

## Youth Violence Myths and Realities: A Tale of Three Cities

The Different Story of Delinquent Youth as Told by  
the Media and by Juvenile Justice System Profes-  
sionals and the Youth Themselves

Barry Krisberg, PhD

Christopher Hartney

Angela Wolf

Fabiana Silva

as presented to the  
Annie E. Casey Foundation

February 12, 2009

## Executive Summary

Wrongly assuming that crime rates and demography are inextricably linked, a number of academics warned of an impending juvenile crime wave. In 1995, John Dilulio attached the term “superpredator” to the then preadolescents that he predicted would be part of a huge and ruthless juvenile crime wave (dominated by youth of color).<sup>1</sup> These youth were described as “fatherless, jobless, and Godless” by Dilulio, who was joined in his dire predictions by James Q. Wilson, Charles Murray, and James Fox. But soon after the peak in the mid 1990s, juvenile crime rates fell for the next ten years<sup>2</sup> and several studies showed that Dilulio and others had gotten the issue wrong. The temporary spike in youth violence was not simply a matter of more youths on the streets, and did not indicate a change in the nature or basic behavior of youth. Rather, the short term rise in crime was attributable to economic disparity, adult drug dealers using youths as pawns, and, most importantly, easy access to guns.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, Dilulio and other “Chicken Little” warnings about “a new horde from hell that kills, maims, and terrorizes”<sup>4</sup> had taken hold. A barrage of “get tough on (youth) crime” laws were enacted and for the most part remain in effect today, long after the very temporary juvenile crime wave subsided. A combination of media coverage, political fear mongering, and a misinformed public—and conservative mountebanks such as Wilson, Murray, and Dilulio—came together to change the very nature of the national debate on juvenile justice.

Unlike the adult criminal justice system, the juvenile justice system is designed to treat young people as youth; not as fully developed and self-responsible adults, but as still growing and reachable children. However, the late 1990s saw the beginning of a trend in legislation and policy that continues to this day as the juvenile system was made to more closely resemble the adult system. Indeed, the distinction has legally blurred as states across the country have made it easier to prosecute youth as adults in the adult criminal justice system. Meanwhile, research has shown that such harsh tactics do not increase public safety but do perpetuate cycles of crime and chaos in the already troubled personal lives, families, and communities to which these youth belong.<sup>5</sup>

Fast forward to 2008. This combination of ideology, political rhetoric, and their impacts, has not yet been successfully replaced with a less sensationalist media, a better informed public, or, in most jurisdictions,

1 Dilulio, JJ. (1995). *The Coming of the Super-Predators*. The Weekly Standard, v001, i11.

2 OJJDP, 1999. *Challenging the Myths*.

3 Blumstein, A., nd. *Youth, Guns, and Violent Crime*.

4 Dilulio, quoting former judge Dan Coburn, in testimony before Congress, 1996.

5 Holman, B., & Ziedenberg, J., 2006. *The dangers of detention: The impact of incarcerating youth in detention and other secure facilities*. Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute.

more rational policies. Newspapers still spread fear with articles about “kiddie” car thieves,<sup>6</sup> “homegrown terrorists,”<sup>7</sup> and youth who “just wanted to kill.”<sup>8</sup> Viewing with horror the increased pressures to put children in adult prisons and jails, Dilulio, who in 1995 said, “No one in academia is a bigger fan of incarceration than I am,”<sup>9</sup> now sensibly argues for less detention and a more community-based response to crime. However, statutes continue to be pushed and passed that pull more youth into a more punitive juvenile justice system and into the adult system. Media coverage of youth and crime still leave the public fearing the young people among them and likely to vote for the most punitive responses to delinquency.

## *The NCCD Three-City Study*

The Annie E. Casey Foundation funded NCCD to assess the intersection of media coverage of youth crime, public perception, public policy, and true trends and issues in youth crime in three US cities: Dallas, Texas, Washington, DC, and San Mateo, California. In particular, NCCD sought to help policymakers and citizens of these cities form policy based on accurate data and facts instead of fear and mythology. NCCD’s project had four parts: (1) review newspaper coverage in the three cities for the past two decades, (2) review crime statistics to assess what trends were truly occurring, (3) interview some of the key stakeholders (juvenile court judges, chiefs of police and probation, probation staff, police, prosecutors, and public defenders) who best understand the juvenile justice system, and (4) conduct in-depth interviews with the youth caught in the system. It is the stories of these youth—told in their own words and supported by statistics and stakeholder expert comment—which best illustrate their plight and the successes and failings of society’s response to serious juvenile crime.

**Project methods.** Each city had ongoing youth crime issues where there was evidence of innovative leadership, programs, or approaches to address this concern. The cities were different from each other in overall level of crime, population size, racial and ethnic makeup, region of the country, and the dominant approach to solving youth violence.

NCCD interviewed 32 stakeholders, including representatives of the police, probation, youth corrections, the court, prosecutors, public defenders, and community-based organizations. Thirteen were judges or department heads.

NCCD interviewed 24 youth (19 boys and 5 girls). Their ages ranged from 12 to 19 years, with most between 15 and 17 years. Twelve were Latinos, 10 African American, and 2 were White. Each youth was in custody in residential placement, in most cases after being adjudicated delinquent. Fourteen of the 24 youth were being held for a violent offense, seven of which involved weapons. The most serious violent offenses

6 (2004, July 29). Reclaiming the City’s Youth. *The Washington Post*.

7 Milloy, C. (2006, July 19). Juvenile Delinquency Gets Old Fast for Victims. *The Washington Post*.

8 Ellis, T.M. and Ball, L.S. (2006, August 2). Teen just wanted to kill, police say: Frisco youth admits serial-killer fascination; original suspect cleared. *The Dallas Morning News*.

9 Dilulio, JJ. (1995). *The Coming of the Super-Predators*. *The Weekly Standard*, v001, i11.

were murder, aggravated assault with bodily injury (including a shooting), and kidnapping at gunpoint. Six youth stated they were in gangs and one more spoke of hanging out with gang members. Many youth not in gangs, particularly in Washington, DC, spoke of their neighborhood friends or “crews” in terms similar to the way self-reported gang members spoke of their fellow gang members.

## *Summary of Findings*

The lessons not yet learned from the 1990s myth of the “superpredator” are multifold.

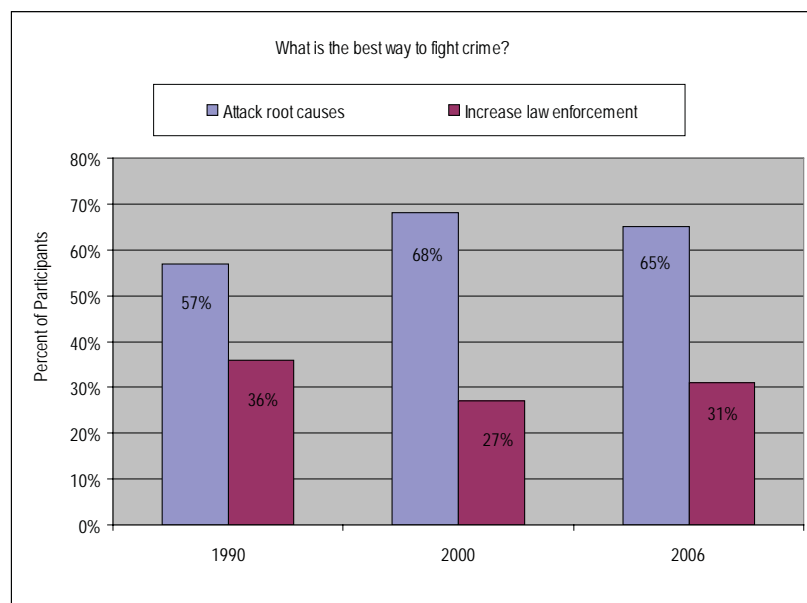
1. Public perception of violent crime is largely a function of media coverage of crime, especially youth crime. Many adults have little contact with youth and most never directly experience youth crime. This leaves them to base their impressions of youth and youth crime on external sources such as word of mouth, public officials, and, in particular, the media.
2. Media coverage does not reflect a sufficiently thorough or, in many cases, accurate understanding of youth or youth crime. Most stories about young people depict them as troubled or, more likely, as trouble for society; stories about youth typically associate youth with violence, whether as victim or instigator. Far too much coverage focuses on infrequent but heinous cases, without any context.
3. The public needs to be an informed partner in the conversation about short- and long-term responses to crime. Polls show that the public does not favor harsh treatment of most youth, yet they are often asked by politicians to support policies based on misleading information.
4. Professionals in the juvenile justice system recognize that discussions of crime trends need to have a comprehensive, evidence-based perspective that should be founded on accurate and timely data. Assessments of youth crime and associated policy cannot be based on oversimplified theories, short-term trends, or selective information.
5. Communities often need to respond to shorter-term crime trends, and changes in police tactics can be an effective part of that response. Public fear can be kept in check when the system is responsive. However, the law enforcement response needs to be planned and carried out responsibly, strategically, and not in a panic mode.
6. At its core, the comprehensive and evidence-based approach is based on the real stories of the system-involved or at-risk youth themselves. Only in their consideration can comprehensive and effective policies and practices be put in place to effectively respond to youth crime.

Key elements of these findings are elaborated on in this summary of the study. Topics covered include the nature of media coverage of crime and youth, the interplay of media coverage with policy decisions and real crime statistics, the attitudes of the public, and the true stories told by these youth. Recommendations stemming from the study are also presented.

## *The Public is Open-minded about Rational Responses to Arrested Youth*

It is important to understand that, when asked to step back from the media's portrayal of crime issues, the public does not support overly harsh treatment of delinquent youth. The majority of the public feels that, in order to reduce crime, more resources should be directed toward the root economic and social causes of crime rather than toward law enforcement, the judicial system, and corrections. This has been public sentiment consistently since 1990.

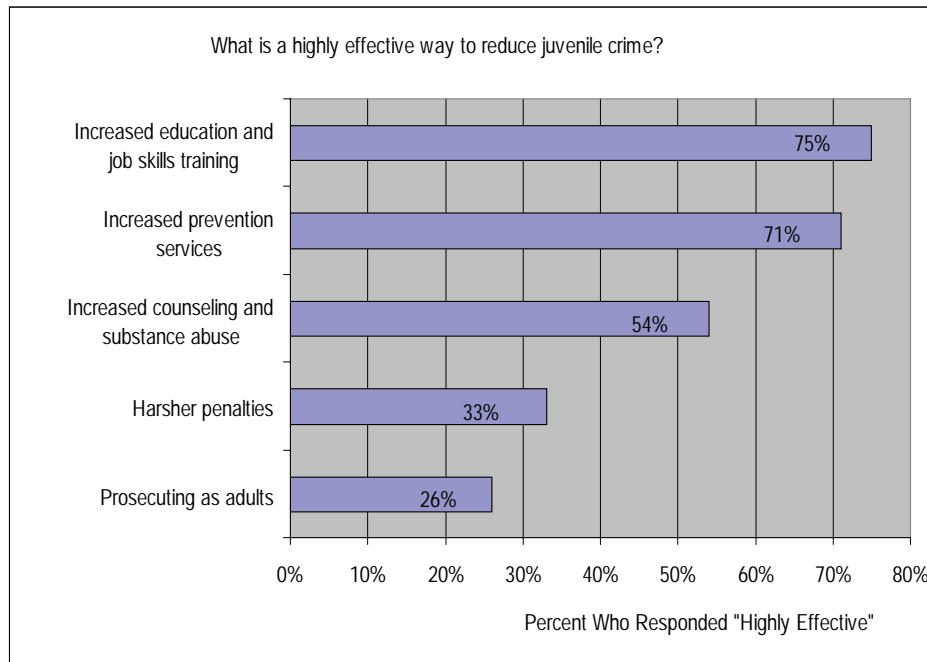
According to the results of a 2007 Zogby/NCCD poll, the public was clearly concerned about youth crime and felt that young people should be held accountable for misconduct. However, they also believed that the most effective ways to reduce youth crime were to increase prevention efforts for at-risk youth and, for youth already involved in the system, to increase services, including education, occupational training, counseling, and substance abuse treatment. They felt overly punitive penalties like transfers to the adult system increase recidivism but, unfortunately, they had limited confidence in the effectiveness of the juvenile system.



Source: The Gallup Poll as cited by the Bureau of Justice Statistics' *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics Online*, [http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/toc\\_2.html](http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/toc_2.html).

## *What Does the Public Hear?*

System stakeholders stress that community understanding and support are key to a successful response to youth crime. However, when community members must rely on inadequate sources for their information, they cannot make an informed assessment of the issue—or of the actual risk of being a victim. The danger of a misinformed public is the knee-jerk support of more punitive responses to youth crime and neglect of the long-term, comprehensive strategies that most juvenile justice stakeholders think are necessary.



\*1,043 nationally representative adults were asked if the listed measures are "highly effective, somewhat effective, or ineffective" in reducing youth crime. The percentage of respondents indicating "highly effective" is charted. Margin of error is  $\pm 3.1\%$ . Source: NCCD (2006, April). *Attitudes of US Voters toward Prisoner Rehabilitation and Reentry Policies*, [http://www.nccd-crc.org/nccd/pubs/zogby\\_feb07.pdf](http://www.nccd-crc.org/nccd/pubs/zogby_feb07.pdf)

The NCCD review of newspaper coverage of youths and violence<sup>10</sup> and associated interviews with system stakeholders found that the public receives much of its information about youth from the media and that the information they receive is distorted.

"There's a daily diet of bad news that on some level creeps into one's world view. Even if you haven't been a victim, what you perceive makes you feel vulnerable."

Stakeholders and NCCD's research typically were in agreement on the nature and impact of the media: The media's portrayal of youth and crime impacts public perception and city policy. The media plays a big role in influencing public perception of crime. As one stakeholder in Washington said, "The [Washington] Post makes policy in this city."

Even positive stories about youth or the justice system did not give context, just specifics to particular cases or events: good storytelling, but not good reporting. For instance, stakeholders in Washington pointed out positive stories, such as the opening of Washington's Court Social Services' drop-in center, an innovative program by Washington's Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS). They felt these were covered without context and were characterized as exceptions to the norm.

10 Articles covered youth and crime in the past two decades, usually from the *Dallas Morning News*, the *San Jose Mercury News*, and the *Washington Post*.

The press often quotes a politician as he declares a rise in youth crime without support of the facts. The media are clearly used to spin preferred policies to the public.

## The Interplay of Media Coverage, Policy Decisions, and Real Crime Data

A few examples from the three cities illustrate ways in which media coverage is linked with policy decisions, and how crime trend statistics are used and, often, misused to inform the discussion.

**All Crime Characterized as a Youth Issue in Washington, DC.** The rate of juvenile arrests for violent offenses in Washington, DC dropped 60% between 1996 and 2002 and then rose for four years before leveling off at about 25% lower than the 1996 rate. The increases in city arrests beginning in 2002 were heavily emphasized in newspaper coverage as a juvenile crime wave, when in fact the increase in the juvenile proportion of total arrests was less than one percentage point in this time period. The fact that arrest rates for adults were also rising was not generally reported. The youth percentage of total Washington DC arrests was about 6% or lower from 1997 to 2006 -- well below the youth proportion of the total city population, which remained around 20% in this period.

Further, for most of this period, reports to the police of violent crime were decreased, suggesting that changes in law enforcement policies and tactics accounted for at least some of the changes in arrest rates. Despite some short-term increases, the rate of reported violent crime (for all ages) dropped by 50% between 1995 and 2007.

**Dallas media ignores decrease in crime.** Rates of violent crime reported to Dallas police dropped 30% between 1995 and 2007. Dallas County rates of juvenile arrests for violent crime dropped every year since 1994, ending 62% below that year's rate.

However, Dallas newspaper coverage deemphasized falling rates. Instead, articles stressed the potential for trends to reverse due to an increasing juvenile population and teenage boys apparently becoming more violent. Articles emphasized a rise in specific crimes and the failure of the Dallas Police Department to meet its goals for crime reduction. And articles continued to focus on sensational cases.

Stakeholders stressed that cities should expect ebbs and flows in crime, and that it is essential to place short-term changes in a larger context. Stakeholders stressed that part of the problem was the lack of readily available and understandable data that the media could use to bolster their coverage.

**Sensationalism fans fear of youth in San Mateo, California.** Stakeholders suggested that the media's tendency to use frightening language surrounding all gang and violent activity, and to emphasize new crime waves and trends, made some city leaders, particularly school administrators, hesitant to admit their gang problems. Admitting these problems might lead to unwanted publicity and, in the case of schools, reduced funding; unfortunately, this meant that parents and others were left in the dark about important issues. Such characterizations also made the public more hesitant to support non-punitive responses to youth crime.

**Emphasis on short-term trends leads to short-sighted policy in San Mateo, California.** Some stakeholders worried that even when media publicity led to effective and needed programming, once the media moved on to cover another issue, the effective programs lost their funding. For example, when the gang situation received a lot of attention in the mid- to late-nineties in San Mateo (particularly in East Palo Alto), the County put a great deal of resources into gangs: a task force, increased awareness by courts, a probation-intensive supervision unit, and more prosecutions of gang members. When attention shifted to other types of crimes during the late 90s, resources shifted and these programs ended. San Mateo stakeholders suggested this led to an increase in gang crime; now that gang crime is receiving more attention again, the gang task force has been revived.

“Crime emergencies” in Washington, DC. In Washington, “crime emergencies” can be called by the police chief in response to short-term spikes in certain crimes. In the 2000s, several of these so-called emergencies noted spikes in robbery and Unauthorized Use of Vehicle (UUV) offenses. Rates of juvenile arrests for UUVs had a one-year rise 2002-2003 followed by a three-year decline, with another rise in 2006-2007. Increases in rates of youth arrests for robbery/carjacking (reported in combination by the Washington Metropolitan Police Department) were longer term and rose consistently from 2001 to 2006 and then dropped slightly.

These declarations of crime emergencies have significant ramifications. They allow, among other things, commanders flexibility to adjust schedules and restrict days off, provide millions of dollars in police overtime, impose youth curfews, increase police access to confidential juvenile records, give judges added discretion to deny bail and detain adults and juveniles that commit certain crimes, and install surveillance cameras in residential neighborhoods.

Stakeholders in Washington suggested that their policy leaders often justified new expenses and procedures as “emergency” actions; this not only frightened the community but made it difficult to enact long-term policy with more thoughtful policy debates. Also, stakeholders emphasized that these “emergencies” influenced long-term changes in policy and legislation. Many policies stay on the books regardless of subsequent downturns in crime. This includes some of the most punitive policy changes of the past two decades including mandatory minimums, enhanced penalties, and easing restrictions on trying youth as adults. These changes have had long-term and detrimental impacts on the youth in the system—they are more likely to get caught up in the system and may be denied access to preventative and rehabilitative community programming.

**Successful media and community outreach in San Mateo, California.** Stakeholders understood that it was sometimes easier for the public to understand a tough stance against crime rather than rehabilitation programming and alternatives to incarceration. Opportunities to explain to the public the value of such programming, and the negative consequences of long sentences for youth were lost every time an article sensationalized crime without providing context and response options.

