on individuals 12 years of age and older. Excluded from these data are counts of the victimization of children younger than 12 years of age and robbers of businesses and other organizations.

**Uniform Crime Reports**

In contrast, Uniform Crime Reports (UCRs) are used to characterize perpetrators rather than victims of crimes. UCRs, the most commonly cited source of information on the frequency of crime, are annually compiled data that are based on counts of offenders supplied to the FBI by police agencies throughout the country. These data are prone to sampling biases, changes in police practices, and other sources of measurement error.

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**Most of those arrested in 1990 were male (88%), African-American or Hispanic (60%), and 14 through 17 years of age (80%).**

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**Self-Reported Survey Data**

The National Youth Survey also provides data concerning perpetrators, but it relies on self-reports of violent behavior rather than on arrest reports. This survey, begun in 1976 by investigators at the Behavioral Research Institute in Boulder, Colorado, has followed a national sample of approximately 1,500 youths from adolescence to young adulthood (25 to 31 years of age in 1990). While the validity of these self-report data has been difficult to establish, the data do provide a useful contrast with official police reports. More recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has begun to collect self-report data on a wide range of health-compromising behavior, including fighting, suicidal actions, and use of weapons.4

**Rates and Trends in Arrests, Incarcerations, Self-Reported Violence, and Homicides**

**Arrests**

According to the Uniform Crime Report for 1990, 1,749,343 arrests during that year involved youth 17 years of age or younger. Of these, 95,677, or 5.5%, were for violent crimes. This number of juvenile arrests represents 16.3% of arrests for all age groups, a proportion that has increased by 27% since 1980. Most of those arrested in 1990 were male (88%), African-American or Hispanic (60%), and 14 through 17 years of age (80%).5

**Incarcerations**

Currently, more than 95,000 youths are incarcerated in the United States, an increase of more than 20% in less than a decade. Twenty-five percent of these incarcerated youths are held for crimes against persons. Although a relatively small proportion of youths arrested and convicted are responsible for violent offenses, violent incidents are increasing at a high rate for all racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups of youths.6

**Self-Reported Violence**

According to findings of the National Youth Survey, a substantial minority of adolescents (21%) engage in at least one serious violent incident by age 18, and about 5% engage in multiple violent incidents.3 Based on these findings, one would estimate that 21% of the roughly 29 million youth aged 11 through 17 in the United States, or more than 6 million youths, will have committed a single serious violent offense, and nearly 1.5 million will have engaged in multiple violent offenses by the time they reach age 18. Because, as mentioned above, it is estimated that fewer than 5.5% of all arrests among juveniles in a single year are for violent offenses, these self-reported data may imply that only a fraction of all youth committing a violent offense are apprehended.

**Homicides**

Homicides are the most salient evidence of the problem of juvenile violence, and the strong quality of the data available concerning homicides makes it the best available candidate to judge trends in vio-
Table 1

Use of Guns and Other Weapons to Kill Adolescent Murder Victims Ages 10 to 18 in 1976 and 1988

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victim’s Age</th>
<th>1976</th>
<th>1988</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Killed by a Gun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>1,138</td>
<td>757</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Violence. Table 1 shows that the proportion of adolescent murder victims killed with a gun increased from 66.5% to 72.4% between 1976 and 1988. Although not listed in the table, the proportion of black victims who were killed by guns (80%) is much higher. The overall number of adolescent murder victims per year (1,432 in 1988) may not seem large, but it is important to note that homicide represents the leading cause of death for 11- through 17-year-olds.

Who Are the Perpetrators?

Information about age, geographic location, minority overrepresentation, secular change, and community context is of particular importance to this discussion because it can provide clues to understanding the causes and solutions to juvenile violence. Key findings are presented here, but greater detail can be obtained from the 1993 report of the National Research Council’s Panel on Understanding and Preventing Violence.

Crime and Age

Most violent crimes are committed by offenders who are 17 to 25 years of age, but these violent acts are usually the culminations of long histories of nonviolent offenses. Once a juvenile has committed a violent crime, the probability increases significantly that he will continue criminal activity of some sort into adulthood.

As indicated in Table 2, the arrest rate for violent crimes shows a clear relationship with age for each of four forms of violence: homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. The arrest rate for robbery is highest in adolescence, while the other types of violence all have a peak age of occurrence in young adulthood. Robbery is the only crime for which there is an overrepresentation of adolescents compared with young adults; while adolescents make up approximately 16% of the population, they account for 24% of robberies. For all four types of violence, the rates for children younger than 15 years of age are quite low, and there is a sharp and progressive decline in rates after age 30. Males represent about 90% of all persons arrested for all types of violent crimes. The proportion who are female ranges from less than 1% for forcible rape to 16% for simple assaults.
### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Murder/ Nonnegligent Manslaughter</th>
<th>Rape</th>
<th>Robbery</th>
<th>Aggravated Assault</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>≤ 14</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–19</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>6.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–24</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>7.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–29</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>6.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–34</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>4.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Crime Rates and Population Size**

Figure 1 illustrates the variation in total violent crime rate by the population size of cities and towns. What is so striking about the figure is the uniformity with which increasing population size is associated with increasing levels of violence. Violent crime increases at each level of city/town size but is most marked for cities with more than one million residents. The relationship between population size and crime rate holds true for homicide, rape, and aggravated assault but is especially pronounced for robbery (not depicted in Figure 1). This implies that rates of robbery may be especially sensitive to the effects of the environment of youthful offenders.

