



OJJDP FACT SHEET

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Delinquency Cases in Juvenile Courts, 1998

by Anne L. Stahl

Counts and trends

In 1998, U.S. juvenile courts processed an estimated 1,757,400 delinquency cases. These cases involve juveniles charged with criminal law violations. The number of delinquency cases handled by juvenile courts increased 44% between 1989 and 1998. During this time, the number of drug law violation cases increased 148%, person offense cases increased 88%, public order offense cases increased 73%, and property offense cases increased 11%.

These estimates are based on data from almost 2,100 courts with jurisdiction over nearly 70% of the U.S. juvenile population. In this Fact Sheet, each case represents one youth processed by a juvenile court on a new referral, regardless of the number of individual offenses contained in that referral. A youth can be involved in more than one case during the calendar year.

Gender

More than three of every four (76%) delinquency cases in 1998 involved a male, which was less than the 81% in 1989. In 1998, males accounted for 86% (161,900) of drug law violation cases, 79% (605,400) of property offense cases, 78% (273,400) of public order offense cases, and 72% (292,500) of person offense cases. However, between 1989 and 1998, the number of delinquency cases involving females increased 83% (from 231,700 to 424,100), compared with a 35% increase (from 989,600 to 1,333,300) for males. The growth in cases involving females outpaced the growth in cases involving males in all offense categories. For both males and females, simple assault cases increased more than any other person offense (108% for males and 188% for females). In the public order offense category, the greatest increase for females was in the number of disorderly conduct cases (179%), whereas for males, the greatest increase was in the obstruction of justice caseload (98%).

Age

Fifty-eight percent of the juvenile delinquency cases processed in 1998 involved a juvenile younger than 16 years old at the time of referral, compared with 59% in 1989. In 1998, juveniles younger

Delinquency cases by most serious offense, 1998

Most Serious Offense	Number of Cases	Percent Change		
		1989-98	1994-98	1997-98
Total	1,757,400	44%	5%	-3%
Person Offenses	403,800	88	12	1
Criminal homicide	2,000	6	-36	-2
Forcible rape	6,000	26	-9	-7
Robbery	29,600	29	-23	-12
Aggravated assault	65,100	36	-22	-6
Simple assault	262,400	128	33	3
Other violent sex offense	10,500	53	2	-1
Other person offense	28,200	87	35	26
Property Offenses	797,600	11	-8	-8
Burglary	125,800	-7	-14	-9
Larceny	370,500	13	-5	-10
Motor vehicle theft	44,200	-34	-28	-11
Arson	8,400	27	-13	-9
Vandalism	118,700	40	-9	0
Trespassing	64,000	26	-3	-5
Stolen property offense	34,000	35	0	3
Other property offense	32,100	37	13	-3
Drug Law Violations	192,500	148	47	1
Public Order Offenses	363,500	73	19	0
Obstruction of justice	152,000	102	38	-2
Disorderly conduct	92,100	100	10	-4
Weapons offense	40,700	61	-20	4
Liquor law violation	19,600	29	32	59
Nonviolent sex offense	10,900	-13	2	-3
Other public order	48,100	36	34	-10
Violent Crime Index*	102,600	33	-22	-8
Property Crime Index**	548,800	3	-10	-10

Note: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding. Percent change calculations are based on unrounded numbers.

* Includes criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

** Includes burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson.

than 16 years old were responsible for 64% (258,000) of person offense cases, 62% (491,600) of property offense cases, 52% (190,300) of public order offense cases, and 40% (77,100) of drug law violation cases.

Race

In 1998, approximately 79% of the juvenile population in the United States was white and 15% was black. However, black juveniles were involved in 29% (508,200) of the delinquency cases handled by juvenile courts, and white juveniles were involved in 67% (1,185,400). Black juveniles were involved in 35% (141,600) of person offense cases, 29% (105,200) of public order offense cases, 29% (56,000) of drug law violation cases, and 26% (205,400) of property offense cases. White juveniles were involved in 70% (558,100) of property offense cases, 68% (131,500) of drug law violation cases, 68% (245,600) of public order cases, and 62% (250,200) of person offense cases.

Detention

One of the first decisions made in processing a delinquency case is whether the juvenile should be detained in a secure facility prior to adjudication. Juveniles are detained to protect the community, to protect the juveniles themselves, or to ensure their appearance at court hearings. Juveniles were securely detained in 19% (327,700) of the delinquency cases processed in 1998. Detention was used in 23% (43,700) of drug law violations, 22% (88,700) of person offense cases, 22% (78,400) of public order cases, and 15% (116,800) of property offense cases.

Intake decision

After reviewing the case, justice system authorities decide whether to dismiss, informally handle, or formally process the case by taking the matter before a judge. About 19% (327,800) of all delinquency cases in 1998 were dismissed at intake, often for lack of legal sufficiency. Another 24% (429,300 cases) were processed informally, with the juvenile voluntarily agreeing to the recommended disposition (for example, probation). More than half (57% or 1,000,300) of delinquency cases in 1998 were processed formally and involved either an adjudicatory hearing or a hearing to consider waiving jurisdiction to the criminal (adult) court.

Waiver to criminal court

During a waiver hearing, a juvenile court judge is asked to waive jurisdiction over a matter and transfer the case to criminal court so the juvenile can be tried as though he or she were an adult. Waiver decisions are often based on a number of factors,

including the seriousness of the offense, the juvenile's prior record, and the youth's amenability to treatment. In 1998, juvenile court judges waived 8,100 delinquency cases. The number of cases waived in 1998 was 1% more than in 1989, 9% less than in 1997, and 33% less than in 1994, the peak year. Of the cases waived in 1998, 36% (2,900) involved a person offense, 40% (3,200) involved a property offense, 16% (1,300) involved a drug law violation, and 8% (700) involved a public order offense as the most serious charge.

Adjudication and disposition

Adjudicatory hearings establish responsibility for an alleged delinquent act. Disposition hearings are held to decide if a juvenile adjudicated as delinquent should be placed under court supervision and what disposition should be imposed. In 1998, juveniles were adjudicated delinquent in 63% of the 1,000,300 cases brought before a judge. Once adjudicated, juveniles in 58% (365,100) of the cases were placed on formal probation; in 26% (163,800) of the cases, juveniles were placed in a residential facility. Eleven percent of adjudicated cases resulted in other dispositions, such as referral to an outside agency, community service, or restitution. Between 1989 and 1998, the number of cases in which the court ordered an adjudicated delinquent to be placed in a residential facility increased 37%, while the number of formal probation cases increased 73%.

For further information

This Fact Sheet is based on the forthcoming Report Juvenile Court Statistics 1998, which will be available on OJJDP's Web site at ojjdp.ncjrs.org. To learn more about juvenile court cases, visit OJJDP's Statistical Briefing Book (ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstatbb/index.html) and click on "Juveniles in court."

Anne L. Stahl is the Manager of Data Collection with the National Juvenile Court Data Archive, which is supported by an OJJDP grant.

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