In the late 1990s into the 2000s, San Mateo stakeholders realized that the development of their new Youth Services Center presented a perfect opportunity to inform the media and public, especially concerning the importance of rehabilitation. This was during a period of short-term fluctuations but overall decreases in



youth-related crime. San Mateo newspaper coverage characterized the crime trends in positive terms, without much of the “doom on the horizon” language used in other cities. The media described efforts to bring the rates even lower through rehabilitative youth and family programming, hallmarks of the new center.

This good coverage of the new youth center in San Mateo—comparatively well-balanced and insightful media coverage in several local newspapers—showed the purpose, goals, background, and pros and cons of the new facility. The success of the new center, and the nature of the reporting, was at least partly due to the concerted efforts of police and probation to “sell” the center. Stakeholders said they had made special efforts to inform the discussion, and that it worked.

### The Untold Story: What Youth Told Us

Factors that impact crime evolve over time, including the availability of weapons, the popularity of one drug versus another, community resources, economic conditions, public sentiment, and the resources, policies, and approaches of city agencies.

The evidence-based view that stakeholders argue for is one that carefully considers long-term crime trends, evolving factors impacting crime, and, perhaps most importantly, the changing—and often not changing—circumstances of youth at risk of system involvement.

So what does the media leave out? A very complicated story. Every youth interviewed had a different story, yet there were clear patterns as well.

**Parents and home life.** The 24 youth interviewed described their chaotic home lives, too often dominated by substance abusing, violent, or absent parents; multiple residence changes; and family members in trouble with the law. Most youth lived in poverty. Youth mentioned parents who dealt drugs in order to pay household bills, and some parents had pleaded with the court to release their child on probation because his or her job helped support the family. Sometimes parents moved their families to seek better circumstances for their children, but more often, financial or other disruptions forced the move.

The adults raising these youth fit easily into common stereotypes. Many youth lived in single-parent homes, yet many—one-third of those interviewed—lived in two-parent homes. Relationships between parents and youth were mixed. Many said they loved their parents and felt bad for letting them down. Almost half described their relationships as positive, with their parents loving and supporting them, and making efforts to improve the youths’ lives. Youth with an absent parent most often spoke of missing that parent rather than holding ill will toward them; they wished they could have a relationship.

Unfortunately, the youth spoke of parents who, despite good intentions, could not provide the structure or guidance that they needed. Some parents’ employment, often at multiple jobs, left them with little time to meet the youths’ needs. Some parents had troubles of their own, health issues, drug abuse, or system-involvement. Most youth had at least one family member or relative who was or had been involved in the criminal justice system. At least one youth described parents selling drugs on the streets in order to pay

household bills. Most of the juvenile justice professionals that we interviewed agreed with these young people's observations. The stakeholders stressed factors that compromise successful parenting, including parental drug use, lack of awareness of children's lives, and lack of time to discipline and support children due to work hours or imprisonment. Still, the stakeholders felt many parents and guardians seemed to be struggling to create a positive home life.

Both youth and stakeholders spoke of gaps of understanding between youth and their parents, including cultural factors related to recent immigration, generational differences, and technology advancements, as youth used electronics and the internet as part of their social lives, education, and street life. Relatives—often a brother or cousin not much older than the youth—sometimes filled the role of absent or incapable parents, and these relationships often proved unhealthy. The gaps of understanding between parents and youth were so great in some cases that, according to both youth and stakeholders, parents turned to city agencies, most often the police or probation, to step in when they could not handle their children. With schools also turning to law enforcement for help with difficult students, this contributed to what some stakeholders described as an overreliance on the juvenile justice system.

**Schools.** Perhaps like most adolescents, the young people that we interviewed stressed the social rather than academic aspects of school. They described school environments that lacked the necessary structure and stability to help them succeed academically. Gang activity and violence were common.

The majority of the stakeholders were very concerned with a school's ability to positively intervene in the lives of young people.<sup>11</sup> In particular they were concerned with truancy and dropouts, though reentry after expulsions or time spent in juvenile facilities was also a major concern. These disruptions served to make academic success even less likely. Both youth and stakeholders thought schools too often involved the police in problems on campus and in truancy issues.

**The Street.** With their parents and schools unable to keep them on track, and with extensive unsupervised time on their hands, the neighborhood was an influential aspect of these youths' lives. Most of them described the difficult environments in their communities. Young people in the juvenile justice system stressed their personal exposure to gangs, drugs, and violence at a young age. The youth turned to street life for a variety of reasons—money, status, social life; their motivations were complex. They turned to those who could provide some of the bonds and structure they were lacking at home or at school. And they sought a modicum of control over their own lives. Some were urged into risky behavior by relatives, some were pressured simply because of where they lived or the clothes they wore. Some spoke of spending little time in the neighborhood, and even among those with active street lives, most were not in formal gangs. But the environment outside their homes and schools seemed always to play a significant and troubling role in their lives.

**The Juvenile Justice System.** Some of the youth reported that time in confinement allowed them to think about their lives and past actions and expressed a desire to change. However, this desire did not necessarily translate into concrete plans for a positive future. Most interviewed youth felt—and stakeholders generally

11 Representatives of schools were not among the stakeholders interviewed.

agreed—that during their confinement they were not making positive progress towards creating a better life for themselves. They felt removed from their social, family, and economic obligations. Further, they felt some of their experiences, including failure to complete probation, made it difficult to turn things around. The youth rarely mentioned resources that had been helpful to them.

Although they had concerns, stakeholders generally commended the efforts of law enforcement and juvenile justice agencies to address the needs of youth. Stakeholders discussed innovative youth programming within the police department, probation, and detention and the increased resources available to youth once in the system. However, some stakeholders questioned whether the juvenile justice system was the right venue for delivering services, given its main function as law enforcement.

## *Policy Considerations*

It is usual for crime rates to fluctuate; however, newspaper reports as a whole emphasize and often exaggerate rises in crime, while drops in crimes are minimized. When overall crime rates are static or dropping, the media look for change in individual types of crime. Increases in crime do not warrant the typically exaggerated coverage mostly focused on shocking crimes. Further, crime in general is often attributed to youth when, in fact, adults commit the vast majority of all types of crime. Positive stories about youth, as opposed to those that emphasize trouble and violence, are hard to find, leaving the public with a distorted view of youth and their role in crime.

Interviewed stakeholders did not necessarily share the same political views on delinquent youth: some preferred greater emphasis on law enforcement, accountability, and public safety, while others preferred to emphasize programming, community-based efforts, and prevention. However, regardless of these views, in doing their work, stakeholders considered the full range of factors that influence youth behavior. Although elected officials may feel the need to respond to crime as reported in the media, or may use such coverage as leverage for pushing their preferred programs, stakeholders recognize the cyclical nature of crime and the need to focus on long-term strategies rather than short-term changes. Stakeholders felt that policies focused on short-term trends or sensational crimes used resources that would be better spent on more long-sighted methods. In fact, they felt that shortsighted policies may, in fact, make the situation worse.

## *Ask the youth!*

Perhaps the most interesting findings stem from what NCCD learned in the youth interviews. The stories they told were common to other youth involved in the justice system: unsettled households, violent communities, the inexorable draw of drugs, gangs, and delinquent behavior, inconsequential early system contacts, and gradually deeper movement into the system.

As a whole, the stories serve as an outline of the root causes of crime and a blueprint for early intervention and prevention programs. In effect, they evaluate how the adults in their lives and society at large had met

their responsibilities to young people (We did not fare very well.). They suggest how to do better, if not for them, then for their young siblings and the next generation. The youth told their stories with insight and, notably, without passing the sort of judgment that others had passed on them throughout their lives. Most of these youth had a clear idea of why things turned out the way they had for them. Most took personal responsibility for their plight. While acknowledging the failures of the adults responsible for their care, few blamed anyone but themselves. Furthermore, the youths' assessment of their own situations agreed in almost every respect with how the stakeholders—experts in the field—assessed the same thing. The youth were, in short, experts on themselves. And they added a personal element that illuminates how society can better serve them and others like them to avoid system contact.

Although these youth were among the most serious offenders in the system, they were not the heartless monsters described in many news reports. Interviewers found the youth to be funny, engaging, and thoughtful; they typically treated the interviewers with courtesy and respect. Their motivations for high-risk and delinquent behavior were complicated. However, they often involved common adolescent needs for interpersonal connections and a sense of belonging and self and perhaps seeking a little order among the chaos in their lives.

In short, trends in crime do not indicate tougher responses to youth crime—these youth are not superpredators. System reform is necessary and demands a comprehensive, long-term approach based on the perspective of the youth, families, and community.

## *Recommendations*

The following recommendations stem from youth interviews, stakeholder comments, and the other findings of the NCCD study.

**Initiate a campaign for accurate public information.** OJJDP and state agencies need to collect and make available the information necessary for meaningful discussion and reporting on youth, crime, and city responses. These resources must be timely and accessible to interested audiences with a range of backgrounds, expertise, and interests, to include not just researchers or academics, but the media, elected officials, law enforcement and other city agencies, and the general public. Types of information that need to be available include crime data, the youth and family perspective, risk and protective factors for crime, the structure and purpose of the juvenile justice system, the nature and impact of effective best practices in programming and service-provision for at-risk and system-involved youth, the impact of incarceration, current research in causes and responses to crime, issues related to class, race, ethnicity, and immigration, and blueprints for effective city-wide responses to crime.

**Support a media training effort.** OJJDP and other justice agencies need to establish methods and resources for informing the media to the true nature of youth crime, the lives of youth in troubled communities, and how cities respond. This effort should include an internet-based clearinghouse of information formatted for easy access, understanding, and use by the media. It should also include conferences, seminars, and trainings designed to give the media a comprehensive understanding of youth and crime as well as expertise

in the use of available data and informational resources.

**Expand funding for public education.** Public perception impacts the system at almost every level, from funding for new programs to crime-focused legislation and ballot measures, to understanding the benefits and detriments to system involvement for youth, to improved intergenerational communication and relations in the community. OJJDP and concerned foundations need to better inform the public and seek productive relationships among agencies, community groups, and individuals. This effort may include justice system events and programs linking justice representatives with local communities through community-based forums and services. Cultural sensitivity should be an essential element of these efforts.

**Promote healthy families and effective parenting.** Frustrated and bewildered parents need help recognizing risk factors for delinquency and effectively advocating for their system-involved children. Justice agencies, collaborating as necessary with public health and human service agencies, need to engage and educate parents on effective parenting skills.

**Broaden training for police and probation officers who work with troubled young people.** Federal funding needs to support appropriate training and institutional support for police and probation officers as they take on broader roles in communities.

**Remember that juvenile justice system-involved youth are ADOLESCENTS.** All of these recommendations must be planned and implemented with consideration of this core fact. These youth are not super-predators, they are not lost causes, but rather have made mistakes. But making mistakes is an integral part of growing up. These youth may be in dangerous ruts, but they maintain hope for new directions. And they need help.

To better understand and engage system-involved youth, the first step is to understand their development. Those convicted of serious crime are not so unlike average youth. They are observant, they have a sense of themselves, they are proud, yet they are often immature. They have complicated lives and motivations. Their home lives may be less than ideal, but they are all they know. They need help contemplating the consequences of their actions beyond punishment and loss of freedom. They need help seeing the big picture. They need help, for example, understanding the purpose of the services offered them, and help developing reentry plans. They need help seeing past their release date and reunion with their troubled homes and communities.

One youth interviewed seemed content to be in secure placement for the time being. She was a gang member; she had an emotional disorder; she reported that she had been abused at home; she said her father had been arrested for drug use and sexual assault. She said, simply, “I don’t mind being in Juvi. Better to be here and be safe.” However, our society must be capable of providing for safe environments for vulnerable young people outside of locked doors, razor wire barriers, and prison-like settings.

## Contents

<i>Executive Summary</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Project Methods</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>The Media's Representation of Youth and Youth Violence</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>The Data: Trends In Crime, Arrests, and Public Attitudes</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Professional Stakeholders and Youth Interviews</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>Summary of Findings</i>	<i>58</i>

## Preface

Wrongly assuming that crime rates and population growth were inextricably linked, in 1995, John J. Dilulio, Jr. attached the term “superpredator” to the then preadolescents that he predicted would be part of a huge and ruthless juvenile crime wave (dominated, he stressed, by African American youth).<sup>1</sup> By 2000, juvenile crime rates had fallen<sup>2</sup> and studies showed that the temporary spike in youth violence was attributable to economic disparity, adult drug dealers using youth as pawns, and, most importantly, easy access to guns.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Dilulio’s warnings about “a new horde from hell that kills, maims and terrorizes merely to become known, or for no reason at all”<sup>4</sup> had taken hold. A barrage of “get tough on (youth) crime” laws followed. A combination of media coverage, political fearmongering, and a misinformed public—and conservative academics like Dilulio—came together to change the very nature of juvenile justice. Designed to treat youth as youth—not as fully developed and self-responsible adults but as still growing and reachable kids—the juvenile system began to more closely mirror the adult system; indeed, the distinction was legally blurred as states across the country made it easier to prosecute youth as adults in the adult criminal justice system.

Fast forward to 2008 and this combination of processes, and its impact, has not yet been successfully replaced with a less sensationalist media, a better informed public, or more rational policies. Newspaper articles still spread fear with articles about “kiddie” car thieves,<sup>5</sup> “homegrown terrorists,”<sup>6</sup> and youth who “just wanted to kill.”<sup>7</sup> Dilulio himself, who in 1995 said “No one in academia is a bigger fan of incarceration than I am,”<sup>8</sup> now sensibly argues for less detention and a more community-based response to crime. However, statutes continue to be pushed and passed that pull more youth into a more punitive juvenile justice system and into the adult system. Media coverage of youth and crime still leave the public fearing the young people among them and likely to vote for the most punitive responses to delinquency.

## Introduction

Public perception of violent crime is largely a function of media coverage of crime, especially youth crime. Many adults have little contact with youth and most never directly experience youth crime. This leaves them to base their impressions of youth and youth crime on external sources such word of mouth, public officials, and, in particular, as the media.

Media coverage does not reflect a sufficiently thorough or, in many cases, accurate understanding of youth or youth crime. Most stories about young people depict them as troubled or, more likely, as trouble for society; stories about youth typically associate youth with violence, whether as victim or instigator.

1 Dilulio, JJ. (1995). *The Coming of the Super-Predators*. *The Weekly Standard*, v001, i11.

2 OJJDP, 1999. *Challenging the Myths*.

3 Blumstein, A., nd. *Youth, Guns, and Violent Crime*.

4 Dilulio, quoting former judge Dan Coburn, in testimony before Congress, 1996.

5 (2004, July 29). Reclaiming the City’s Youth. *The Washington Post*.

6 Milloy, C. (2006, July 19). Juvenile Delinquency Gets Old Fast for Victims. *The Washington Post*.

7 Ellis, T.M. and Ball, L.S. (2006, August 2). Teen just wanted to kill, police say: Frisco youth admits serial-killer fascination; original suspect cleared. *The Dallas Morning News*.

8 Dilulio, JJ. (1995). *The Coming of the Super-Predators*. *The Weekly Standard*, v001, i11.

Professionals in the juvenile justice system recognize that discussions of crime trends need to be based on accurate and timely data that is placed in the context of long-term crime data trends as well as trends of other factors that impact youth behavior.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation asked NCCD to assess the intersection of media coverage of youth crime, public perception, actual trends in youth crime, and public policy in three US cities. In particular, NCCD was asked to help policymakers and citizens of US cities form policy based on information and reality instead of fear and rhetoric. NCCD's project had four parts: review newspaper coverage in the three cities for the past two decades; review crime statistics to assess what trends were truly occurring; interview some of the key stakeholders (juvenile court judges, chiefs of police and probation, probation staff, police, prosecutors, and public defenders) who best understand the juvenile justice system and the youth caught in it; and, perhaps most importantly, interview youth entrenched in the juvenile justice system in each city. It is the stories of the youth—told in their own words and supported by statistics and stakeholder expert comment—which best illustrate their plight and the successes and failings of society's response.

This report has four sections. First, the media review and a discussion, primarily based on stakeholder interviews, of the interplay of the media with public policy. Second, a review of relevant trends in crime and youth arrests. Third, the findings from the youth and stakeholder interviews concerning the factors leading to their system involvement, including home life, community environment, and school, and their experience with the juvenile justice system itself. These interviews are presented with very limited NCCD commentary—the pictures drawn are clear enough on their own. Fourth, a summary of findings and recommendations for better approaches to reporting on youth, coping with public perception, and serving at-risk and system-involved youth. While all of NCCD's findings, both quantitative and qualitative, are included, the report uses the stories told by the youth as the guide for presenting the findings. Stakeholder comments and relevant data are included to fill out the discussion of all the relevant issues, which were in almost all cases raised by the youth themselves.

## *Project Methods*

### *City selection*

The most important goal was to select cities that were different from each other in overall level/type of crime, population size, racial/ethnic makeup, region, and approach to solving youth violence. NCCD also sought cities with ongoing youth crime issues where there was evidence of innovative leadership, programs, or approaches to address this issue. Consideration was also given to cities with existing relationships to NCCD for practical considerations.

### *Media review*

NCCD conducted a search of newspaper coverage of youth crime and violence in the three cities from 1988 through 2008 via Lexis-Nexis. Local newspaper coverage of local crime issues was the focus of the media review. Key words included: teen(s), juvenile(s), youth(s), violence, violent, crime, criminal(s), gang(s).



Both news articles and columns were included. This report includes descriptions of articles covering the themes and styles representative of the type and quantity found in the scan.

## *Crime trend data*

The primary purpose of the quantitative crime data presented is to assess whether trends in juvenile crime are cyclical and whether spikes in crime are generally short term?

The bulk of the crime data (reported crimes and arrests) reported here comes from federal crime data sources. The data reported usually covers the latest ten or twenty year periods, usually up to 2007. Violent crimes and property crimes are reported, both of which contribute to the perception of risk among community members.

**Data overview.** There is no way to precisely measure either risk of victimization or change in criminal behavior. Two types of crime data that can measure actual risk of crime included crimes reported to police and arrests.

**Reported crime.** The most important data for this project come from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports. Crimes reported to police do not speak of juvenile crime in particular; the data cannot be disaggregated by age. It is, however, disaggregated by city. These data are meant to give a notion of how public perception and media portrayal of crime in general compare to actual risk or experience of crime.<sup>9</sup>

**Arrests.** Arrest data are collected with the most reliability and detail and can point to crime trends. Detailed demographics of arrestees, which cannot reliably be collected for reported crimes or victimization, are also helpful in characterizing offense behaviors and trends. However, since arrests are subject to changes in laws and law enforcement practices, a rise or fall in arrests does not necessarily equate to a change in actual criminal behavior or, therefore, to a change in risk to the public. In fact, research has shown that, in many cases, rises in the rates of arrest have no other explanation than a change in policies, as in the case of drug sweeps in certain areas, "zero tolerance" policies toward youth violence on school campuses, or domestic violence policies which lower the threshold at which family members will be charged with assault.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, arrest data are an important factor in tracking crime and, along with reported crime data, are used most often by the media, city leaders, and crime experts. Arrest data here are taken from the FBI's *Crime in the United States* and from the state and city agencies of the three cities.

**Metropolitan Areas.** The media cover crime locally and regionally. Stories of events in the larger arena have an impact on public perception of crime in each locality within it. Also, some factors impacting per-

9 Less than 50% of violent crime and less than 40% of property crimes are reported to police. Violent crimes that involve weapons or injury are reported at higher rates; for instance, the percentage of crimes reported were approximately 55% of aggravated assaults involving a weapon, 57% of rapes, and robberies with injury 80% or more. The proportion of crime reported to police fluctuates by just a percentage point or two each year, with no particular trend up or down. (Sourcebook for Criminal Justice Statistics Online, <http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook>, 2008.)