By 1991, the homicide rate in the nation’s capital had reached 79.6/100,000 (the highest in the nation).12 Washington, D.C. police department records reveal that the proportion of all homicide victims under age 21 rose from 12% in 1986, when the city counted 194 victims overall, to 30% in 1991, when the number of victims was 489. During these same years, among all persons arrested for homicide, the proportion who were under age 21 rose from 21% to 51%.12

Despite the heavy concentration of violence in large urban areas, the variation among neighborhoods within a given city may be even more marked than the variation according to city size. Again for Washington, D.C., a few census tracts account for a large proportion of homicides.12

**Minority overrepresentation for all types of crime has become progressively more marked over the past two decades.**

**Crime Rates Among Different Racial and Ethnic Groups**

Minority overrepresentation for all types of crime has become progressively more marked over the past two decades and is evident at each juncture in the criminal justice system, beginning with arrest rates and continuing through sentencing and incarceration.13 For example, from 1980 to 1990, the arrest rate for white males aged 15 to 24 has hovered around 12 to 13/100,000, while the rate for black males in the same age range has been nearly 10 times greater.14 Although black youth make up 12% of the population, they accounted for 24% of arrests for burglaries and 67% of arrests for robberies in a 1987 study of 14 states.14 Another study indicated that the proportion of youths held in detention among 13 states increased by
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Figure 1

Total Violent Crime Rate by City Size, 1973 through 1992

15% over the decade of the 1980s, but this increase was only 1% for whites compared with 30% for blacks. Black males aged 10 to 17 make up 4.5% of the general population of California but 34.4% of the juveniles in custody. The rates for Hispanics are usually intermediate between the high rates represented by blacks and the low rates represented by whites at each point in the system. Data comparing Spanish-speaking groups of different national origin, Asians, and Native Americans are either unavailable or imprecise.

The Settings Where Juvenile Violence Occurs

Most data sources do not record the settings where violent incidents among youths occur. This information should be recorded, however, because it can suggest possible interventions. It is unlikely, for example, that all violence by youth occurs in favorite neighborhood gathering places or in protection of gang-designated “turfs.” The distribution and selling of illicit drugs constitutes one likely source of violent confrontations, although more generally it may be the recruitment of young people into illegal economies of various types that increases their risk for committing violent acts as well as being victims of violence.

Schools have traditionally been considered safe havens, but the insularity of school settings from violence is eroding in many locales. In a recently conducted survey of public schools in Illinois, for example, nearly 8% of students said they had been physically attacked in or near their
school, and another 15% reported only narrowly escaping an attack. One-third of the students in the state’s public high schools reported carrying a weapon to school, and 5% reported carrying a gun. These figures for Illinois are consistent with figures reported in a 1991 survey of public schools in Seattle. In the Seattle survey, 47% of males reported easy access to a gun, 6.4% said that they owned a

Handgun owners were more likely to have been members of a gang, charged with assault and battery, suspended or expelled from school, and sentenced by a judge than other students.

handgun, and 6% reported that they had carried a gun to school. These handgun owners were more likely to have been members of a gang, charged with assault and battery, suspended or expelled from school, and sentenced by a judge than other students, and one-third reported that they had used the gun to shoot at someone. The rate of gun ownership among female students was only 1.5%. The authors of this study suggest that these rates of access to and use of handguns are underestimates due to sampling limitations and the fact that many of the most deviant children may have already dropped out of school. Because the homicide rate for Seattle is not one of the highest among the larger cities in the country and because it has a relatively small minority population, it is likely that rates of gun possession and use by students are higher in cities where the homicide rate is higher.

Theories About the Causes of Juvenile Violence

In 1954, Cyril Burt introduced the fourth edition of his The Young Delinquent with the following authoritative statement: “Thirty years ago, when I first began my work, the most urgent need appeared to be a systematic and scientific investigation into the chief causes of delinquency. Now, as we have seen, a general measure of agreement has at length been reached [as to both] the nature and the relative importance of the various causal factors.”

Burt thought the cause was the psychological traits or inherent defects of individuals, but other researchers have believed, with equal conviction, that the root causes of violence were environmental. Jack Tizard, for example, suggested: “... we need to develop a theory about the environmental determination of characteristic ways of behaving in different circumstances ... and research on the characteristics that differentiate one natural environment from another, and to explore ways of changing some of them and of assessing their effects.”

Still other researchers have posited that genetic factors, neurochemical mechanisms, temperament, family environment, early experiences, institutional settings, social conditions, or labeling were important determinants of violent behavior. Currently, the most hotly debated theory regards the potential role of genetic and neurochemical factors such as the gonadal hormone, testosterone, and the neurotransmitter, serotonin. While evidence exists for a correlation between
these substances and aggression, the findings are hardly conclusive. It may be that preexisting behavior or other environmental conditions determines the level of such substances. For some biological systems, biological factors may be the consequences, not causes, of behavior.

Any proposed theory must fit the data. That is, an adequate theory must explain why rates of violence differ by age, gender, and size of community, and whether it is environmental conditions that cause individuals to behave violently (social causation), or whether persons prone to behave violently create environments characterized by high rates of violence (social selection).

Theories must fit one other key finding that has emerged from the literature on root causes of violence: some children show signs of disruptive and antisocial behavior from as early as 2 to 3 years of age. These children are likely to continue to show signs of disruptive behavior throughout childhood, and to engage in a higher frequency and more severe delinquency during adolescence than others. Theories should therefore explain the backgrounds and causal pathways that distinguish this important group of delinquent youths because it is this group that is likely to be disproportionately involved in offending.

Developing a theory that fits the data is a tall order, and no theory presently comes close to approximating these requirements. As suggested by Tizard, the difficult task that remains is development of an integrative theory—one that deals simultaneously with individual differences and contextual influences.

Testing Theories: Risk Factors and Population Indicators

Typically, theories are tested by examining rates of crime in large groups and seeing if models can be built to predict which children will display violent behavior later in life, or which adolescents or adults may, as young children, have had particular experiences that predisposed them to later violent behavior. The key experiences or characteristics of individuals that are used in these models are called risk factors.

Investigators typically select risk factors to include in a model based on a favorite theory. For example, disruption in mother-infant bonding might be the most important risk factor included in a model by a psychoanalyst, but exposure to violence in the home and inconsistent disciplinary practices might be the risk factors included in a model by a social learning theorist. Eventually, however, most researchers try to include as many variables as feasible. What may have begun as a theoretically guided investigation therefore can sometimes turn into an exploratory exercise. This is probably an inevitable response to the nature of violent behavior. No one theory or limited set of risk factors can go very far in producing a powerful explanation, given the multiply determined nature of violent behavior.

Understanding the different kinds of risk factors is essential to interpreting how violent behavior is caused. Variables such as sex, race, ethnicity, and social class, for example, are sometimes called risk factors for violent behavior. Such variables are most usefully employed to increase precision in identifying and locating vulnerable groups. They may be misused if they are assumed to be part of a mechanism that causes delinquency. To be clear, it is perhaps best to refer to these noncausal types of risk factors as population indicators. In contrast, other risk factors such as temperament, family relationships, and school performance do suggest the operation of potential causal mechanisms.

It is also important to consider the multiple levels on which risk factors typically operate. Risk factors can exert influence on individual, family and peer, institutional, community, or societal levels. Psychologists and psychiatrists often build theories beginning with individual factors and gradually incorporating environmental influences. Sociologists, on the other hand, begin with societal and institutional influences and gradually incorporate individual-level factors. Psychologists and sociologists have rarely engaged in interdisciplinary efforts in this field. Yet, it is during such encounters that the search for understanding may be most powerfully advanced.

Risk factors for juvenile violence may be organized into the following five do-

No one theory or limited set of risk factors can go very far in producing a powerful explanation, given the multiply determined nature of violent behavior.
Population Indicators and Risk Factors for Youth Violence

Population Indicators
Sex: male
Age: 15 to 19
Race/Ethnicity: African-American, Hispanic
Residence: large urban areas
Income level: less than average

Risk Factors
Neighborhood
- High level of male unemployment
- Extreme poverty (40% or more of residents below poverty line)
- Social disorganization of formal and informal networks and institutions

School-Related
- High absenteeism and dropout rates
- Lack of strong central authority
- High proportion of students carry weapons

Peer Network
- Association with delinquent peers or membership in a gang
- Peer facilitation of access to weapons, alcohol, and drugs

Family
- Parental criminality
- Lack of supervision and involvement
- Parental rejection, neglect, or abuse
- Marital discord
- Older sibling criminality

Individual—Psychological
- Low verbal and reading skills
- Poor impulse control
- School underachievement
- Early age of onset of disruptive behavior

Individual—Health
- High lead level
- History of head injury
- Prenatal exposure to alcohol, drugs, or tobacco
- Substance abuse
- Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder

Magnitude of Relationship Between Risk Factors and Outcomes

Some risk factors are more important than others, although their relative importance may shift with age and maturation. Relevant studies to address questions about the magnitude of the relationship between risk factors and violent behavior are limited. Nevertheless, based on the strong assumption that multiple developmental pathways lead to violent behavior—one for those who display chronic violent behavior, beginning at an early age, another for those who display violent behavior only later in life, and others in which there exists no substantial evidence of previous problem behavior—it can be hypothesized that the risk factors and causal mechanisms will be different for these groups. Using the list provided in Box 1, we might hypothesize that family adversity and individual psychological and health-related problems are most closely associated with violence in the early-onset, high-persistence pathway, while community and peer influences are most important for the more late-onset and transient pathway.