10 OJJDP (October, 2008). *Girls Study Group: Understanding and Responding to Girls' Delinquency*. Accessed at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/223434.pdf>.

ceived and actual crime rates, such as economic and social issues, can have a regional component to them.

Therefore, in addition to city and county statistics, regional crime rates are relevant to the current study. The regional statistics we chose to investigate were from the most recent 10-year period for the immediate vicinity of the study city, or what the FBI refers to as Metropolitan Statistics Areas (MSAs). Data are available from the FBI from 1995 to the present.

## *The Interviews*

**Stakeholders.** Stakeholders interviewed came from a range of focus areas within juvenile justice, and held a range of posts from direct care staff to department heads and judges. NCCD asked stakeholders to characterize their jobs, the youth violence in their city, changes in youth violence over time, their city's (and program's) approach to youth violence, media coverage of the issue, and if this coverage affected the city's approach. In general, NCCD asked the stakeholders what was working well in the system and what needed improvement. Interviews were in-person and lasted approximately 45 minutes. While no stakeholders interviewed requested anonymity, to encourage frankness NCCD assured stakeholders that their names and titles would not be included.

In Washington, NCCD interviewed 12 stakeholders, including representatives of the police, probation, youth corrections, the court, attorney general's office, public defenders, and two community-based organizations that provide support services to the system, including education. Three were judges or department heads.

In San Mateo, NCCD interviewed nine stakeholders, including representatives of the police (including a gang taskforce), the court, prosecutor, probation, and a community-based violence prevention organization. Four were judges or department heads.

In Dallas, NCCD interviewed 11 stakeholders, including representatives of a gang taskforce, court, public defender, probation, and a community-based organization. Six were judges or department heads.

Although NCCD interviewed several people that work with the schools and with youth who have had difficulties in school, NCCD did not interview individuals who worked directly in the school system, which limits our ability to address some of the difficulties schools have in ensuring safety and engaging juvenile justice system-involved youth.

**Youth.** NCCD focused on the highest-level offenders to the degree that interview logistics and city requirements allowed it. Youth interviews were unstructured, though they were loosely based on NCCD's Juvenile Assessment and Intervention System.<sup>11</sup> Interviewers met with each youth individually for approximately 45 minutes. Interviewers asked about life growing up, life before being incarcerated, school, family, and plans for the future. Interviews were arranged with the help of city representatives and followed each city's and NCCD's own requirements for protecting the confidentiality and anonymity of each youth.

11 Information available at the NCCD website: [http://www.nccd-crc.org/nccd/n\\_cj\\_jabout.html](http://www.nccd-crc.org/nccd/n_cj_jabout.html).

Twenty-four youth (19 males and 5 females) were interviewed. Their ages ranged from 12 to 19 years, with most between 15 and 17 years. Twelve were Latinos, 10 African American, 2 White.

Gang-affiliation was based on youth statements; six youth stated they were in gangs and one more did not say he was in a gang but spoke of hanging out with gang members. Whether reporting gang membership or not, most of the youth interviewed, especially the males, spoke of groups of neighborhood friends with whom they spent a lot of time, had formed bonds and at least sometimes participated in various types of risky behavior, from substance abuse to delinquency. Youth in Washington in particular did not speak of gang membership, but spoke of their neighborhood friends in terms similar to the way self-reported gang members spoke of their fellow gang members.

The cities did not always provide the formal charge or disposition offense; the youth were not always certain which offense they were being held for and tended to catalog their arrests, past and present. Based on these rough tabulations of the most severe offense, 14 of the 24 youth were being held for a violent offense, seven of which involved weapons. The most serious violent offenses were murder, aggravated assault with bodily injury (including a shooting), and kidnapping at gunpoint. There were two assaults on police officers, a robbery, a sexual assault, a car theft, threatening a witness, six drug offenses, and a vandalism charge. One youth declined to divulge his charge.

Four offenses were gang-related, including a male arrested for coercing another youth into stealing a bicycle as part of gang-initiation and a female who was arrested for graffiti (and drug possession, though she was unsure if the drug charge was formally adjudicated).

Of the other four females, three were arrested for domestic violence incidents (assaults on a parent or guardian, one involving a weapon and one with injury), and the fourth was a runaway.

**Reporting.** The number of stakeholders and youth interviewed is not sufficient to justify generalizing the interviewee's thoughts, attitudes, and experiences to broader populations. It was NCCD's goal, however, to include in the report information that was common among those interviewed. NCCD's criteria for what information to include in the interview report was that a significant number of stakeholders or youth (roughly ranging from three to ten or more) expressed similar sentiments or experiences. These shared thoughts and experiences may represent the group as a whole (stakeholders or youth) or may represent subgroups (e.g., gang members, youth who liked school, judges, probation workers, stakeholders favoring system reform). Unless otherwise indicated, the reader can assume information attributed to the youth or stakeholders was expressed by a relatively large number of interviewees. Estimates of the actual number of interviewees in agreement are given when they are particularly high (e.g., "10," or "15," or "a majority," "most," or "nearly all") or low ("one," "two or three," "a few"). Quotes used are not composite but rather are reported as verbatim as possible. They are the words of individual interviewees expressing thoughts or sentiments shared by other interviewees or seen by NCCD as thematic to the views expressed.

## *The Media's Representation of Youth and Youth Violence*

This section describes the results of the NCCD media review in three parts. The local findings are put in the national context through several previously published studies involving coverage of youth and crime in both print and television media around the US. Media coverage in the three cities is characterized by type. Lastly, the interplay of media coverage and each city's responses to crime are explored chronologically over the past two decades.

Following the results of the media review are the findings from NCCD's interviews with stakeholders regarding media coverage and how it impacts their efforts to serve system-involved youth.

*Summary. The media review largely confirmed that the media does not provide a balanced perspective on crime or youth issues to the general public. Articles typically focused on youth crime, emphasized crime increases and "crime emergencies," did not make appropriate use of real crime data, and highlighted the more sensationalist aspects of stories rather than context. Further, stakeholders were generally accurate in their perception of the media's portrayal.*

### *National coverage of youth: Inventing "new forms of menace"*

Newspaper coverage in the three cities largely mirrored what several formal national media reviews found during the past decade. A 1997 study of local television news found:

- violence dominated coverage,
- details of particular crimes dominated coverage of violence,
- over two-thirds of the stories about violence involved youth (and over half of stories about youth were about violence), and
- less than one-fifth of stories about violence were contextualized.<sup>12</sup>

A 2001 review of 70 studies of newspaper and television crime coverage found the number of stories about youth involved in violence to be hugely disproportionate to the number of youth arrested for violent crimes, especially for youth of color. This study also found that even when crime was decreasing, stories about crime were increasing. The authors spoke of a "misinformation synergy" in media coverage where violent crime is overemphasized, youth are overrepresented as offenders, and, in particular, youth of color are overrepresented as offenders and underrepresented as victims. This produces "a terribly unfair and inaccurate

12 Dorfman, L, Woodruff, K, Chavez, V, and Wallack, L, 1997. Youth and violence on local television news in California. *American Journal of Public Health*, v87, i8, 1311-1316.

overall image of crime in America. Add to that a majority of readers and viewers who rely on the media to tell the story about crime, and the result is a perfect recipe for a misinformed public.”<sup>13</sup>

A 2004 study<sup>14</sup> found that newspaper stories relied far too heavily on police and government sources in reporting on crime, rarely seeking comment from outside experts, community groups, or representatives of the juvenile defendant. This was especially true on shorter pieces, which make up the majority of crime stories. This work found little change in how newspapers cover crime since Doris Graber reported similar findings in 1980.<sup>15</sup>

A study from 2005 found local newscasts about youth focused on violence, treated youth as sources of “social disruption and disorder,” and were “overwhelmingly episodic in nature, focusing on particular events and discrete occurrences, without providing any thematic context or otherwise linking them to broader trends or issues.”<sup>16</sup>

Finally, sociological studies described how deeply though sometimes subtly media-created imagery such as “superpredator” and “wilding” impacts the thinking of the public, creating age and racial stereotypes and inventing “new forms of menace”<sup>17</sup> and a “spectacle of wasted youth.”<sup>18</sup>

There are, of course, well reported and in-depth articles of youth issues and crime to be found in the nation’s newspapers. They are not the norm, but they do appear. For instance, a 2000 article in the San Francisco Chronicle described the way the “superpredator” myth took hold: “This increased violence among urban teens was cause for concern but did not justify the wholesale demonization of America’s youth that soon followed. . . . Politicians seized on this [superpredator] rhetoric, inflamed the public’s fear and exploited the gap between public perception and the reality of juvenile crime. Increased press coverage of juvenile violence, making it seem like the norm rather than an aberration, also fanned public hysteria.”<sup>19</sup>

### Where does the public learn about crime?

It is clear that the media is a primary influence in public perception of crime: 76% of the public say they get information on crime from the media, three times the number who say they get it from personal experience.<sup>20</sup> Polls and focus groups show that adults with no regular personal contact with teenagers

13 Dorfman, L., and Schiraldi, V. (2001). *Off Balance: Youth, Race & Crime in the News*. Building Blocks for Youth.

14 Simon, J. (2004). *Juvenile Crime Stories Use Police Blotter Without Comment from Suspects*. *Newspaper Research Journal*, Department of Journalism, University of Memphis.

15 Graber, D.A. (1980). *Crime News and the Public*. New York: Praeger.

16 Amundson, D.R., Lichter, L.S., and Lichter, S.R. (2005). *What’s the Matter with Kids Today: Television Coverage of Adolescents in America*. Center for Media and Public Affairs.

17 Welch, M., Price, E., and Yankey, N. (2002). *Moral Panic over Youth Violence: Wilding and the Manufacture of Menace in the Media*. *Youth & Society*, v34, no. 1, 3-30.

18 Acland, C.R. (1995). *Youth, murder, spectacle: the cultural politics of youth in crisis*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

19 Drizin, S., and Harper, S.K. (2000, April 16). *Old Enough to Kill, Old Enough to Die*. *SF Chronicle*.

20 Dorfman, L., and Schiraldi, V. (2001). *Off Balance: Youth, Race & Crime in the News*. Building Blocks for Youth.

rely the most on the media for their understanding of youth and youth issues.<sup>21</sup> This is especially true for adults and youth of different races or ethnicities.

### Three cities media review

#### Focus on youth crime

As in the published media reviews described above, articles about crime in the three cities tended to focus on youth. Juveniles and youth crime were often used in the headline and lead paragraphs, even when the article had a broader focus. And there was often no corroborating data or other factual information to support the emphasis on youth. For example, in 1993 the *Washington Post* published an article titled “Police Launch Initiatives to Cut Juvenile Crime” which begins with the sentence “As investigators looked for three young men who walked into a District market and left a clerk critically wounded Tuesday night, police launched several efforts yesterday to keep juveniles from committing crimes.”<sup>22</sup> However, the article actually was about a range of new police initiatives designed to address both adult and juvenile crime, including increased patrols in high-crime areas, specialized task forces of local and federal officers, stiffer penalties for juvenile offenders, plans for a drug court to send drug offenders to treatment rather than jail, and a learning center for suspended students.

A 2003 article in Washington headlined “District Auto Thieves Downsize; Ever-Younger Criminals Help Push Stolen-Car Rate Up 20%” reported that “the most crucial tool for some car thieves in the nation’s capital is a stack of phone books – so they can see over the steering wheel.”<sup>23</sup> Despite the focus of this article on the age of the car thieves, this article included no data to show that youth are responsible for the increase in auto theft, or that the age of car thieves is decreasing. (Rates of reported motor vehicle thefts<sup>24</sup> and of juveniles arrested for Unauthorized Use of Vehicle<sup>25</sup> did rise in 2003, but they both then fell annually until 2006. Despite the rise in 2003, rates of reported car thefts were still lower than their 1995-1996 levels.)

#### Unsupported basis, specific crimes made to be high profile

Claims about trends in crime and youth behavior are rarely backed up by data or put into context. For example, an article titled “Curfew Plans Targets Violent Teens; Council Member Seeks to Halt Rise in Juvenile Crime in District” quotes a council member that claims there has been an increase in the number of youth who are victims and perpetrators of violence, but no data is presented to confirm the councilmember’s claims.<sup>26</sup> In this dangerous circularity, the media depends on a single source, usually city leaders, for their in-

21 Amundson, D.R., Lichter, L.S., and Lichter, S.R. (2005). What’s the Matter with Kids Today: Television Coverage of Adolescents in America. Center for Media and Public Affairs.

22 Castaneda, R. (1993, October 28). Police Launch Initiatives to Cut Juvenile Crime. *The Washington Post*.

23 Dvorak, P. (2003, July 5). District Auto Thieves Downsize; Ever-Younger Criminals Help Push Stolen-Car Rate Up 20%. *The Washington Post*.

24 Washington Metropolitan Police Department Citywide Crime Statistics 1993 to 2005. Accessed at <http://mpdc.dc.gov>.

25 Data provided by the Washington Metropolitan Police Department 10/16/2008.

26 Lewis, N. (1995, March 31). Curfew Plans Targets Violent Teens; Council Member Seeks to Halt Rise in Juvenile Crime in District. *The Washington Post*.

formation, just as city leaders seem to depend on the media for their sense of public opinion.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, an article headlined “Experts, Family Want to Know Why Teen-Age Boys Seem to Be Growing More Violent” describes a few cases of young males that behaved violently; the article does not at all put these incidents in the context of data on broader crime trends, show these boys to be the norm rather than unique cases, or seek information from experts or other sources on whether teenage boys truly are becoming more violent.<sup>28</sup>

Although the difference between minors under 18 years of age and adults 18 or older has been clearly defined as an important threshold<sup>29</sup>, the media review also found the use of nonstandard age ranges to define “youth.” A 2000 article entitled “Williams Vows to Curb Violence by Washington youths” mentioned “youth-on-youth homicides,” “serious and violent crimes among young people,” and “youth violence” in the first two lines; only later do we learn that the youth here are aged 16-to-24.<sup>30</sup>

### Noncontextualized sensationalism: He “just wanted to kill”

Articles typically included sensationalist terms while including only superficial coverage of the range of issues influencing youth violence. The articles do not help the public understand delinquent or at-risk youth. A rise in certain offenses becomes a “massive explosion in juvenile crime.”<sup>31</sup> An article that covered juvenile car theft highlighted the age of those committing the theft through the use of terms such as “kiddie” car thieves.<sup>32</sup>

In a 2007 *Washington Post* article, columnist Colbert I. King said, “Behind the guns are young men so desensitized by their upbringing and their surroundings that the welfare of others counts for nothing and remorse is a word without meaning. The use of a gun to rob, to mete out pain and to exact revenge comes to them as easily as the ability to tie a shoelace.”<sup>33</sup> In another 2007 article,<sup>34</sup> King begins by retelling a horrifically violent story from 1991, then concludes that “The outer limits of 1991 are now commonplace.” The author admits that violent crime and homicides have decreased in the city, and offers no other reporting to support his claim that “Random, senseless acts of murder—a ruthlessness that cuts down innocent bystanders—is no longer out of the ordinary.”

This emphasis on anecdote was evident in various articles where the crime was described in detail, whereas the larger circumstances leading to youth crime were ignored. For example, a long article about a teenage shooter in the *Dallas Morning News*, emphasized the details of his crime and of the police search; the youth

27 See Graber, D.A. (1980). *Crime News and the Public*. New York: Praeger; Simon, J. (2004). *Juvenile Crime Stories Use Police Blotter Without Comment from Suspects*, *Newspaper Research Journal*, Department of Journalism, University of Memphis; and stakeholder interviews.

28 Abdullah, H. (1998, June 30). Experts, family want to know why teen-age boys seem to be growing more violent. *The Dallas Morning News*.

29 See discussion in this report regarding Supreme Court decisions regarding the death penalty and the Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act.

30 Cottman, M. (2000, June 23). Williams Vows to Curb Violence by D.C. Youths. *The Washington Post*.

31 Evans, C. (1993, July 25). Juvenile Justice System Hasn't Kept Pace. *The Dallas Morning News*.

32 *The Washington Post*. (2004, July 29). Reclaiming the City's Youth.

33 King, C.I. (2007, July 28). Getting fingers off triggers. *The Washington Post*.

34 King, C. (2007, August 4). At the Root of the Violence. *The Washington Post*.

“went looking for someone to shoot Saturday night—anyone would do.”<sup>35</sup> The details of the crime were chilling, but there were no similar details about what led this teen to shoot a stranger, only the inclusion of the parents’ suggestion that he needed psychological help.

## Sensationalism goes both ways

NCCD found that newspapers *did* cover positive stories, e.g., about activities and programs to reduce gang violence or about youth who had decided to turn their lives around. For instance, the review revealed articles about “Beyond Violence” community forums in San Mateo, youth mock trials in Dallas,<sup>36</sup> and about a Washington youth that has overcome the odds to succeed and promote peace, despite growing up in a difficult neighborhood.<sup>37</sup>

However, as the stakeholders also reported, even when covering more positive youth-related news, articles often aimed to move the readers emotionally rather than to edify. As with newspaper articles on violence and crime, many more column inches are spent on the details of unusual circumstances rather than a broad context. For example, we are told that the mock trial will help children see the consequences of their actions. The article does not address, for example, whether children are committing crimes because they do not see the consequence of their actions or why the mock trials would be an effective deterrent for youth. *The Dallas Morning News* covered a story about a reformed gang member whose nephew was killed by the gang he had founded.<sup>38</sup> The article emphasized the family relationship and the details of the nephew’s shooting, but there was no discussion of what led the individuals to join a gang, or how individuals can be convinced to leave gangs.

## Exceptions

In 2006, a new juvenile hall facility, which aimed at rehabilitating youth rather than punishing them, received widespread coverage in the *San Jose Mercury News*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Inside Bay Area*,<sup>39</sup> these articles all described the purpose of the new center, noting that “the premise is treatment, not punishment, and the message is delivered in the very walls: soothing pastels to calm testy moods, skylights letting in swaths of sunlight and open space for stretching growing muscles.”<sup>40</sup> The articles also tended to stress that the county resisted the efforts of other counties to build large juvenile halls, and that those counties

35 Ellis, T.M. and Ball, L.S. (2006, August 2). Teen just wanted to kill, police say: Frisco youth admits serial-killer fascination; original suspect cleared. *The Dallas Morning News*.

36 Adams-Wade, N. (2006, June 28). Youths set to hold court at mock trial. *The Dallas Morning News*.

37 Milloy, C. (2005, July 10). Away From D.C.’s Crime, a Push For Peace. *The Washington Post*.

38 Grabel, M. (2006, July 19). Ex-gang leader related to victim: Dallas: blinded by bullet, he changed his ways, now talks to youths. *The Dallas Morning News*. Mclemore, D. (2006, October 29). For witness to MS-13 crimes, betrayal was a death sentence: Teen gang member ‘was trying to change her life’ by testifying. *The Dallas Morning News*; Dennis, D. (2007, January 27). Family’s mercy draws apology from killer: Man who shot Dallas teen at party vows to live a trouble-free life. *The Dallas Morning News*.