Protective Factors

It is common in developmental psychology today to cite protective factors to explain why only some children living in adverse conditions develop problematic outcomes. Perhaps the children who escape adverse consequences are exposed to or possess a set of protective factors. Research about protective factors is still at an early stage, but is summarized in the recent Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) report on adolescent health as follows: “Overall, a picture emerges of the resilient child as having an easy temperament and a higher IQ, being more autonomous, having a good relationship with at least one adult, and being more successful and involved in school.”

Results of studies of risk and protective factors should be applicable to the design of interventions, which is discussed in the following section. But, as pointed out in the OTA report, crafting an intervention is difficult because, “... few, if any, risk factors for delinquency act independently. Many of the risk factors for adolescent delinquency are interrelated in ways that are still not well understood. It is clear that no one factor by itself is correlated with or predicts delinquency very well, but rather for most adolescents, delinquency is the result of the
interaction of multiple risk factors . . . ,
each of which incrementally increases the
risk of delinquent behavior. The impor-
tance of each factor also depends on the
age of the individual. 28 [Italics in the
original.]

**Interventions**

This section is divided into two parts: one
dealing with treatments, or interventions
that reduce the chronicity and negative
consequences of delinquent and violent
behavior once it has occurred; and the
other with prevention, or interventions
designed to reduce the likelihood that such
behavior will occur. The assessment of
treatment approaches is presented first
because these are much better established
in most communities than are prevention
efforts. Further, much of the impetus to
launch prevention strategies is born of a
recognition that treatment often comes
too late and is ineffective.

**Interventions Following an Offense**

After an offense occurs and a suspect is
arrested, the juvenile justice system, a
system that varies widely across states,
assumes responsibility to assist the child or
adolescent in resuming normal develop-
ment. The next sections describe the ju-
dicial process and the interventions of-
tered to those juveniles who are formally
adjudicated.

**The Judicial Process**

Several key decision points exist between
arrest and a judicial disposition. Decisions
at these points determine the overall effec-
tiveness of the juvenile justice system, par-
ticularly with respect to how well serious
offenses are handled. Only about 6% of
the cases referred to juvenile courts are for
serious violent offenses, with aggravated
assault and robbery representing more
than 90% of these cases. 15

Figure 2, based on data from National
Juvenile Court Data Archives, indicates the
ways in which juvenile courts typically dis-
charge their work load. 29 As depicted in
the figure, approximately 20% of juveniles
are held in detention immediately follow-
ing an arrest. More than half the cases
(54% in 1987) referred to courts are han-
dled informally, meaning that they are
either dismissed, referred to a mental
health or social service agency, or placed
on probation. These are, with few excep-
tions, juveniles involved in minor offenses
or first-time offenders. Of the remaining
cases which are formally petitioned to the
court, about one-third do not advance to
a formal hearing but are, instead, likely to
be dismissed. Thus, of all arrested cases,
only about one-third are formally adjudi-
cated, and even a small proportion of these
may be dismissed. Roughly 30% of those
adjudicated receive a placement, but most
are placed on probation. Most, but not all,
serious violent offenders probably en-
counter one of these dispositions, but
there may be significant variation by jur-
isdiction.

Dispositions handled in the juvenile
justice system are supposed to balance the
best interest of the child with public safety
concerns. To varying degrees, all juvenile
justice systems operate on a philosophy
that mixes treatment with punishment.
But over the past decade many juvenile

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**Only about 6% of the cases referred to juvenile courts are for serious violent offenses.**

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justice systems have become increasingly
punitive. 30 For example, the proportion
of youths transferred from custody of ju-
venile courts to adult criminal courts in-
creased from less than 1% in 1970 to 5% in
1987. During this same period, the rate
of confinement in institutional settings
increased by 43%; and, despite intense
solicitations from the American Bar Asso-
ciation, the Children’s Defense Fund, and
the National Council on Crime and Delin-
quency, the U.S. Supreme Court refused
to raise the minimum age for executions
from 15 to 18. 31 In many instances, this
may be a response to the perception that
there are an increasing number of chroni-
cally violent offenders, a different “breed,”
who are tougher and younger than the ju-
veniles encountered in the past. 32 This
perception may make it easy to believe
that strong negative sanctions are not
only indicated, but justifiable.

**Treatment Facilities and Programs**

Treatment facilities and programs can be
classified as either institutional or commu-
nity based. Many institutional programs
rely on a high degree of supervision and
a punitive environment. Frequently re-
ferrred to as “lock-ups,” these institutions
are reserved for the most violent and
Figure 2

### Juvenile Court Processing of Delinquency Cases, 1987

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Referral</th>
<th>Intake Decision</th>
<th>Intake Disposition</th>
<th>Judicial Decision</th>
<th>Judicial Disposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Petitioned&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>531,000</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>Waived&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>11,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpetitioned</td>
<td>614,000</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>Placement</td>
<td>99,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>958,000</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>Probation</td>
<td>191,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>187,000</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissed</td>
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*<sup>a</sup>A petition is filing a document in juvenile court alleging that a juvenile is a delinquent, a status offender, or dependent.

A petition requests that the court assume jurisdiction over the juvenile or that the juvenile be transferred to criminal court for prosecution as an adult.<br>

*<sup>b</sup>A waived case is one that is transferred to the criminal court.<br>

*<sup>c</sup>An adjudicated case is one in which the court has entered a judgment.


A chronic group of offenders. “Boot camps,” devised for nonviolent offenders, use strong disciplinary codes to expose youths to a kind of “shock” incarceration. Many community-based interventions are either low-security group homes or diversion programs, such as restitution programs, intensive probation, or wilderness camps, designed to steer youth away from violent behavior.

The effectiveness of these various types of programs is routinely measured by the number of juveniles who are rearrested or reincarcerated over a specified period of time. Unfortunately, interpreting the data is difficult because of measurement error, sampling biases, and the use of inconsistent definitions and differing lengths of time over which discharged youth are followed. Most jurisdictions probably exper-
ience a 60% to 70% rearrest rate over a 12-month period. Such high rates provoke widespread reservation, if not resignation, about the effectiveness of most of these programs.

An Example of Statewide Reform

The Massachusetts Department of Youth Services gained national prominence during the early 1970s through its radical reform. In 1972, all of the state’s large juvenile correctional institutions were closed, and the more than 500 residents were transferred to smaller, 15- to 18-bed secure facilities. This policy change has resulted in a permanent and, based on the evidence, positive change in the state. Perhaps most notable is the support coming from directors and staff who operate the system. The Massachusetts recidivism rate (the proportion rearrested within 12 months of discharge) has remained lower than that for most other states for well over a decade. For example, California reports a recidivism rate of 70% compared with a 40% to 50% rate in Massachusetts. The number of violent youthful offenders in the Massachusetts system who have been transferred to the adult criminal courts has plummeted. In 1973, 129 juveniles were transferred; by 1987, the number had fallen to 14. Since then, the number has increased only slightly. Because of the highly selective use of the most secure beds, the Massachusetts system is less costly than the systems in most other states. While a secure bed costs more in Massachusetts than in other states, the expanded use of low-cost community-based programs for most offenders produces an estimated cost of $23,000 per youth in the Massachusetts juvenile justice system, compared with a national average of about $35,000. The success of this system has led to replications in some states, most notably Utah, and to a renewed and widespread interest in closing large public juvenile correctional schools.

Interventions Occurring Prior to an Offense

There is now broadbased support for the benefits of early intervention programs which are aimed at increasing the school readiness and social competence of preschool children. In addition, youngsters exposed to such programs have lower rates of socially disapproved behaviors, such as early pregnancy, substance abuse, and delinquency as teenagers. Just as preventive interventions can be crafted for young children, so too can preventive interventions be designed for adolescents. Such preventive efforts can be grouped into those that are (1) school based (for example, changing the school climate and introducing violence prevention curricula), (2) community based (for example, neighborhood watch programs and recreation programs), or (3) aimed at influencing the mass media.

Two recent documents review many of the nation’s violence prevention programs for adolescents. The first, prepared by the Education Development Center (EDC), reviewed 51 programs that responded to a nationwide survey and selected 11 programs with credible evaluation components for a more detailed description. The second document, commissioned by the National Institute of Justice to introduce the concepts and strategies that underpin violence prevention programs to police and other criminal justice professionals, reviewed a smaller but overlapping number of programs.

The reviews reveal the broad range of violence prevention programs. Some programs aim specifically to reduce recruitment into gangs or to produce alternatives to gang membership while other, broader programs, seek to teach children to deal more effectively with many forms of stress. Few have undergone extensive evaluation, but a key element in some of the most promising interventions appears to be the active participation of youth. Two programs, the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program and the Violence Prevention Project, exemplify this approach.

The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program

The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program is based in the New York City public schools and coordinated with a private organization known as Educators for Social Change. Begun in 1985, the program consists of curricula for students from grades K-12. Teachers and students are trained to address conflict with nonviolent alternatives and negotiation skills. The curricula also contain strategies to promote mul-
ticultural acceptance and global peace. To encourage acceptance and integration of the program into the school, administrators and teachers are asked to accept the principles of the program before students are engaged. Teachers receive approximately 20 hours of instruction, and then student mediators are trained. These mediators, who work in pairs during recess and lunch periods, are believed to be essential to the ultimate goal of moving the school toward a more cooperative and peaceful climate. Finally, parents are invited to workshops to help them develop skills to handle conflict at home. The project has sustained itself over several years and has now expanded to more than 150 New York schools. More than 2,000 students have been trained as mediators, and more than 60,000 students have participated in the program.