39 Coté, J. (2006, September 15). New juvenile hall focuses on rehab, not punishment. *The San Francisco Chronicle*. Gordon, R. (2006, September 17). Center to focus on healing youth. *Inside Bay Area*. de Sa, Karen. (2006, July 30). New Juvenile Hall Delivers Message: Skylights, Softer Colors Evident. *The San Jose Mercury News*.

40 de Sa, Karen. (2006, July 30). New Juvenile Hall Delivers Message: Skylights, Softer Colors Evident. *The San Jose Mercury News*.



built larger facilities “despite evidence that juvenile crime has been on a downward slide.”<sup>41</sup> Coverage of the center was more likely to discuss rehabilitation and to include details as to why this approach is important. Still, the articles depended on city and county leaders who all voiced similar sentiments about rehabilitation, rather than on objective research.

Also in San Mateo, the news paid considerable attention when the county charged a 14-year old as an adult for the first time (soon after neighboring Santa Clara County had done the same thing). Coverage included interviews with experts who stressed the isolated nature of these incidents. In regard to the 14-year olds charged as adults, although a newspaper article asked if the “cases, taken together, raise new questions” about youth violence, experts quoted in the article shut down such speculation by stressing that the County was experiencing low levels of youth crime, that the rate of homicides by juveniles had declined, and that these were isolated incidents.<sup>42</sup>

### The interplay of media and city responses

It is hard to determine from reading newspaper articles if city leaders are using perceived crime emergencies to urge policies they already favored, or if they are proposing policies due to the media/public’s demand for quick action. It is clear that newspapers highlighted crime increases and often called for a quick response from city leaders. In August of 2003, a *Washington Post* article headlined “The Kids Are Tougher Than DC’s Laws” and argued for harsher laws as “the children of today have largely outgrown our juvenile justice system.”<sup>43</sup> A 2004 *Washington Post* article decried the “sharp increase in fatal shootings” and called for “rapid action from the city.”<sup>44</sup>

It is also clear that city leaders used the emphasis on a rise in crime to call for urgent action and that they are aware of and exploit the media’s role as a conduit to the public. Many articles reported that city leaders had proposed new legislation and crime-fighting measures in response to perceived crime increases. For example, Washington Police Chief Charles H. Ramsey declared a “crime emergency” at three times: in July, 2004, due to a rise in auto theft; in December, 2005, due to an increase in crime, especially robberies; and July, 2006, due to a general increase in crime.<sup>45</sup> The last time Ramsey declared an emergency, he wrote a column describing his reasons that was published in the newspaper.<sup>46</sup> These declarations allow, among other things, commanders flexibility to adjust schedules and restrict days off. In 2006, the Washington council approved emergency legislation that would impose a 10 p.m. youth curfew, give police immediate access to some confidential juvenile records, give judges added discretion to deny bail and detain adults and juveniles that

41 de Sa, Karen. (2006, July 30). New Juvenile Hall Delivers Message: Skylights, Softer Colors Evident. *The San Jose Mercury News*.

42 Seyfer, J. (2005, August 1). Experts say charges against two 14-year-olds probably not sign of trend. *San Jose Mercury News*.

43 Gillice, T. (2003, August 10). The kids are tougher than D.C.’s laws. *The Washington Post*.

44 *The Washington Post*. (2004, July 29). Reclaiming the City’s Youth.

45 Wilber, D.Q. (2004, July 19). Ramsey to Unveil Crime Emergency Plan; Changes Meant to Help Police Fight Rise in Auto Theft by Youths. *The Washington Post*. Wilber, D.Q. (2005, December 3). D.C. Killings Prompt Emergency Measures. *The Washington Post*.

46 Ramsey, C.H. (2006, July 16). Why I Declared a Crime Emergency. *The Washington Post*.

commit certain crimes, and install surveillance cameras in residential neighborhoods.<sup>47</sup> At roughly the same time, a 2006 *Washington Post* article stated that “many [juveniles] have decided to steal what they want from others...It doesn’t matter if the perpetrators are juveniles. Today, they steal your stuff; tomorrow, they might take your life...[Juveniles] have become hardened and increasingly violent.”<sup>48</sup> The writer then proceeded to refer to these juveniles as “homegrown terrorists.”

Interestingly, though the legislation often would not have an immediate impact on violence, city leaders still justified their preferred policies by presenting them as an answer to a perceived “emergency” situation. For example, in Washington a spokeswoman said the Mayor “hopes council members will be more receptive to initiatives they had already rejected, such as an expansion in the use of surveillance cameras and alerting police when serious juvenile offenders are released from custody, due to the ‘crime wave’ the city is in the midst of.”<sup>49</sup>

Newspaper coverage often helped these leaders make their case; as the Police Chief lobbied for access to youth records, a *Washington Post* article stated that “Juvenile crime is rising in the District, and Washington Police Chief Charles H. Ramsey spent yesterday afternoon trying to sell a Washington Council committee on a controversial plan to help buck the trend.”<sup>50</sup> Stakeholders in all three cities felt the media played a big role in influencing public perceptions of crime and what to do about it. Washington stakeholders had perhaps the strongest feelings about this connection between the media and the policies enacted by city leaders, as one of them said that one local newspaper “makes policy” in that city.

Several articles in San Mateo area newspapers gave in-depth descriptions of the operations, purpose, and benefits of the new Youth Services Center. This represented some of the most thorough journalism concerning youth and crime found in the media review and was apparently the result of a concerted effort by city leaders to educate the public via the media. San Mateo stakeholders confirmed they made efforts to better inform the public of the realities of youth crime in a variety of ways.

### Interplay of media and city response to crime

The remainder of the media review describes chronologically the apparent interplay between crime trends, newspaper articles, and the statements and policies of city leaders since the late 1980s. The media review findings are juxtaposed with government crime data to show how actual crime and arrest trends compare to the way crime is reported in the media.

47 Stewart, N. and Klein, A. (2006, July 20). Council Approves Earlier Curfew; D.C. Officials Also Support Surveillance Cameras in Neighborhoods, Access to Records. *The Washington Post*.

48 Milloy, C. (2006, July 19). Juvenile Delinquency Gets Old Fast for Victims. *The Washington Post*.

49 Montgomery, L. and Stewart, N. (2006, July 18) Mayor Takes Aim at City’s Spike in Crime. *The Washington Post*.

50 Dvorak, P. (2006, June 13). D.C. Police Chief Lobbies for Access To Youth Records; Local Coalition Criticizes Bill Introduced by Council Chairman. *The Washington Post*.

**Interplay: 1988 to mid-1990s.** During the late 1980s through the mid 1990s, newspapers in the three cities emphasized juvenile crime.<sup>51</sup> In Dallas, newspapers described the “surge in violent juvenile crime,”<sup>52</sup> and Washington coverage included headlines such as “Washington Area’s 703 homicides in 1990 set a record; police say disrespect for life, especially among youths, is fueling violence.”<sup>53</sup> A Washington article reported a “deterioration of remorse” among youth;<sup>54</sup> another attributed the rise in homicides to the “disregard for human life on the part of many young men who have weapons and do not hesitate to use them.”<sup>55</sup> Though articles focused on San Mateo did not emphasize juvenile crime as much as the other cities, they did discuss the “upsurge in violent teen crime” and contrasted contemporary “teens suspected of armed robbery, assault and homicide” to the teens of the past who were in juvenile hall for being “truants, egg throwers.”<sup>56</sup>

The concern about a rise in youth crime in this period led to a range of local and state “get-tough” efforts targeted at youth that were also reported in print media. These efforts included lowering of the execution age, expansion of the range of crimes that could lead youth to be incarcerated in an adult prison, implementation of youth curfews, and increased sentences for juveniles.<sup>57</sup> Media coverage in San Mateo was milder, as crime rates did not garner as much attention.<sup>58</sup>

**Interplay: late-1990s.** In the late 90s, newspaper coverage in all three cities acknowledged a decrease in juvenile crime; however, the emphasis varied. In Dallas, the tone generally remained skeptical, and articles em-

51 Examples in Dallas: (1991, June 16) Dallas Approves Curfew on Youths. *The New York Times*; Box, T. (1992, May 17). D-FW leads state in juvenile violence. Officials fear for future, cite growing troubles that youths face. *The Dallas Morning News*; (1993, October 5). Youth Crimes Raise Moral Questions. *The Dallas Morning News*; Nagorka, J. (1993, March 29). Fear of Crime Up, But Murder Rate in U.S. Same as in '74. More Youths Involved in Violence. *The Dallas Morning News*; Barlow, Y. (1995, March 26). Juvenile Court System Struggles with Rising Youth Crime. *The Dallas Morning News*. Examples in Washington: Churchville, V. (1988, May 28). Youth Crime A Quandary for Police; Arrest of Boys, 7, Anger D.C. Mothers. *The Washington Post*; D.C. Judge Walton Describes ‘Deterioration of Remorse’ to House Panel. *The Washington Post*; Escobar, G. (1991, January 21). Washington Area’s 703 homicides in 1990 set a record; police say disrespect for life, especially among youths, is fueling violence. *The Washington Post*; Woodlee, Y. (1994, February 3). Teen Curfew in District is Proposed. *The Washington Post*; Lewis, N. (1995, March 31). Curfew Plans Targets Violent Teens; Council Member Seeks to Halt Rise in Juvenile Crime in District. *The Washington Post*. Examples in San Mateo: Zinko, C. (1995, September 21). Teens to tackle youth violence. Students will study its causes, develop action plan, join adults to make it work. *San Jose Mercury News*. Zinko, C. (1995, December 18). Juvenile Hall bursting at seams. San Mateo County’s outdated Hillcrest Juvenile Hall, built in the 1940s, is overcrowded and worn. *San Jose Mercury News*. DATE?

52 Barlow, Y. (1995, March 26). Juvenile Court System Struggles with Rising Youth Crime. *The Dallas Morning News*.

53 Escobar, G. (1991, January 21). Washington Area’s 703 homicides in 1990 set a record; police say disrespect for life, especially among youths, is fueling violence. *The Washington Post*

54 Churchville, V. (1989, May 17). Youth Offenders Said Growing More Violent; D.C. Judge Walton Describes ‘Deterioration of Remorse’ to House Panel. *The Washington Post*.

55 Castaneda, R. (1993, August 12). Year Ranks with D.C.’s Deadliest; Drugs, Guns, Poverty Blamed as Homicides Kept Pace With '91. *The Washington Post*.

56 Zinko, C. (1995, December 18). Juvenile Hall bursting at seams. San Mateo County’s outdated Hillcrest Juvenile Hall, built in the 1940s, is overcrowded and worn. *San Jose Mercury News*.

57 Evans, C. (1993, July 25). Juvenile Justice System Hasn’t Kept Pace. *The Dallas Morning News*; Barlow, Y. (1995, March 26). Juvenile Court System Struggles with Rising Youth Crime. *The Dallas Morning News*. Ragland, J. (1991, December 2). A Fragile Coalition Leads Dixon’s Anti-Crime Battle; Effort Could be a Masterstroke – or a Morass. *The Washington Post*. Castaneda, R. (1993, October 28). Police Launch Initiatives to Cut Juvenile Crime. *The Washington Post*. Woodlee, Y. (1994, February 3). Teen Curfew in District is Proposed. *The Washington Post*. Woodlee, Y. (1994, March 30). D.C. Crime Package Swipes at Gunrunners. *The Washington Post*. Lewis, N. (1995, January 1). Court Cases Reveal Arms Buildup Among D.C. Youths. *The Washington Post*. Lewis, N. (1995, March 31). Curfew Plans Targets Violent Teens; Council Member Seeks to Halt Rise in Juvenile Crime in District. *The Washington Post*. Lewis, N. (1995, July 15). Youth Curfew Takes Effect At Midnight; Children 16 and Under to Be Held; Parents to Face Fines, Counseling. *The Washington Post*. Zinko, C.

58 *San Jose Mercury News*. (1995, December 5). San Mateo County official recommends teen curfew.

phasized the expected increase in the juvenile population, which some predicted would lead to an increase in crime; headlines such as “U.S. Juvenile Arrest Rates Fell Last Year. But Experts Caution Much Work Lies Ahead”<sup>59</sup> and “Despite Drop in Crime, Experts Are Keeping an Eye on Juvenile Offenses”<sup>60</sup> exemplify this trend. Indeed, a 1998 *Dallas Morning News* article headline read “Experts, family, want to know why teen-age boys seem to be growing more violent,” despite the decreased juvenile crime rates.<sup>61</sup> In Washington, the media scan found few mentions of a decrease in juvenile crime and violence. One article attributed the decline to a decrease in the juvenile population, decreased drug use, and increased police presence.<sup>62</sup> In fact, during this time, newspaper articles mostly expressed continued concern about juvenile crime and violence. Newspaper articles covered various efforts to curb juvenile crime including job training programs, substance abuse classes, truancy reduction programs, increased policing, and youth curfews.<sup>63</sup>

In San Mateo, on the other hand, articles described officials’ efforts to take advantage of decreased violence to boost prevention and rehabilitation services; as one article says, “With violent crime dropping and the economy surging, San Mateo County officials approved a \$728 million budget that includes investment in prevention and rehabilitation programs aimed at saving youngsters and adults from lives of crime.”<sup>64</sup> In 1999 the county rejected proposals to build a larger juvenile hall and opted to build a “Youth Services Campus” based on the youth campus model, to hopefully “save youngsters from lives of crime and addiction by attacking underlying family and personal problems that could land them in the system.”<sup>65</sup>

**Interplay: 2000s.** Articles since 2000 have stressed crime increases and system responses. In Dallas, coverage did not emphasize overall crime trends, but continued to emphasize particular crimes or youth, such as the teen arrested for murder who “just wanted to kill.”<sup>66</sup> In 2001 and 2002, newspapers ran several articles focusing on youth in juvenile and adult facilities.<sup>67</sup> The *Dallas Observer* ran a series of articles assessing Texas’ overhaul of juvenile justice in the 1990s; this overhaul occurred as a result of concern over the increase in

59 Rodriguez, B. (1996, August 9). U.S. Juvenile Arrest Rates Fell Last Year. But Experts Caution Much Work Lies Ahead. *The Dallas Morning News*.

60 Kessler, B. (1997, November 8). Despite Drop in Crime, Experts Are Keeping an Eye on Juvenile Offenses. *The Dallas Morning News*.

61 Abdullah, H. (1998, June 30). Experts, family want to know why teen-age boys seem to be growing more violent. *The Dallas Morning News*.

62 Mathews, J. (1998, September 3). Lives of D.C. Children Improve, Study Finds. *The Washington Post*. Goldstein, A. (1999, September 9). D.C. Life Improves for Children; Report on the Young finds Less Violence but More AIDS. *The Washington Post*. Pan, P. (1998, January 28). Police Get Partial Credit for Steep Drop in Slayings. *The Washington Post*.

63 Nakashima, E. (1996, September 2). Schools Step Up Incentives to Keep Students in Class; Officials Call Truancy a Precursor to Juvenile Crime, Gang Violence. *The Washington Post*. Horwitz, S. (1999, April 17). Study Finds Drug Abuse At Heart of City’s Ills; Mayor Promises More Treatment. Fountain, J. (1999, June 29). Washed Away by Violence; Care, Nurturing Can’t Always Save Young Lives from Fatal Uprooting. Ho, D. (2000, March 23). Internships Offer Teens More Than Job Skills; Campaign to End Violence Creates Hope. *The Washington Post*. Slevin, P. (1999, June 19). Court Upholds District Curfew; Youths’ Rights Not Violated, U.S. Panel Says. *The Washington Post*.

64 Gathright, A. (1997, June 27). San Mateo County Funds Crime Prevention Projects. *San Jose Mercury News*.

65 Gathright, A. (1999, February 28). Replacing Juvenile Hall, San Mateo County Plans ‘Youth Services Campus.’ *San Jose Mercury News*.

66 Ellis, T.M. and Ball, L.S. (2006, August 2). Teen just wanted to kill, police say: Frisco youth admits serial-killer fascination; original suspect cleared. *The Dallas Morning News*.

67 Housewright, E. (2001, January 15). Youths in half-way house look to life beyond crime. *The Dallas Morning News*. Rozen, M. (2001, February 22). More, please: Quick, someone buy the county’s juvenile authorities a copy of *Oliver Twist*. *The Dallas Observer*.

violent youth.<sup>68</sup> In the following years, much of the attention on crime was focused on the Police Chief, and changes to the crime rate as a result of the new leadership and policies.<sup>69</sup>

One recent article in Dallas recognized that violent youth crime had decreased. The 2006 article described the results of a study by the Center for Public Policy Priorities, which indicated that Dallas County teenagers were less likely to die a violent death or be arrested for a violent crime than in years past, by looking at numbers from 2000 through 2004.<sup>70</sup> This is the only mention NCCD found of this decline. Headlines were more likely to obscure a decrease in youth crime, such as “Dallas to crack down on juvenile crime.”<sup>71</sup> In 2006 and 2007, the discovery of sexual abuse in Texas youth prisons led to widespread coverage of their treatment of youth; as a result, some judges started sending fewer youth to these prisons.<sup>72</sup>

Coverage in Washington again began to heavily emphasize juvenile crime and violence in 2003; one headline read “Upsurge in Gang Violence Worries Police, Residents; Brazen Shootings in Recent Months Echo Crack Era.”<sup>73</sup> Newspaper articles focused on perceived crime waves and emerging issues. In particular, as a result of a few high-profile incidents of juvenile car thefts that resulted in death, newspaper coverage began to heavily emphasize juvenile car theft.<sup>74</sup> Even an article about the consolidation of police service areas—a topic presumably unrelated to juvenile car theft—discussed juvenile auto theft in its lead paragraphs.<sup>75</sup> In 2004, newspaper articles emphasized the “sharp increase in fatal shootings of youths in the District;”<sup>76</sup> the Police Chief focused on youth culture, stating that a culture of casual street violence could be a factor in some juvenile homicides and that many of the youth victims were in the act of committing crimes when they were killed.

68 Rozen, M., Lyons, J. and Brink, B. (2001, September 13). Make ‘em Pay: Spurred by a horrifying wave of teen violence in the ‘90s, Texas today spends more money than ever to lock up young criminals. Are we getting our money’s worth? *The Dallas Observer*. Rozen, M. (2001, September 27). Unhappy campers: critics of a private prison firm that ran two juvenile boot camps in Dallas wonder where the love is at these “tough love academies.” *Dallas Observer*.

69 Brown, A.K. (2003, August 27). Dallas police chief fired after four years; crime rate, scandal over drug cases roiled city. *The Associated Press*; Trahan, J. (2006, October 24). Dallas unlikely to hit crime goal: Drop surpasses 5% so far, but Kunkle wanted 10% in ‘06. *Dallas Morning News*; Trahan, J. (2007, January 3). Murders fall, rapes rise in ‘06: Dallas crime down overall, but Kunkle fails to meet goals. *The Dallas Morning News*.

70 *The Dallas Morning News*. (2006, November 17). Study: Violence involves fewer Dallas teenagers.

71 Eisener, T. (2007, August 1). Dallas to crack down on juvenile crime. *The Dallas Morning News*.

72 Swanson, D.J. (2007, March 2). Sex abuse alleged at 2nd youth jail: Agency denies cover-up after guard accused of luring girls with drugs. *The Dallas Morning News*; Jones, G. (2007, March 19). Texas juvenile facilities ruled by fear. *The Dallas Morning News*; Emily, J. (2007, April 9). Judges Send Fewer Children to TYC. *The Dallas Morning News*.