The Violence Prevention Project
Established in 1986 as a community-based program of the Boston Department of Health and Hospitals, the Violence Prevention Project combines outreach through schools, recreational facilities, and other youth organizations with education through a high school curriculum. The goal is to mobilize community resources and activate schools and community organizations around a core concept: nothing is to be gained by fighting. The creed of the program, disseminated through public-awareness educational and media campaigns, is “Friends For Life, Don’t Let Friends Fight.” The project has developed a 10-session violence prevention curriculum which has been adopted by more than 150 school districts throughout the nation, a series of public service announcements for television, a peer leadership program, a summer camp program, and a hospital-based, clinical program that augments and monitors the care of children who are victims of violence. Staff members of youth agencies have been trained in violence prevention approaches, and strides have been made toward creating a community-based view of violence as a controllable and preventable problem. The program’s founder, Deborah Prothrow-Stith, has become a pioneer in the national campaign to make violence prevention a central component of modern public health.32

Both of these programs have evaluations that primarily gauge program implementation. The evaluations indicate that the programs are satisfactorily delivering designed services. However, evaluations to determine program effectiveness in reducing violent incidents in schools and neighborhoods have not been conducted.

Policy Considerations
The material presented thus far suggests some important policy directions. These are organized into five groups that represent different spheres of societal influence: the quality of community life, public health strategies, school and educational influences, the impact of mass media, and changes in the juvenile justice system.

Quality of Life in Large Cities
As mentioned above, large cities face higher, and increasing, rates of crime. These increasing rates reflect changes in the demographic composition of cities, which suggest that ways to decrease crime may include attempts to stabilize urban populations by improving the quality of life in cities. The following discussion describes the relevant population shifts and then reviews some of these approaches.

The population of the largest U.S. cities has been decreasing or holding steady over the past decade. Middle-class families have migrated out of the largest cities, but offsetting numbers of relatively poor and minority families have migrated into them. As described by William Julius Wilson,39 these demographic changes have left many residential areas in cities with high concentrations of poor families. The social disadvantage and political neglect accompanying these demographic changes have resulted in the progressive deterioration of these areas. Researchers more than 50 years ago identified poverty and social disorganization in urban areas as two of the major risk factors associated with delinquency and crime.40 The same associations still hold 50 years later; the only difference appears to be that the physical deterioration and level of social disorganization have become far worse.
Although it is difficult to establish on empirical grounds, the worsening physical deterioration and social disorganization may further undermine family support systems with the result being less supervision and monitoring of children and adolescents. The combination of harsh city environments and less support and supervision from concerned adults produces a climate in which more children develop antisocial attitudes and violent behavior than in the past.

Approximately 2.4 million people, of whom 65% are black and 22% Hispanic, live in extreme poverty in large cities. It is in those areas of extreme poverty that the rates of violence are highest. As argued by Wilson, the combination of a historically weak attachment to the labor force (as is true for many black and Hispanic Americans) with the contemporary restructuring and relocation of jobs outside the central city creates a climate of hopelessness, lack of discipline, loss of self-confidence, and fragmentation of the moral structure of neighborhoods. Unless these trends are reversed, it is unlikely that levels of violence among youth will decline.

At least two policy options follow. Either a more systematic approach should be adopted to help poor families, especially those with young children, relocate to small cities and towns, or the residential inner city must undergo a massive revitalization. Indeed, in response to a host of external pressures, such as the relocation of workplaces or the pursuit of better public schools, out-migration is already happening. It may be prudent, therefore, to exert some control over what is happening spontaneously already. One place to start would be to encourage residents of public housing complexes to move to better-organized neighborhoods where schools and recreational facilities are stronger. A court-mandated program of this sort has operated in Chicago for a number of years.

The second alternative—rebuiding cities—is all too easy to dismiss as beyond the budgetary capacity of our government. Yet, many expensive projects are being pursued (for example, farm subsidies and the space station), and, given sufficient political will, undoubtedly this problem could be, too. Indeed, recent crime bill deliberations indicate heightened interest in responding to and preventing crime, so a window of opportunity for renewed public investment may exist, especially if the clear relationship between the quality of city life and crime is made known.

**Public Health Strategies**

Public health authorities throughout the country, bolstered by efforts at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, have placed violence prevention among their top priorities. Explicit strategies and goals have been articulated to monitor the success of this initiative. An important step toward the prevention of violence among youth is passage and enforcement of stricter regulations to prohibit the sale of firearms to persons under the age of 21.

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The personal attention and close supervision required by adolescents, particu-
larly those living in socially distressed neighborhoods, will be difficult to achieve in large high schools. Policies that encourage the development of smaller and more personal schools should be examined.