73 Fahrenthold, D. (2003, September 18). Upsurge in Gang Violence Worries Police, Residents; Brazen Shootings In Recent Months Echo Crack Era. *The Washington Post*.

74 For examples please see: Dvorak, P. (2003, July 5). District Auto Thieves Downsize; Ever-Younger Criminals Help Push Stolen-Car Rate Up 20%. *The Washington Post*. Chan, S. (2003, October 25). Bill Would Toughen Juvenile Law in D.C.; More Teens Could Be Charged as Adults. *The Washington Post*. Williams, C. (2004, February 12). 6th District Wary of New PSAs; Residents Hope New Police Zones Can Reduce Auto Theft. *The Washington Post*. Wilber, DQ. (2004, July 19). Ramsey to Unveil Crime Emergency Plan; Changes Meant to Help Police Fight Rise in Auto Theft by Youths. *The Washington Post*. Cauvin, H. (2004, July 11). Mandatory Minimum Penalties for Car Thieves Proposed: Two D.C. Council Bills Are Aimed at Repeat Youth, Adult Offenders. *The Washington Post*.

75 Williams, C. (2004, February 12). 6th District Wary of New PSAs; Residents Hope New Police Zones Can Reduce Auto Theft. *The Washington Post*.

76 *The Washington Post*. (2004, July 29). Reclaiming the City’s Youth.

Newspapers described the calls by elected officials for tougher penalties for juveniles, and often the newspapers made their own such calls. In August of 2003, a *Washington Post* article headlined “The Kids Are Tougher Than D.C.’s Laws” argued for harsher laws as “the children of today have largely outgrown our juvenile justice system.”<sup>77</sup> Another article, in the same year, suggested that “Public concern over juvenile crime has prompted Mayor Anthony A. Williams to propose some of the most significant revisions of the District’s juvenile code since it was enacted.”<sup>78</sup> Newspapers covered the Mayor’s call for increased penalties for juveniles, especially juvenile car thieves, and the Police Chief’s call for emergency resources to tackle juvenile auto theft, despite overall crime levels being low.<sup>79</sup>

In 2006, coverage again focused on an increase in juvenile crime, this time with a particular focus on juvenile robberies.<sup>80</sup> The Police Chief declared a crime emergency which enabled him more access to resources to combat this rise in crime, and the Mayor proposed emergency legislation that would allow installation of surveillance cameras in residential neighborhoods, provide an extra \$8 million for police overtime, and give him authority to adjust the city’s youth curfew.<sup>81</sup> Notably, public officials seemed willing to also claim victory through the media, as when Washington’s police chief, two months after declaring the crime emergency, stated that “the spike in violent crime has been reversed.”<sup>82</sup> The same article quoted the Washington representative to Congress that her efforts to increase police patrols should signal to tourists that the Mall was once again safe to visit.

In 2007, coverage focused on a “rash of killings.”<sup>83</sup> Again, a youth curfew was proposed. Finally, in 2007 and 2008, there was also significant coverage of juvenile justice in Washington, particularly of Washington’s Oak Hill facility which was implementing many changes.<sup>84</sup>

Between 2000 and 2006, San Mateo newspaper coverage tended to stress the low levels of juvenile crime, though beginning in 2005, San Mateo coverage emphasized an increase in youth crime, particularly in re-

77 Gillice, T. (2003, August 10). The kids are tougher than D.C.’s laws. *The Washington Post*.

78 Chan, S. (2003, October 25). Bill Would Toughen Juvenile Law in D.C.; More Teens Could Be Charged as Adults.” Oct. 25, 2003 Metro Section

79 Wilber, DQ. (2004, July 19). Ramsey to Unveil Crime Emergency Plan; Changes Meant to Help Police Fight Rise in Auto Theft by Youths. *The Washington Post*. . Cauvin, H. (2004, July 11). Mandatory Minimum Penalties for Car Thieves Proposed: Two D.C. Council Bills Are Aimed at Repeat Youth, Adult Offenders. *The Washington Post*. Montgomery, L. (2005, April 7). Williams Proposes Anti-Crime Measures; Mayor Revives Charge For Skipping Court Date. *The Washington Post*.

80 Milloy, C. (2006, July 12). Violent Robberies Make It Hard to Ignore D.C.’s Vicious Side. *The Washington Post*. Milloy, C. (2006, July 19). Juvenile Delinquency Gets Old Fast for Victims. *The Washington Post*.

81 Dvorak, P. (2006, June 13). D.C. Police Chief Lobbies for Access To Youth Records; Local Coalition Criticizes Bill Introduced by Council Chairman. *The Washington Post*. Montgomery, L. and Stewart, N. (2006, July 18). Williams Targets Spike In Crime; Aim Is to Reduce Incidents by Half. *The Washington Post*.

82 *Washington Post*, Washington Chief Says Violent Crime Spike “Has Been Reversed.” 9/8/06.

83 Harris, H. (2007, April 7). Churches Alter Outreach to Youths; Rash of Homicides, Other Crime in D.C. Area Prompts Changes in Worship Services, Schedules. *The Washington Post*. Woodlee, Y. (2007, June 21). Earlier Youth Curfew is Proposed; 17-Year-Olds to Be Included in Summer Effort to Cut Crime. *The Washington Post*. Klein, A. (2007, November 19). Slaying toll already equals last year’s; D.C. homicides had been falling since 2002. *The Washington Post*.

84 Pressley, S.A. (2006, April 9). Oak Hill’s Evolution; As the Troubled Juvenile Facility Plans Changes, It’s Still a Grim Rite of Passage for Some Youths. *The Washington Post*; King, C.I. (2007, October 27). A Sad Toll Within Juvenile Justice’s Realm. *The Washington Post*. Saslow, E. (2006, November 23). Moving the Chains at Oak Hill; Detention Center’s Football Team Given a chance to Play Outside as a Way Toward Rehabilitation. *The Washington Post*. Pierre, R.E. (2007, December 5). Violent Youths In D.C. Being Jailed Longer; Agency Chief Addresses Critics Who Link Deaths, Early Release. *The Washington Post*.

gards to gang violence.<sup>85</sup> This new emphasis led to the creation of a gang unit as part of the police department's response to youth crime.<sup>86</sup>

### *Stakeholders' view: Media's portrayal of youth violence and policy implications*

*Summary. The professional stakeholder interviews revealed an acute awareness of how the media covers youth and crime. Stakeholders reported that the media presented a narrow view of youth violence. They thought the media focused on the stories that were easy to tell and did not explore the context of these stories.*

#### **If it bleeds, it leads**

Stakeholders stressed that violent incidents were easy to write about and garnered much interest; as such, they were likely to be covered by the media. Various stakeholders specifically repeated the saying "if it bleeds, it leads." They suggested stories about violence are often full of drama, play upon the public's fear, and are readily available. In particular, stakeholders felt that the general public had a fear of youth crime that the media was willing to exploit.

As found in the media scan, stakeholders cited examples of reporters using odd definitions of youth, such as 16 to 22 years of age, which enabled them to write a story focused on "youth crime." Stakeholders felt that the media described the violent incidents in detail, but did not thoroughly explore the family, community, and policy factors that led to these incidents.

#### **Crime surges**

Furthermore, stakeholders reported that the media stressed "surges in crime" and "new waves of crime," which may refer to a few high-profile incidents or a short-lived increase in a particular crime category. Stakeholders suggested that the media ignored the cyclical nature of crime, and presented a few incidents as the beginning of a new crime wave. Some stakeholders suggested that by the time newspapers reported a "surge" in a particular type of crime, such as robberies, it was likely that the particular spike in crime had already stopped. Stakeholders stressed that a city should expect ebbs and flows in particular offenses and even in the overall level of crime. Greater care was needed to give the public a broader viewpoint. Stakeholders suggested that the media place specific incidents in the context of overall levels of crime and crime trends.

85 Alquist, E. (2005, October 17). Parents must take lead to keep children out of gangs. *San Jose Mercury News*. Kinney, A. (2006, July 12). Report paints poor picture on local crime. *Inside Bay Area*.

86 *Oakland Tribune*. (2006, April 4). County to Raise Pressure on Gangs.

## Exceptions, with caveats

Nevertheless, stakeholders noted several news stories about activities aimed at providing positive opportunities for youth. These stories included the opening of Washington's Court Social Services' drop-in center; innovative programming by Washington's Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS), such as a production of "Shakespeare in the Park" and trips to aid in the Katrina reconstruction efforts; and the opening of San Mateo's Youth Services Center. However, stakeholders cautioned that these issues were covered because they were one-time events (e.g., openings and trips) and that they tended not to focus deeply on the particular issues addressed by these activities (e.g., the need for rehabilitation). It was also likely that the city had made a concerted effort to "sell" these reforms to the public, thereby providing the media with context for their articles.

## Interplay of the media, public, and city response

Stakeholders stressed that the media's reporting of youth violence impacts public perception and policy. Some suggested that the media created "moral panic" around high-profile incidents, demanding public attention and a public response. One Washington stakeholder stated that the *Washington Post* "makes policy" in that city. Indeed, during NCCD's site visit to Washington, the majority of stakeholders discussed, without NCCD's prompting, a series of Colbert King articles targeting DYRS; it was clear that these articles had garnered much attention.

Some stakeholders felt politicians reacted hastily to stories in the media to seem responsive. Instead of crafting comprehensive proposals that targeted the root causes of violence and addressed the long-term needs of the city, policymakers sometimes enact "knee-jerk" policies that enable them to say "we responded." Policies cited by stakeholders as responses to short-term crime issues included some of the most important and punitive policy changes of the past two decades including mandatory minimums, enhanced penalties, and easing restrictions on trying youth as adults for certain crimes.

Stakeholders also worry that the identified issue to be addressed may not need a systematic response. Some stakeholders perceived that the media creates crime waves out of short-lived spikes or out of high-profile incidents; as such, policymakers may be crafting responses to a trend that may not exist by the time the policy is enacted. By responding to specific crime categories, as opposed to the overall needs of the youth, the city might not be using its resources most productively, particularly if by the time policy is enacted, this particular spike in crime has ceased. Stakeholders worry that instead of creating policies and funding priorities based on the ongoing needs of the city, city officials think they must respond to crime waves created or at least exaggerated by the media. The issues covered by the media may not represent the most serious needs in the city.

Some stakeholders felt proposed policies were not only short-sighted, but detrimental to the rehabilitation and overall safety of their communities. For example, some suggested that youth that were incarcerated due to enhanced punishments were not able to take advantage of community-based rehabilitation services that enable them to learn how to live a productive life in the community. Furthermore, stakeholders worry that a



great number of youth will be affected by city policies crafted with a few particular cases in mind. In particular, all youth may be affected by youth curfews (and have system contact they would not otherwise have had), when these policies may have been crafted in response to a few incidents of youth crime.

A few stakeholders also worried that even when media publicity led to effective and needed programming, once the media moved on to cover another issue, the effective programs lost their funding. For example, when the gang situation received a lot of attention in the mid- to late-nineties in San Mateo (particularly in East Palo Alto), the County put a lot of resources into gangs: task force, courts increased awareness, probation intensive supervision unit, more gang members were prosecuted. When attention shifted to other types of crimes during the late 90s, resources shifted and these programs ended. San Mateo stakeholders suggested this led to an increase in gang crime; now that gang crime is receiving more attention again, the gang task force has been revived. This phenomenon promotes wasteful cycles where certain programs are implemented, then lose their funding, and then once the given issue receives attention again, have to be restarted. As such, policymakers that lobby for their preferred policy positions by proclaiming their urgency and ability to tackle the new crime emergency will find it harder to argue for such policies when the perceived emergency no longer exists, even if the policies are arguably necessary. Stakeholders in Washington suggested that their policy leaders, particularly Mayors and Police Chiefs, often justified new expenses and procedures as “emergency” actions; this not only frightens the community, but can make it difficult to enact long-term policy.

Stakeholders suggested that the media’s tendency to use frightening language surrounding all gang and violent activity, and to emphasize new crime waves and trends, made some city leaders, particularly school administrators, hesitant to admit their gang problems. Admitting these problems might lead to unwanted publicity and, in the case of schools, reduced funding; unfortunately, this meant that parents and others were left in the dark about important issues.

### *Impact of public misinformation and fear*

*Summary. Stakeholders suggested that the media’s emphasis on youth crime affected the public’s perception of crime in their communities, and their willingness to support certain policies. Stakeholders felt that the media played on the public’s fears of violence in general, and the fear of violent youth in particular. Stakeholders thought the public, aided by the media’s reporting of crimes, overestimated the frequency of youth violence and accepted the idea that juveniles were responsible for a majority of violent crime.*

In describing noncontextualized crime reporting in 1980, Doris Graber wrote “The public wants to be entertained, primarily, and not educated and prodded into social action.”<sup>87</sup> What makes good reading in a single article can, however, add up to much less than entertainment. As one stakeholder said, “There’s a daily diet of bad news that on some level creeps into one’s world view. Even if you haven’t been a victim, what you perceive makes you feel vulnerable.”

87 Graber, D.A. (1980). *Crime News and the Public*. New York: Praeger.

Several stakeholders in San Mateo reported that their community reacted even when the stories reported were not local; as one stakeholder said, “After news of horrific crimes elsewhere, all of a sudden the police are called every time someone sees two kids walking together.”

Stakeholders were concerned that the general tendency to focus on youth violence, and to focus on particularly vicious crimes and not the background and problems of the youth and opportunities for rehabilitation, made the public generally less willing to fund programs aimed at supporting juvenile justice system-involved youth. As one stakeholder said, “Inaccurate public perception is a problem when people who fear kids won’t vote for taxes to serve kids’ needs. The fear signals the end of the resource stream. They won’t pay a penny in taxes to provide tools worth a pound to the justice system.”

Stakeholders felt that it was easier for the public to understand increased penalties and a “tough” stance against youth than rehabilitation programming and alternatives to incarceration. As one stakeholder said, the public feels that youth just “need a kick in the ass.”

Stakeholders admitted that the public is ill informed about alternatives such as electronic monitoring or home visits during incarceration. The public tends to react negatively to seeing these youth back in the community. Stakeholders felt that the media’s coverage did not help to inform the public of the benefits of alternative sentencing and rehabilitation programming or of the negative effects of long sentences for youth. The public tended to support harsh responses to youth.

### *What can be done to improve media coverage and public understanding?*

#### **Educate the media**

Various stakeholders stressed that the media could be receptive to a more comprehensive view of youth crime and violence; they suggested it was not productive to assume that the media would always spotlight the worst cases of violent crime and demand punitive reforms. These stakeholders suggested teaching those in the media about issues such as rehabilitation. If reporters approach particular stories with an existing understanding of the issues that impact youth violence, it will be easier for them to present a more complex view of youth violence, despite their deadlines.

Further, a few stakeholders suggested it was important to think of the potential “story” when talking with reporters. For example, San Mateo stakeholders realized that the opening of the Youth Services Center, which stressed youth development, presented a perfect opportunity to inform the media and discuss the importance of rehabilitation. Stakeholders also pointed out that if they shared interesting or unique stories with the media that highlighted positive programming that worked to rehabilitate youth in the juvenile justice system, the media was willing to cover these stories.

## Educate the public: “Wow! They’re just kids!”

Stakeholders in the cities did not resign themselves to the descriptions of youth presented by the media, nor to the policy prescriptions demanded by the media. They described their efforts to impact media narratives and to directly impact public opinion. A few high-level stakeholders described situations in which they refused to change policies they believed in despite media pressure to do so. Sometimes, they just had to accept a negative response by the media to their decisions. For instance, the Washington Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services (DYRS) had been the subject of considerable negative press. However, DYRS stakeholders stated that DYRS leaders would not change course just because of criticism—they had laid out clear goals and planned to stick with them. They did try to work closely with vocal opponents and the media to change their impressions of DYRS, and the Mayor supported their efforts. As one Washington stakeholder said, “We need to stand up to the media and say we will not lock kids up unless it’s necessary.”

Many stakeholders also emphasized their efforts to shape public opinion by engaging directly with community members. They did not always have to rely on the media to get information out to the public. Stakeholders described holding community meetings often to listen to the concerns of the public and to explain to the public any new law enforcement initiative they were planning on implementing. The cities had programs designed to educate the public regarding gangs, parenting, and other key issues. Further, several stakeholders described the impact on community members of volunteering and working directly with youth involved in the juvenile justice system. Various stakeholders in San Mateo described the effect that volunteering at the new Youth Services Center, which houses the juvenile court, juvenile hall, and a girls’ camp, among other things, had upon the opinion of the volunteers. One stakeholder described the reaction of volunteers in the Youth Services Center as: “Wow! They’re just kids!”

Stakeholders suggested that the public was willing to learn about these issues and could be open to comprehensive approaches to youth violence. These stakeholders believe that once the community members understand the issues faced by these youth, and come into contact with them, they will be supportive of policies that promote rehabilitation and enhanced services. A few stakeholders suggested that when the community was aware of the issues in their city, they were willing to fund necessary programs.

## Better data

Some stakeholders admitted that the limited data available did not make it easy for the media to place incidents in the context of larger crime in the city. As one stakeholder said, “Part of the issue with media portrayal, though, is that agencies and city as a whole aren’t coordinated enough to get a true picture of what’s going on with juvenile justice; getting data takes a lot of transparency.”

Stakeholders stressed that better data could improve media coverage. Stakeholders suggested that if the media had access to reliable data on criminal trends as well as the costs and effectiveness of different approaches to youth violence, they would depend less on emotional arguments. A few stakeholders in Dallas and Washington, where the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (which promotes data collection

and tracking) had been implemented, suggested that this Initiative was already impacting the conversations among stakeholders and the media's ability to gather adequate data.

Unfortunately, there are often lengthy lag periods between the occurrence of crime, the collection of data by government agencies, and the public release of that data in a usable form, including news agencies and researchers. New data systems available to law enforcement provide the police with rapid updates on individual crimes and evolving crime trends, but this data is not generally available to the public.

For city law enforcement, quick access to useful data is of course a powerful tool in both responding to crime and making ongoing adjustments in resource allocation. In terms of policymaking, such data needs to be put in the context of longer term trends and other related factors in order to assist in long-term planning, including issues beyond those specifically related to law enforcement, such as prevention and early intervention programming.

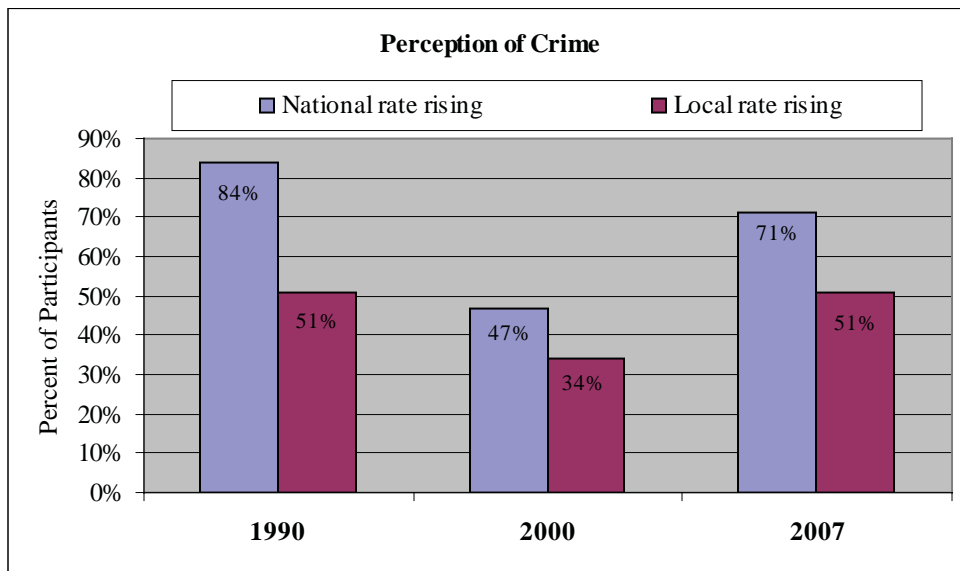
## *The Data: Trends In Crime, Arrests, and Public Attitudes*

*Summary. Before describing specific crime trends in the three cities, this section describes findings from national polls of public attitudes about various issues related to crime. The media's impact on public perception is perhaps evident in some misconceptions that are reported, such as the general belief that crime rates increase each year. On the other hand, attitudes toward rehabilitation and solving crime problems show the public has a better understanding of the issues and a less severe attitude toward crime than is often assumed.*

### *Public perception of crime*

National polls indicate that the media's crime coverage has an impact. According to a Gallup poll reported by the US Department of Justice, 71% of adults 18 years or older thought there was more crime in the US in 2007 than in 2006. This figure is somewhat lower than those polled each year in the late 1980s and early 1990s when over 80% perceived a rise in crime each year. In the early 2000s, less than 50% perceived a rise in crime.

Interestingly, the public does not necessarily perceive a rising crime problem locally even when they do perceive a national increase. Fifty-one percent felt annual crime was rising in their area in 2007, around 30% in the early 2000s, and around 50% in the early 1990s.



What is perhaps most interesting about these data is that each year a large percentage of people in the US feel there is more crime than the year before, whether or not actual crime rates show that trend. Whether in terms of counts or rates, whether in terms of personal experience of crime or of arrests, crime figures do not rise every year, as will be shown in the next section. Yet, the public generally feels crime is increasing each year.

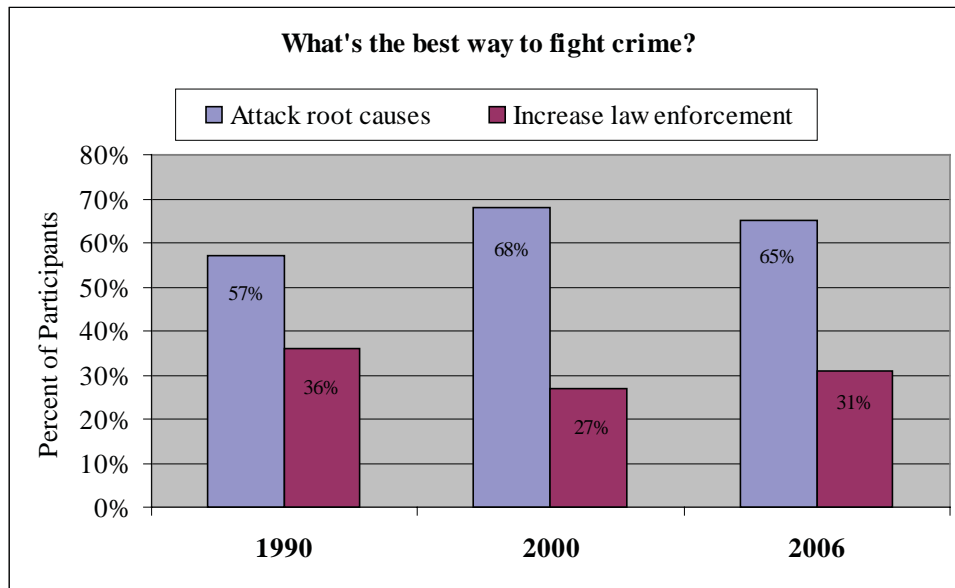
### Crime as a national issue.

According to The Gallup Poll,<sup>88</sup> “Americans currently rate crime as a relatively low-priority issue. In January 2007, only 36% rated it as an extremely important government priority, compared with 62% for the situation in Iraq and 55% for terrorism. Crime has not registered high on Gallup’s most important problem list since 2002. During the mid-1990s it was the top concern, and rated at or near the top of the list from 1994-2000. Crime tends to rate much more highly as a national problem in the eyes of Americans when the international stage is calm and the economy is in good shape. Otherwise, those concerns tend to overshadow crime.”

### *Public attitudes toward rehabilitation of delinquent youth*

Nationally representative polls performed by various organizations provide information about how the public feels about crime and youth. In 2006, 65% of respondents felt that attacking social problems was the best way to reduce crime, whereas 31% felt more law enforcement would be more effective. In 2000, the balance was similar. Ten years earlier, in 1990, attacking social problems was still favored, though to a lesser extent.

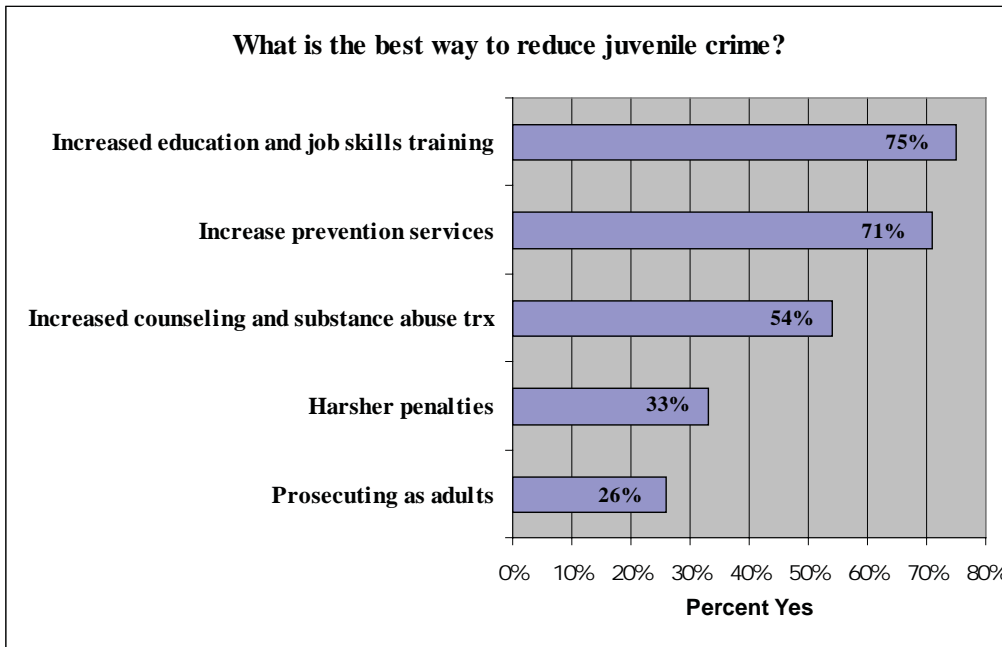
88 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1603/Crime.aspx>



In 2006, the groups that most favored addressing root causes were the youngest respondents, 18 to 29 years old, and urban respondents (both 71%). Whites favored more law enforcement more often than non-Whites (34% vs. 14%). Non-whites favored addressing social issues more often than Whites (77% vs. 61%).

According to the results of a 2007 Zogby/NCCD poll,<sup>89</sup> the public was clearly concerned about youth crime, felt that young people should be held accountable for misconduct, and had limited confidence in the effectiveness of the juvenile system. However, they also believed that the most effective ways to reduce youth crime were to increase prevention efforts for at-risk youth and, for youth already involved in the system, to increase services, including education, occupational training, counseling and substance abuse treatment.

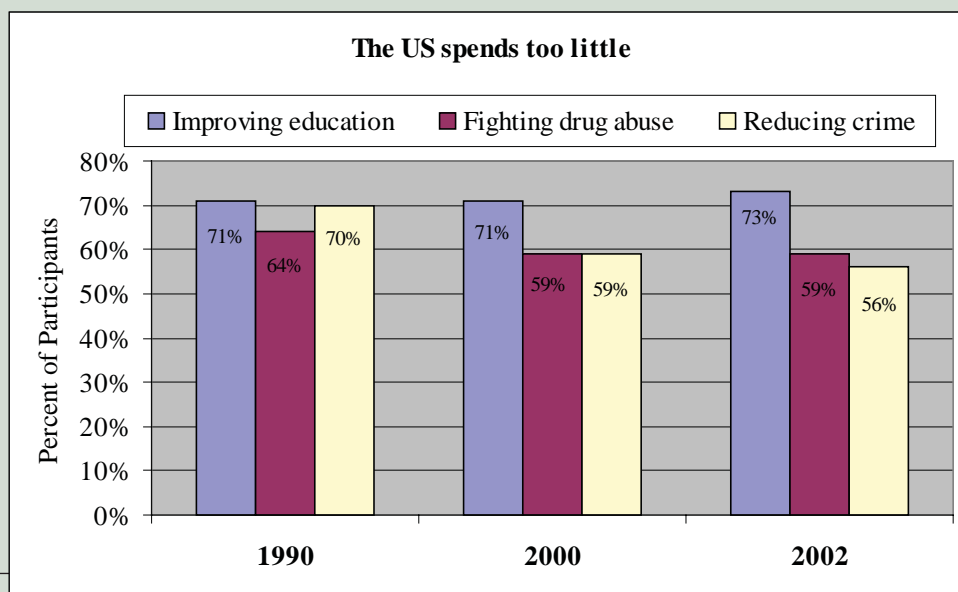
89 NCCD (2006, April). Attitudes of US Voters toward Prisoner Rehabilitation and Reentry Policies, [http://www.nccd-crc.org/nccd/pubs/zogby\\_feb07.pdf](http://www.nccd-crc.org/nccd/pubs/zogby_feb07.pdf)



\*1,043 nationally representative adults were asked if the listed measures are “highly effective, somewhat effective, or ineffective” in reducing youth crime. The percentage of respondents indicating “highly effective” is charted. Margin of error is ±3.1%.

### The Public Pocketbook

In the NCCD poll, participants were willing to spend more taxpayer money on efforts to reduce crime. The majority of participants in the Sourcebook poll also felt the US spent too little on crime reduction, although fewer people felt so recently than in 1990, when crime was of generally higher priority.



### *Accuracy of media representation of data*

It is NCCD's impression that the media reports accurate statistics, but it does not consistently place the statistics in the context of long-term trends and it too often uses the statistics to reach erroneous conclusions. Further, the media's decisions regarding what statistics to report and which ones to omit further muddles the line between ethical and unethical. "The cumulative choices of what is included in the news—or not included—presents the public with a false picture of higher frequency and severity of crime than is actually the case."<sup>90</sup>

One area which may reach the threshold of inaccurate is describing "youths" as older than 18, sometimes as old as 25. There are some researchers that make the same mistake, and, in fact, the juvenile justice system sometimes maintains jurisdiction over wards as old as 25, so perhaps newspapers feel their overly broad definition of "youth" is justified. Yet, the standard as defined by, for instance, the Supreme Court in its ruling concerning the death penalty and the US Congress in its JJCPA legislation, not to mention work in other fields, establishes 18 as an important milestone toward full culpability for one's actions and, therefore, the threshold age between juvenile and adult status. Further, legislative "tough on crime" trends indicate not a raising but a lowering of this threshold age, to allow younger children to be processed as adults. Considering the media's role in building public support for such legislation, it is misleading to provide data for youth well *over* 18 as an argument for transferring youth to adult court.

### *Crime Trend Data*

This section will provide actual crime trend data to illuminate three alarming aspects of media crime coverage: 1) emphasis of crime increases and de-emphasis of drops, 2) overemphasis on youth involvement in crime, and 3) emphasis on particular types of crime, regardless of overall crime trends.

#### **Washington**

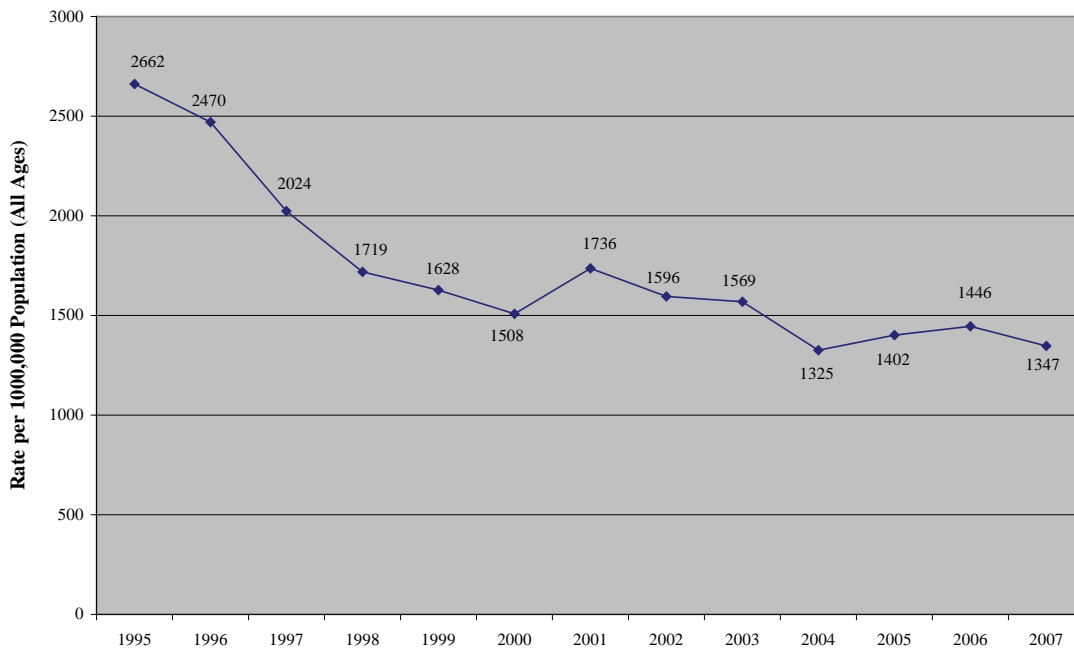
**Reported violent crime in Washington.** Despite short-term increases in 2000-2001, and two years of increases in 2004-2006, the rate of reported violent crime for all ages dropped by 50% between 1995 and 2007.<sup>91</sup>

90 Dorfman, L, and Schiraldi, V, 2001.

91 FBI, *Crime in the US, 2007*. Accessed at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2007/index.html>.



## Washington Violent Crime Rate per 100,000 Population, 1995-2007



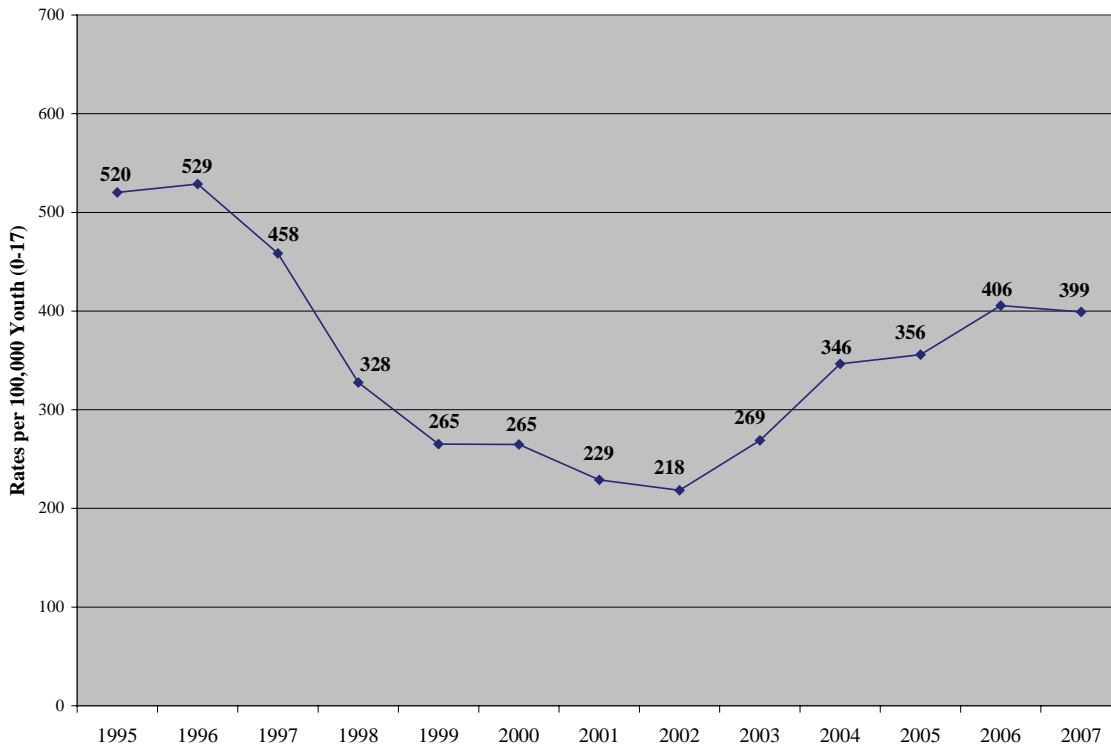
**Washington juvenile arrests.** The rate of juvenile arrests for violent offenses in Washington fell 60% between 1996 and 2002 and then rose for four years before leveling off at about 25% lower than the 1996 rate.<sup>92</sup>

The youth percentage of total arrests was about 8% in 1995, then fell to about 5% in 1997, and after a period of slight decrease it has been slowly rising since 2000. In 2006, juvenile arrests made up 6.1% of total arrests. These figures are well below the youth proportion of the total population, which has remained around 20% in this period.

Washington “crime emergencies” in the 2000s noted spikes in robbery and Unauthorized Use of Vehicle (UUV) offenses. Rates of juvenile arrests for UUVs had a one-year rise 2002-2003 followed by a three-year decline, with another rise in 2006-2007. Rates of youth arrests for robbery/carjacking, reported in combination by the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD), rose consistently from 2001 to 2006 and then dropped slightly.

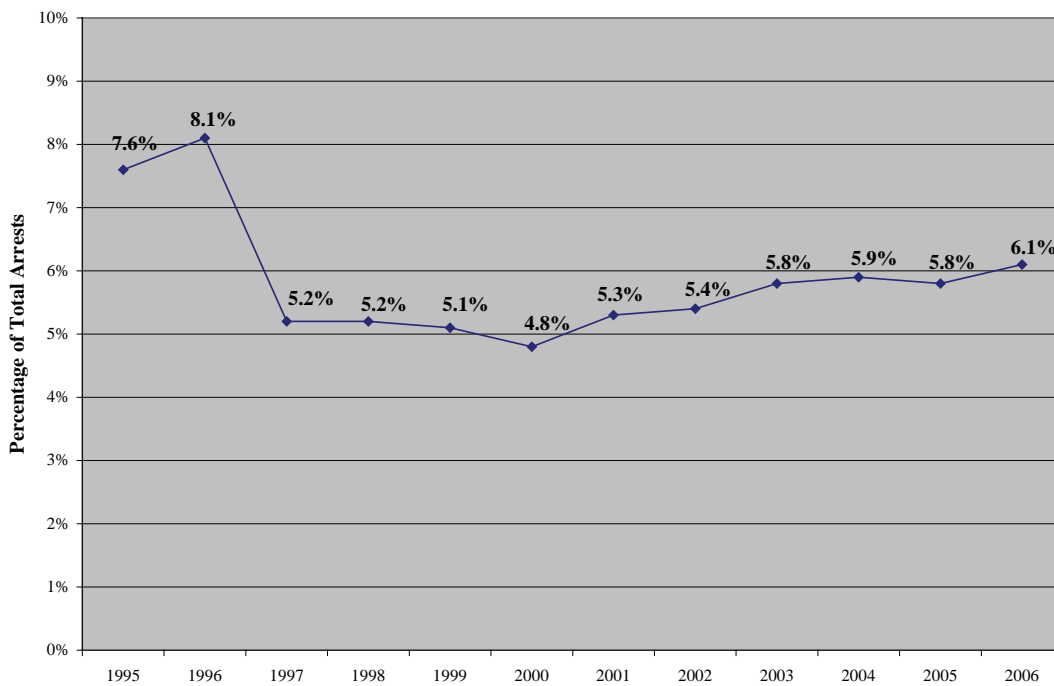
92 Washington arrest data provided by the Washington DC Metropolitan Police Department, 2008.