Schools and communities should also strive to create an alliance with local police. The concept of community policing should embrace schools so that police participate in violence prevention programs and cooperate in providing a climate of safety for students. To date, there do not appear to be any systematic efforts to establish community policing programs in schools.45

Mass Media
A fourth area for policy development regards the much disputed role of mass media in sustaining and aggravating a culture of violence. Although there is some controversy, the vast weight of evidence suggests that young children’s interpretation of violent episodes is correlated with their own violent behavior.46 The greater their exposure to media depictions or coverage of violent encounters, particularly when such events are depicted callously, the more jaded become children’s own perceptions and understandings of interpersonal violence.47

Positive policy steps are being taken. Recent changes in television rating systems permit easier identification of shows with violent content. Both Congress and the Justice Department have given indications that close monitoring of television programming is desirable. To complement these strategies, script writers and producers should adopt a code of ethics that encourages, for example, the depiction of harmful consequences of violence and expressions of pathos, outrage, and remorse in response to violence. Script writers should develop plots in which conflict is resolved without violence and moral themes are adapted to the interests of today’s youths.

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Reforming the Juvenile Justice System
The ideal that juvenile courts work in the “best interests of the child” has been eroding for nearly three decades.49 In recent years, the increasing number of youths charged with violent and drug-related offenses has pressured juvenile courts to treat youths more punitively and to transfer more of the most serious offenders to adult criminal courts. Advocates of this shift assert that adolescents should be treated as adults because they have the same moral reasoning capacity as do adults.48 These and other factors have led to a gradual contraction of the jurisdiction of juvenile courts in most areas of the country.

At least three policy issues should be considered when weighing alternatives for reform: closing juvenile court hearings, linking juvenile and adult records, and transferring juveniles to adult courts.

Closed Juvenile Court Hearings
The practice of closed hearings should be carefully reviewed because it insulates these courts from societal scrutiny and may contribute to perfunctory and inefficient handling of cases.

Linkage of Juvenile and Adult Records
A national commission should be established to consider whether juvenile and adult records should be linked, at least for serious offenders. Most states, if not all, still provide for the expunging or sealing of juvenile records because it is believed that the reduced culpability of youths might not be observed in sentencing adults with previous records as juveniles. But not linking records means that adult courts have incomplete information when judging the dangerousness of violent offenders. Some states are, in effect, reversing this policy of sealing juvenile records by transferring cases from juvenile to adult criminal courts.

Transferring Juveniles to Adult Courts
The third policy consideration has implications for international relations. One of the most successful charters developed by the international community is the Convention on the Rights of the Child.49 This charter, being implemented by the United Nations, is a reaction to the many forms of exploitation and manipulation of children and specifically bars the transfer of children (defined as individuals under age 18) to adult authorities. Although more than 150 countries have signed the Con-
vention, the United States has not\textsuperscript{50} and, obviously, cannot so long as juvenile cases continue to be transferred to adult courts.

**Future Research Needs**

The policy considerations and the literature described above suggest some directions for future research. One need is for better evaluation research that measures both process and outcomes.\textsuperscript{51} Our social and political climate urges quick responses to interpersonal violence, and therefore well-intended action understandably takes priority over longitudinal research. All too often, however, intervention and prevention programs are not evaluated at all. For example, despite the juvenile court’s century of service, little evidence exists to support its effectiveness. When evaluation of the court or any program does occur, it is often inadequate, and we are frequently left with uncertainties about how well the program worked, whether it worked better for some individuals than for others, how its level of success compares with that of other approaches, and what modifications are needed.

Several basic research issues also need to be explored. For example, we still do not understand the causes of juvenile violence. Which individuals are most likely to behave violently? What types of situations are likely to bring about violent behavior in many persons?\textsuperscript{52} Does everyone have the capacity to behave violently, given sufficient provocation, or is violence limited to particular individuals? Though there is overwhelming evidence that both gender and poverty are related to violence, we do not understand the mechanisms that create the associations. Social science research should begin to conceptualize violent behavior as a response to (1) conditions and experiences that are part of the individual’s personal history, (2) the immediate circumstances with which she or he is confronted, and (3) the interaction of both individual proclivities and situational determinants.

Researchers should use geographic mapping techniques to determine the changing patterns of youth violence in urban neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{53} The current picture derived primarily from criminal justice sources indicates that violent events tend to occur in relatively limited areas in a few neighborhoods. Is that true for all violence, or just a few types? Do the patterns exist because more violence actually happens in those neighborhoods? Or because a greater police presence in those neighborhoods leads to higher rates of detection? Or because a biased system leads to increased reports? What role do drug sales and, more broadly, illegal economies have on violent behavior among youths? Technologically enhanced systems of community surveillance, such as computer mapping methods when properly used, can provide useful information to communities that may allow them to maintain or restore a sense of local social control and effective monitoring of youth activities.

We also do not yet understand how age and maturation influence patterns of violent behavior. Undoubtedly, part of the rise in crime rates during adolescence occurs as adolescents try to secure an identity through trial and error, but what might account for the finding that age of onset of aggressive behavior may discriminate those individuals more likely to persist in violent behavior beyond adolescence from those with shorter periods of involvement? Cultural, psychological, and biological explanations are all plausible, but we do not yet have evidence regarding the relative importance of these factors.

The National Research Council’s Panel on Violence has called for studies to understand how community, situational, and individual factors operate in combination.\textsuperscript{5} A multidisciplinary, longitudinal study that examines simultaneously a broad range of community properties, family factors, and individual characteristics is needed. One such study is currently in its early stages of field work.\textsuperscript{54}

Longitudinal research will help us understand how developmental trajectories that steer children toward or away from delinquent and violent lifestyles are conditioned by individual propensities and social circumstances. Such research is essential if we are to know what to expect of prevention efforts that are aimed at...
changing communities, but it does not necessarily address the special needs of particularly vulnerable subgroups, or preventive efforts that target individuals without attempting to change the settings in which they live, learn, and work. In other

We have not advanced very far in our understanding, control, or prevention of all types of delinquency and crime, and especially of violent crime.

words, how much effort is needed and what degree of effectiveness can we expect of preventive efforts that seek to improve communities and schools, in contrast to changing individuals? Which will reduce the toll of youthful violence the most, which is most cost effective, and which will produce the most durable results? These are questions only research can answer.

Conclusion

This article has not explored with great depth the causes of youth violence. Rather the effort has been to assert that, despite decades of research and a great number of well-intended interventions into the lives of troubled youths, we have not advanced very far in our understanding, control, or prevention of all types of delinquency and crime, and especially of violent crime. No evidence exists to suggest that a fundamental difference has occurred in the types of youths committing delinquent and violent acts in today’s society, but there is evidence showing that the circumstances and experiences of growing up in American society have worsened over the past 30 to 40 years and that violence by juveniles is increasing in frequency and severity. As reflected in the opening vignette, adults charged with the responsibility of raising and caring for children—from parents and teachers to district attorneys—are feeling more helpless and ineffectual in dealing with the present generation of youths. Easy access to handguns, alcohol, and illicit drugs, the deterioration of neighborhoods, the weakening of family structure, and saturation of the media with the reporting on violent incidents are indeed making America’s youth tougher and more dangerous at younger ages. Could we really expect them not to be affected by such strong forces?

Modern society has not succeeded in creating multiple and useful roles for adolescents, and in no place is this more obvious than in large cities. Besides the role of successful student or athlete, the adolescent has few opportunities to operate with positive social or economic purpose. The absence of guidance from family and institutions constitutes a kind of late developmental deprivation, which may be just as insidious and damaging as is early deprivation. Perhaps it is this weakening of the social structure, as much as anything, which explains the relationship between age and crime.

Despite this bleak picture, public health authorities, educators, the police, other criminal justice professionals, and politicians have renewed their efforts to control and prevent violence. All acknowledge the very serious conditions that seem so obviously linked to violence, yet so difficult to transpose into a concerted plan of action. The types of interventions, policies, and evaluation and basic research described in this article represent the elements required for a concerted effort. We must not wait to pursue this effort, for the longer we wait, the fewer children will be prepared who can as adults create and maintain a society in which conflict is controlled and social justice is valued. Violence is not the inevitable result of an ill-suppressed instinct. It is rightfully perceived as an ugly distortion of human behavior, an indication of something wrong, something that requires urgent attention and action.

1. The circumstances of the incidents described here are taken from an article appearing in a local newspaper. Names and details of events have been deliberately altered, but not to the extent that the story has been distorted.


8. See note no. 2, Reiss and Roth, for further discussion.


27. See note no. 5, U.S. Congress, p. 616.


29. See note no. 15, Snyder, Finnegan, Nimick, et al. The 1,133 courts providing information to this archive constitute roughly half of all jurisdictions in the country.


41. Extreme poverty areas are described by Wilson (1991) as census tracts in which 40% or more of the residents live below the federally defined poverty line. Wilson indicates why the 2.4 million designated by this definition seriously underestimates those who are unable to live decently.

42. Begun in 1976, this program is designed to help families in public housing move into private housing using Section 8 federal housing subsidies. Some 6,000 families have been involved in the project. For a reference reporting on evidence of the program’s effectiveness, see Rosenbaum, J., and Popkin, S. Employment and earnings of low-income blacks who move to middle-class suburbs. In *The urban underclass.* C. Jencks and P. Peterson, eds. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 1991, pp. 342-56.


45. The Los Angeles-based DARE program involves police in a drug education program. Other local efforts may involve police in peer mediation or in returning truants to school, but none of these is a systematic effort.


53. For an example of computerized mapping technology currently in use, see Block, C. *Spatial and Temporal Analysis of Crime* (STAC). Available from the Illinois Criminal Justice Authority, 120 South Riverdale Plaza, Chicago, IL 60606-3997.

54. Some elements of the basic design of this project are reported in Tonry, M., Ohlin, L., and Farrington, D. *Human development and criminal behavior: New ways of advancing knowledge.* New York: Springer-Verlag, 1991. For a list of publications that have been derived from the preparatory stage of this project, contact the author of this paper.

55. For such a detailed analysis, see note no. 20, Earls, and note no. 36, Earls, Cairns, and Mercy.