Washington Rates of Juvenile Violent Arrests, 1995 to 2007

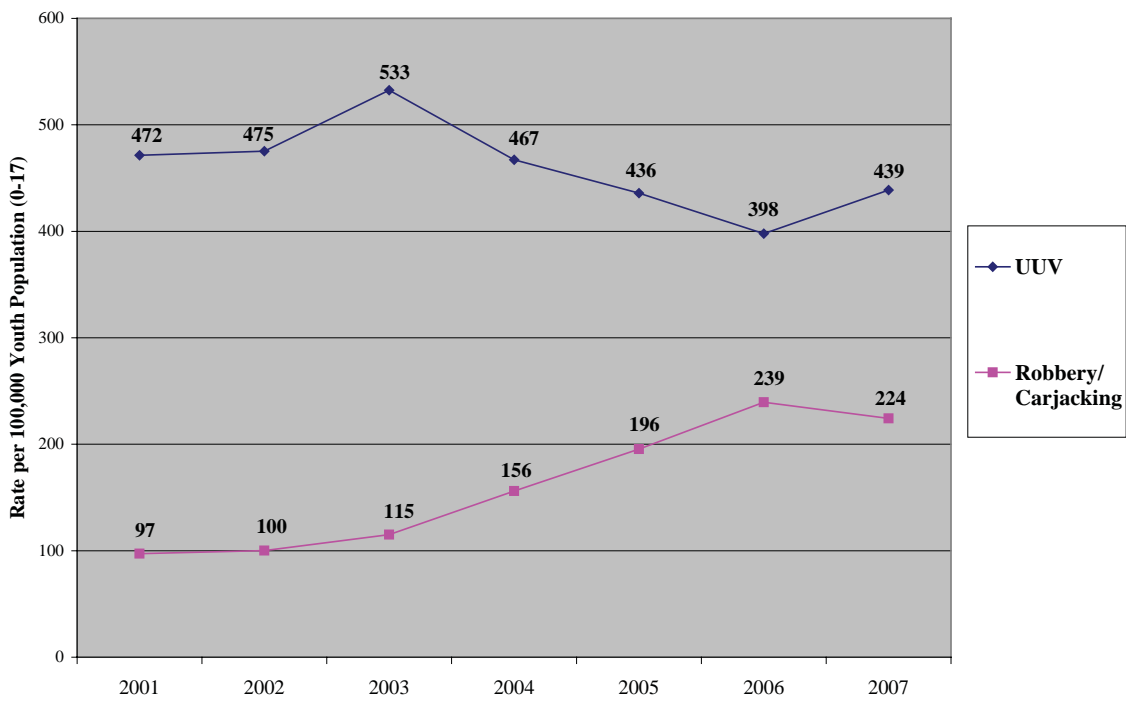


Note: Violent arrests include homicide/manslaughter, aggravated assault, rape/sexual abuse, and robbery/carjacking. 2007 rates estimated from MPD data.

Washington Juvenile Arrests as Percentage of Total Arrests, 1995 to 2006



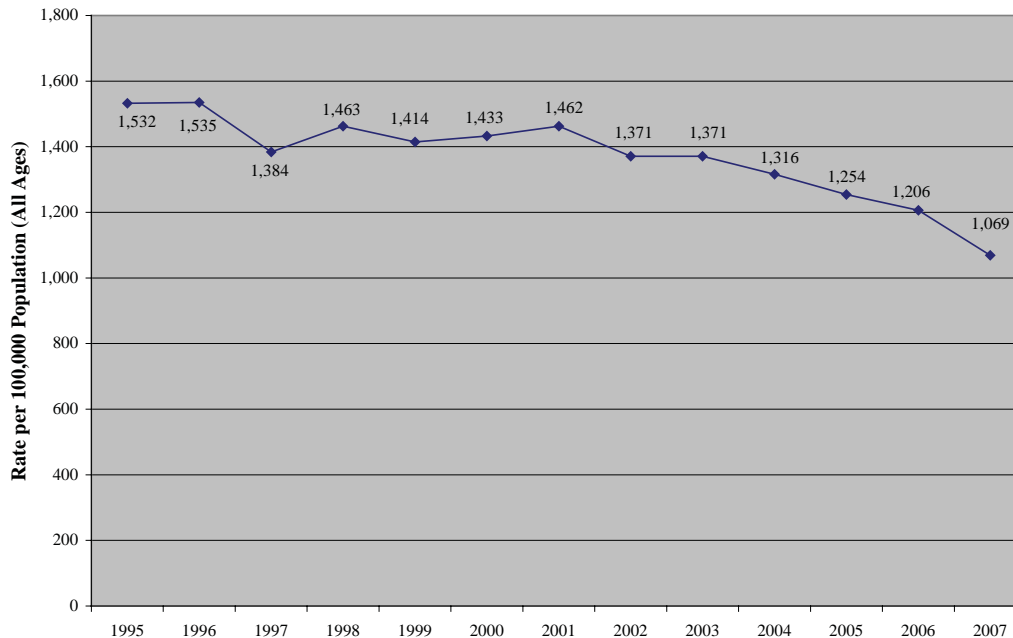
Washington Juvenile Arrest Rates for Unauthorized Use of Vehicle and Robbery, 2001 to 2007



## Dallas

**Dallas reported violent crime.** Despite small short-term increases from 1997 to 1998 and from 1999 to 2001, Dallas reported that violent crime rates dropped 30% between 1995 and 2007.<sup>93</sup>

Dallas Violent Crime Rate per 100,000 Population, 1995-2007



**Dallas county juvenile arrests.** Rates of juvenile arrests for violent crime have dropped every year in Dallas County since 1994, ending 62% lower.<sup>94</sup> (2006 rates were not listed, but the referral rates fell slightly from 2005 to 2006.<sup>95</sup>)

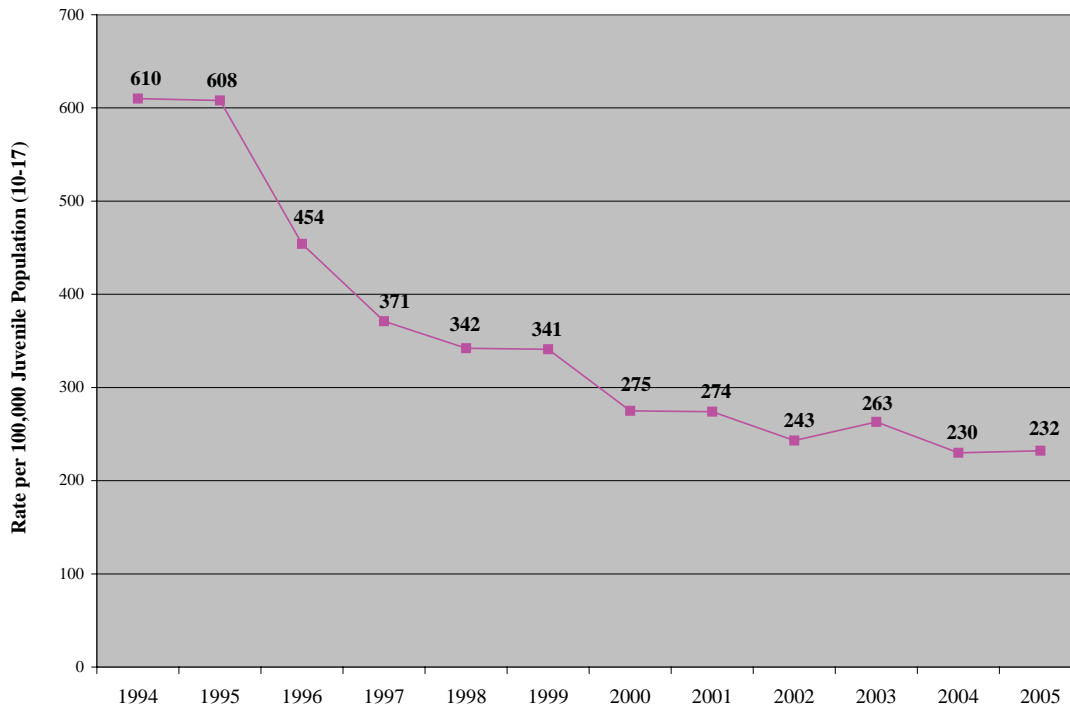
Despite occasional one-year increases, the juvenile percentage of total arrests in Dallas County fell from 25% in 1994 to 16% in 2005, ending just 2 percentage points above the proportion of youth in the total population.

93 FBI, *Crime in the US, 2007*. Accessed at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2007/index.html>.

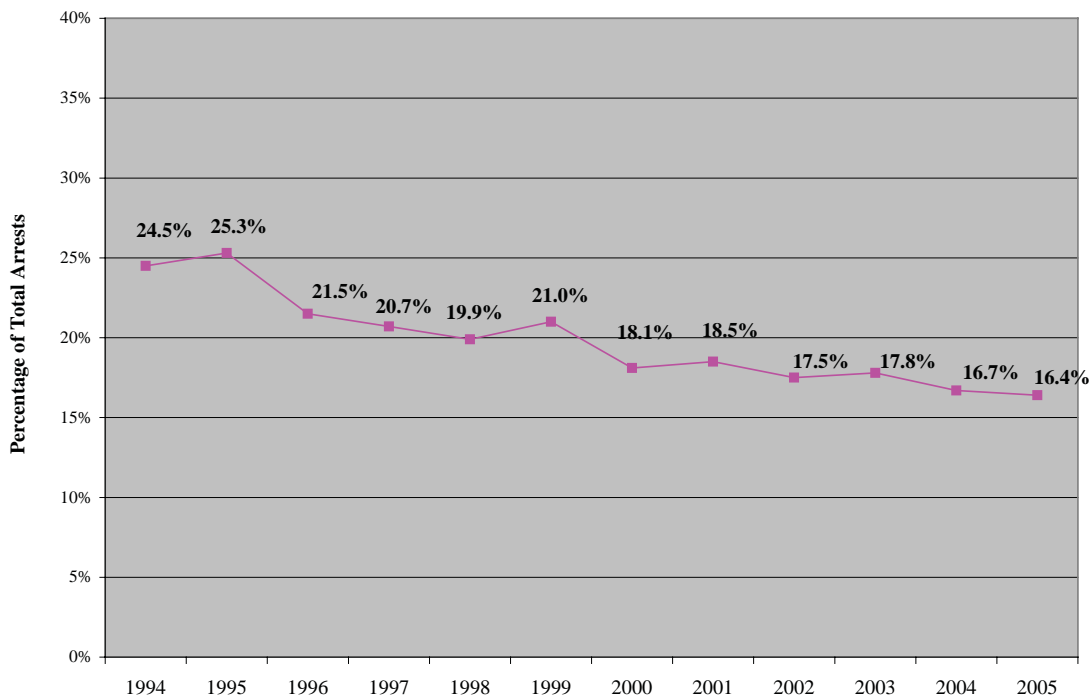
94 Easy Access to FBI Arrest Statistics. Accessed at <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/ojstatbb/ezaucr/>.

95 Data provided to the Annie E. Casey Foundation by Dallas County Juvenile Department, 2007.

Dallas County Juvenile Arrest Rate for Violent Offenses, 1994 to 2005



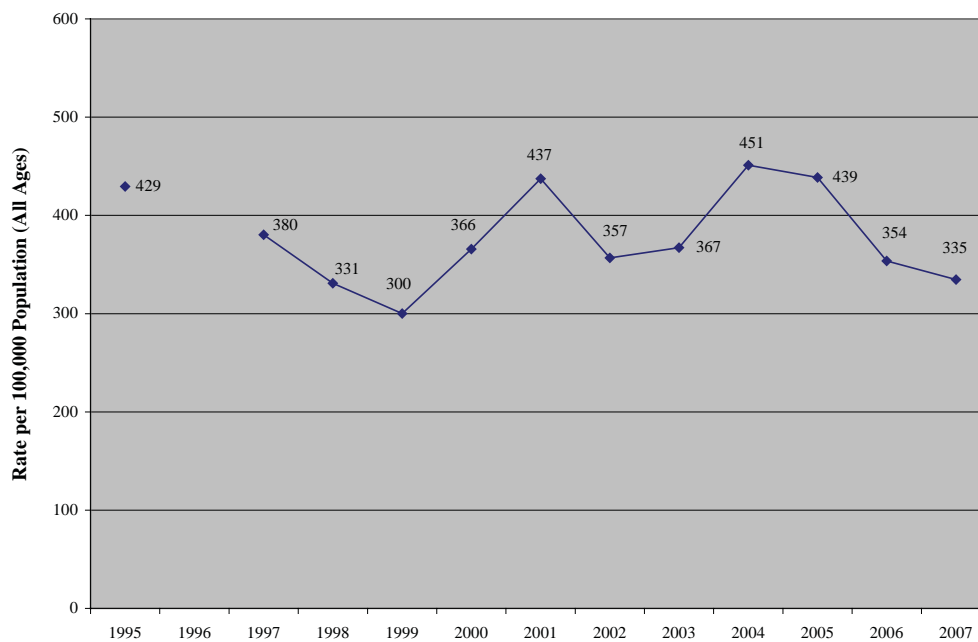
Dallas County Juvenile Arrests as Percentage of Total Arrests, 1994 to 2005



## San Mateo

**San Mateo reported violent crime.** Despite a substantial two-year increase from 1999 to 2002 and another from 2003 to 2004, San Mateo reported violent crime rates ended 22% lower in 2007 compared to 1995. Property crime rates fluctuated, but also ended lower.<sup>96</sup>

City of San Mateo Violent Crime Rate per 100,000 Population, 1995-2007



\*1996 not available.

**San Mateo juvenile arrests.** Rates of felony juvenile arrests have fluctuated in San Mateo.<sup>97</sup> They had a one-year increase in 1999, followed by a three-year drop, followed by a three-year rise. Rates in 2006 were 12% lower than in 1999, the earliest data were available. (The number of violent juvenile arrests is low in San Mateo compared to the other two cities, so all felony arrests were used here. In addition to violent crimes, felonies include burglary, theft, motor vehicle theft, and drug offenses.)

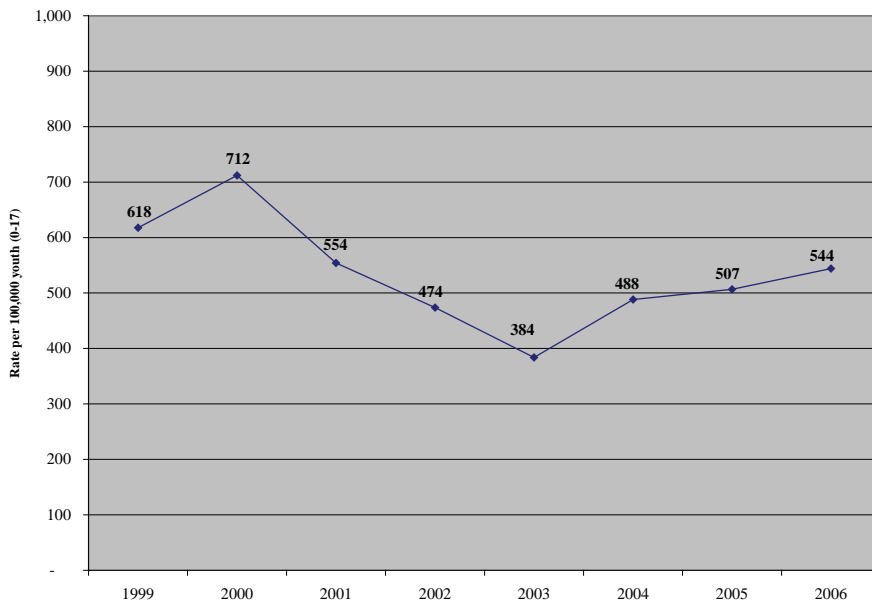
The juvenile percentage of total arrests in the City of San Mateo rose from 11% in 1999 to 15% in 2002 and then consistently dropped, falling to under 11% in 2006. (The county-wide proportion of juvenile arrests was 24% in 1994 and 14% in 1995.) The percentage of the population under the age of 18 has re-

96 FBI, *Crime in the US, 2007*. Accessed at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2007/index.html>.

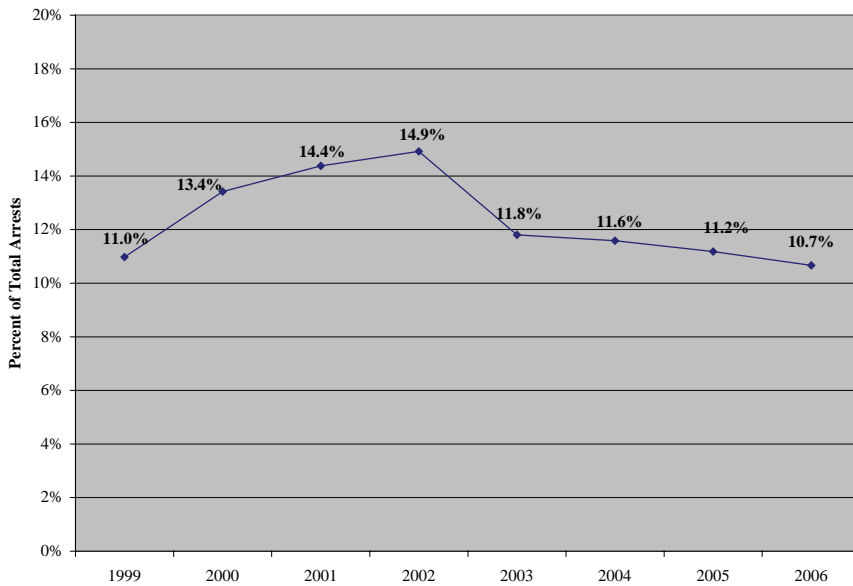
97 California Office of the Attorney General, *California Criminal Justice Profiles, 1999-2006*. Accessed at <http://ag.ca.gov/cjsc/publications/profiles/pub.php>.

mained at approximately 20% during that period. The youth proportion of arrests dropped below the youth proportion of the total population.

City of San Mateo Felony Arrest Rate per 100,000 Population, 1999-2006



City of San Mateo Juvenile Arrests as Percentage of Total Arrests



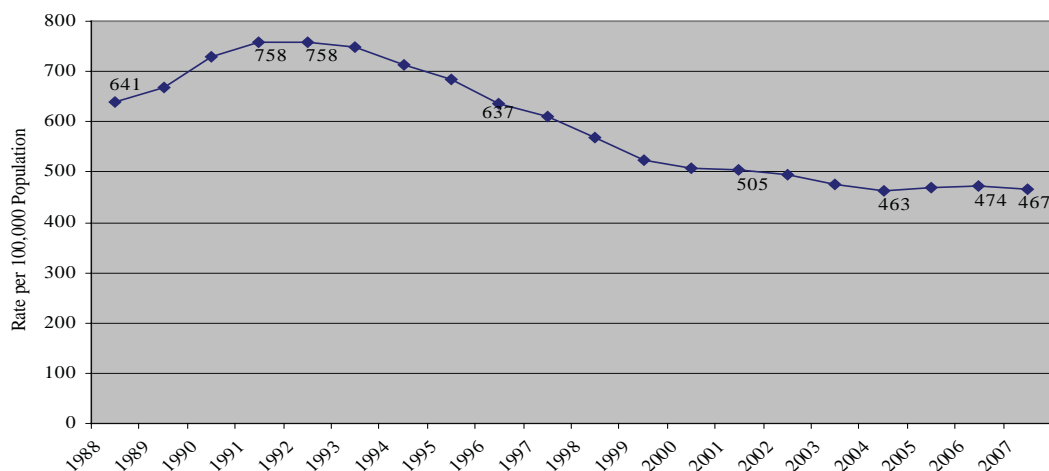
## National and regional data

Media coverage is not limited to stories within city or county limits. Public perception of youth and crime is influenced also by what happens and what is covered in neighboring communities and nationally. It is interesting, therefore, to look at reported crime for the broader area. This final data section shows trends in reported violent crime for the surrounding counties of each of the three cities and reported crime and arrests at the national level.

### National

Twenty-year trends in reported crime rates nationwide show a consistent decline leading up to 2007.<sup>98</sup> Despite a three-year increase from 1988 to 1991, violent crime rates have dropped overall during the previous 2-, 5-, 10-, and 20-year periods. Rates in 2007 were 27% below those in 1988 and, again, 27% below 1996. A rise in the violent crime index from 2004 to 2006, sparked by increased rates of robbery, reversed in 2007. Property crime rates have followed a similar pattern, with increases up to 1991, but a drop every other year since then, except for a one-year rise from 2000 to 2001. The 2007 property crime rate was a third less than the high in 1991.

#### National Rate of Violent Crime Reported to Police, 1988-2007



Looking city-by-city across the US, nearly three-quarters of city residents continue to experience decreasing or stable violent crime rates.<sup>99</sup> Even when accounting for cities reporting increases, violent crime rates are far lower than they were in the early 1990s.

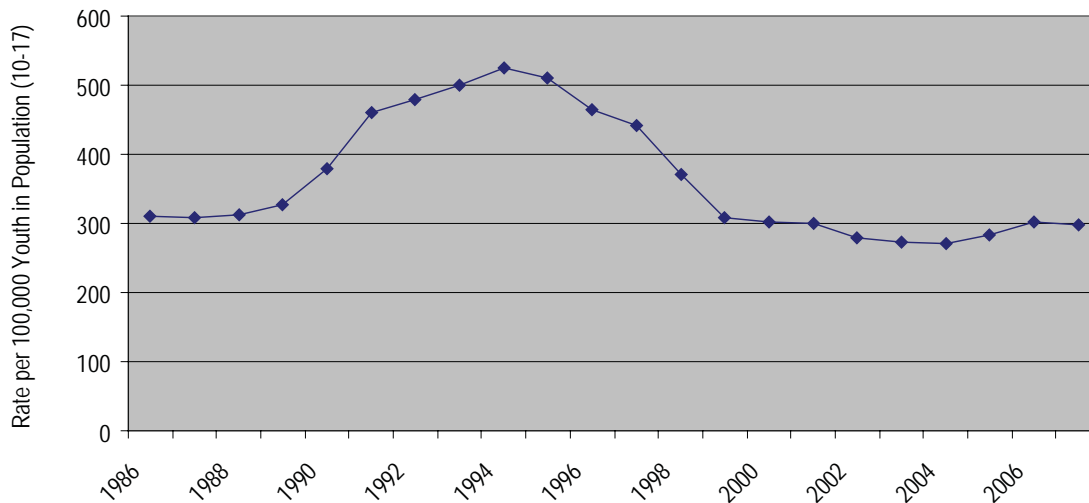
98 FBI, *Crime in the US, 2007*. Accessed at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2007/index.html>.

99 Butts, JA (2008). *Violent Crime in 100 US Cities*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.



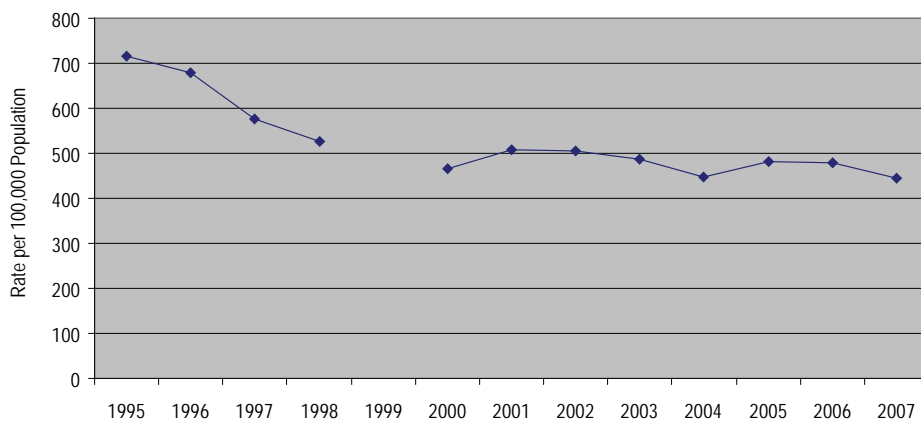
**National arrests.** National juvenile arrests for violent offenses fell each year from 1994 to 2004, at which point they had a two-year rise that has again turned downward in 2007.<sup>100</sup> Rates each year of the 2000s were at least 40% below 1994 rates and are lower than the 1987 rates.

#### Rates of Juvenile Arrests, 1986-2006



**Washington regional.** In the Washington MSA,<sup>101</sup> the violent crime rate in 2007 was less than two-thirds of what it was in 1995. Besides one-year increases in 2001 and 2004, the rate fell each year. (Property crime rates dropped similarly, though with a somewhat larger dip in 2000 that corrected by 2002.)

#### Washington Metro Area Violent Crime Rate, 1995-2006

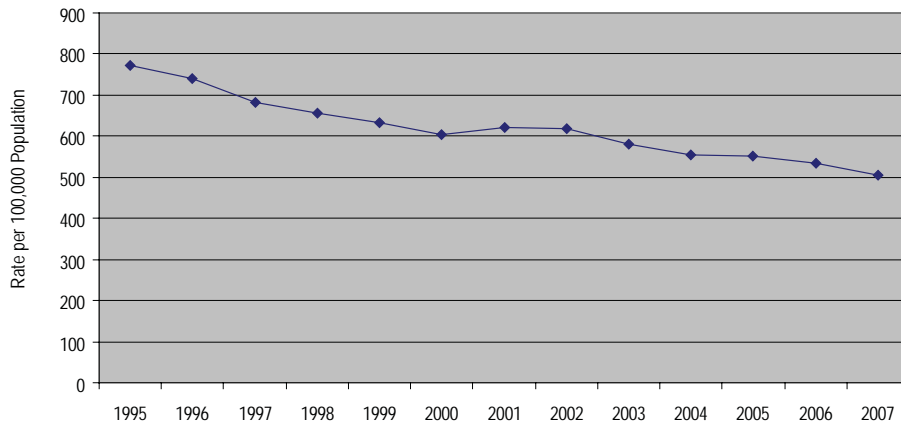


<sup>100</sup> FBI, *Crime in the US, 2007*. Accessed at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2007/index.html>.

<sup>101</sup> The Washington MSA includes the District of Columbia, and the following counties: Calvert, Charles, Frederick, Montgomery, and Prince Georges in Maryland; Alexandria, Fairfax, Falls Church, Fredericksburg, Manassas, Manassas Park Cities, Arlington, Clarke, Culpepper, Fairfax, Fauquier, King George, Loudoun, Prince William, Spotsylvania, Stafford, and Warren in Virginia; and Berkeley and Jefferson in West Virginia. Source: FBI, *Crime in the US, 2007*. Accessed at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2007/index.html>.

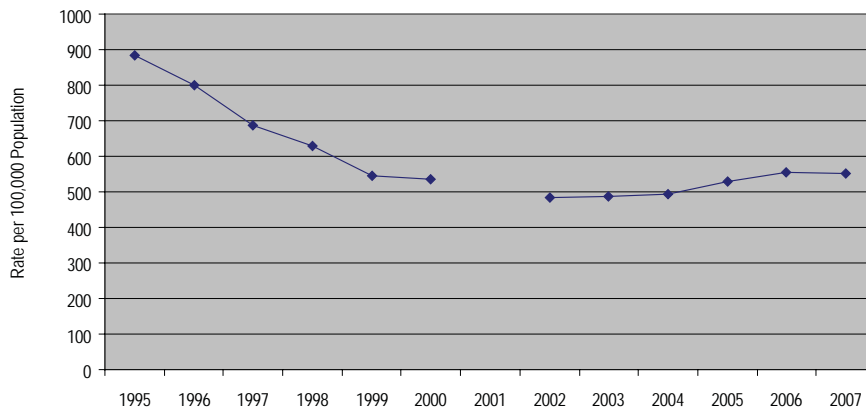
**Dallas regional.** In the Dallas MSA,<sup>102</sup> the violent crime rate in 2007 was two-thirds that of 1995. The violent crime rate was flat or dropping slowly but consistently throughout this period, with a slight increase in 2001 that corrected by 2003. (After five years of decline, the property crime rate rose in 2001 and 2002, only to decline again; 2007 levels were three-quarters those of 1995.)

#### Dallas Metro Area Violent Crime Rate, 1995-2006



**San Mateo regional.** The 2007 San Mateo MSA<sup>103</sup> violent crime rate was just under two-thirds the rate in 1995. After falling since 1995 to a low of 483 in 2002, it gradually rose to 555 in 2006, then dropped slightly in 2007. (The property crime rate followed a similar pattern; in 2006 it was three-fourths the 1995 rate. After dropping to lows around 3,300 in the early 2000s, it fluctuated around 3,600 from 2003 to 2006 and then dropped to 3,356 in 2007.)

#### San Mateo SF Metro Area Violent Crime Rate, 1995-2006



102 The Dallas MSA includes Collin, Dallas, Denton, Ellis, Henderson, Hunt, Kaufman, Rockwall. Source: FBI, *Crime in the US, 2007*. Accessed at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2007/index.html>.

103 San Francisco/San Mateo MSA includes Marin, San Francisco, and San Mateo counties. Source: FBI, *Crime in the US, 2007*. Accessed at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2007/index.html>.

## *Professional Stakeholders and Youth Interviews*

This report now turns to the interviews with committed youth. The findings in the interviews are interspersed with related comments of juvenile justice professionals, referred to as the stakeholders.

Although not necessarily daily newspaper readers, the youth interviewed were generally aware of how they were perceived by those around them, peers and adults. They were not aware of crime statistics, other than what they observe. They were aware of their home and community environments, they were aware of the downsides to their behavior, they were, largely, in touch with themselves and their emotions. Their words described a mix of being active participants in their own lives and being caught up in dynamics beyond their control. They knew that police and teachers and parents needed to respond to bad behavior and did not seem to hold grudges, but they also felt that until someone showed them real alternatives, they would have trouble permanently turning their lives around.

### *Home life*

*Summary. The 24 youth interviewed described chaotic home lives with substance-abusing, violent, or absent parents; multiple residence changes; or family members in trouble with the law. Still, many emphasized that their parents did their best to provide for them. The 32 stakeholders stressed factors that compromise successful parenting, including parental drug use, lack of awareness of children's lives, and lack of time to discipline and support children due to work hours or imprisonment. Still, the stakeholders felt many parents and guardians seemed to be struggling to create a positive home life.*

### **Poverty, drugs, upheaval, loss**

Many of these youth lived in poverty and some spent many years without reliable shelter, moving often and sometimes being homeless. Several stakeholders mentioned youth whose parents asked the court to assign probation instead of placement because their child's (legitimate) jobs helped support the family. One youth said an adult in his home (it was unclear who) sold drugs in order to help pay the bills; his sister was eventually arrested on a drug charge. Several youth mentioned moving multiple times; one estimated ten moves by the time she was fifteen, another five, and another said he had moved three times in the past five years, after his father had gone to prison. In all, ten of the youth mentioned moving at least three times. Some of the young people had also faced the murder or suicide of family members and siblings.

*Youth described a more nuanced home environment than the stark negative picture presented by the stakeholders. Taken together, the interviews illuminated how home and family experiences helped to lead youth toward delinquency.*

Many of these youth lived with both parents at home, but it was also common for them to live with one birth parent and usually a stepparent or grandparent. Several had at least one parent that they “don’t really know very well” because they had been mostly absent from their lives. Several youth had one or both parents in prison at the time of the interview; 14 reported that either a parent or sibling had been incarcerated at some time. Absent parents were often described as nice or fun, with the caveat that the youth didn’t know them very well since they weren’t around often. Youth were typically ambivalent about these absent parents, describing both liking them and wishing they were closer *and* feeling anger towards them. A couple youth lived with grandparents or other relatives. Some youth had been in the foster care system.

The youth told stories of parents and guardians who abused drugs, fought mental health issues, suffered from serious illnesses, and were violent in the home. One youth said her father was in prison (“he was a big drug dealer; sold crack and guns”), her mother was in jail, and her guardian/grandmother smoked crack cocaine. A youth serving time for a violent offense described his father in straightforward terms—“cheating, stealing, doing drugs”—and said he loved his mom, but that she often “punches” him. In all, 14 youth discussed being disciplined physically, sometimes in fairly violent ways.

Stakeholders were very concerned about violence in the home and substance abuse among parents. Like the youth, stakeholders emphasized parental drug abuse as a key problem. They felt that heavy drug use was commonly linked to unhealthy home environments and contributed to the breakup of families and the involvement of parents in the prison system. Also, stakeholders noted that many of the young people currently in the juvenile justice system were born around the time of the crack epidemic. In addition to the impact on family composition and parental quality, stakeholders worried that prenatal drug use had affected the children’s physiological development. (One youth said she had been born prematurely and that her mother had used drugs during pregnancy.)

### **Complicated relationships with parents and family**

Most of these youth described their early childhood as happy, at least until their middle school years. Most of them described having a good, if complicated, relationship with at least one parent or guardian. One youth, a gang member adjudicated for a fight with her mother, said she missed home and appreciated her mother because “She never gives up on me.”

About half of these youth stressed that their parents or guardians supported them, worried about them, and worked hard to ensure their safety and success. These youth described how their parents sought out schools far away with better reputations, moved to safer neighborhoods, and tried different parental techniques, amongst other things. Despite stakeholders' concerns about the parents and families of the youth, they, too, reported that some parents tried to obtain resources for their children; unfortunately, these resources were often unavailable. Also, while parents may be trying to provide for their kids, they often worked long hours and were not able to provide proper supervision.

Youth may receive support and positive encouragement from one parent, but have a problematic relationship with the other.

**A difficult job.** Several of the young people suggested that their parents and guardians could not control them. Youth spoke of simply leaving the home if the parent did not give permission for them to do something; one youth reported leaving the home for months at a time because he did not like his parents' rules. One young woman had repeatedly run away from her home. She believed that her mother's passiveness, particularly around the mother's boyfriend, had made it difficult for her to respect her mother; she said, "when I was growing up all I saw was her be pushed over by [her boyfriend]...I was like, well, if he can do it, so can I."

The majority of stakeholders were less sympathetic with the parents than the youth were themselves. They squarely placed the responsibility of youth's negative life choices on their parents and family environment, coupled with community factors; "Whatever we see in kids is because they are reflecting the situation at home and their community." Stakeholders asserted that parents lacked basic parenting skills and did not know how to set limits in the home; as one stakeholder put it, "Parents don't know how to parent."

**Calling the police on your child.** Some of the youth reported that their parents had contacted law enforcement due to the youths' behavior. For example, a parent might call the police because the youth had run away from their family home or from a group home, or a parent might contact a probation officer because the youth was not following the terms of her probation.

Some of the youth felt their parents had betrayed them by contacting law enforcement, while others stressed that their parents did not know what else to do. One youth was sent to juvenile hall because her mother called her probation officer when she broke curfew; her mother did not realize she would be sent to juvenile hall and was very upset. However, the youth believed her mother had done what she felt was best to ensure her daughter's safety.

Stakeholders concurred that some parents resorted to contacting the police and probation to deal with parenting issues. A stakeholder in a police department had responded to calls by parents and guardians for help with parenting tasks such as ensuring that a child attends school. On the other hand, according to stakehold-

ers, some parents considered the justice system a place for only the most dangerous youth and thus did everything they could to keep their children from system contact. The stakeholders described how the public is misinformed and how misinformation hinders their work to help young people.

**Parent/youth/system understanding gap.** According to both the youth and stakeholders, there were three types of apparent gaps in understanding on the part of parents. As mentioned above, parents sometimes called upon police or probation officers to help with traditional parenting tasks. On the other hand, some parents seemed to misunderstand or mistrust the aims of the system. Some parents rejected the system even when it might provide needed services. Further, parents seemed to misunderstand their children and their children's risky behavior.

Youth often mentioned that their parents could not relate to them. This was especially true for those whose parents had immigrated to this country. The youth stressed difficulties communicating with their parents, due to language and cultural issues. “[My mother] looks at us like [she] doesn't really know what to talk to us about...she doesn't even know what to say or nothing cause she's old school from Mexico and we are more wild and stuff.”

Sometimes the gap in understanding was generational or technological. A lack of understanding about computers, cell phones, and the internet leaves parents unable to detect risk signs or to respond to them.

One stakeholder stressed that children of immigrant families may have faced a long separation from their parents during immigration, or may have been sent to the US on their own to live with a relative. Immigrant parents were more often working very long hours. Further, stakeholders stressed that immigrant adults may be more suspicious of the justice system. Some of these immigrant parents understood the system the least. They could not effectively advocate for their system-involved children or make the best use of its services.

Stakeholders spoke of parents who failed to notice obvious signs that their kids were involved in risk behavior, from personal issues like self-mutilation (cutting) to drug use to promiscuity to gang activity. Even when presented with evidence by authorities, some parents had a “not my child” mentality. One stakeholder said “Parents may think teenagers are all bad, but it's different when it comes to their own kid. *My kid is good.*” Parents would resist residential placement because they did not want their child to be living with “those” teenagers. This sometimes prevented the child from receiving appropriate services, although judges can sign releases for placement or services when parents refuse. Stakeholders stressed that success in probation and programming is even more difficult for the youth without the support and agreement of family.

**Influences and expectations; intergenerational lifestyles.** Several youth mentioned that, since their parents were often working long hours or incarcerated and had very limited resources, they were left to the care of older siblings and relatives.

Stakeholders were very concerned with how siblings involved in negative behavior influenced the youth's behavior. Five of the youth reported that their older siblings or cousins introduced them to criminal behavior.

Some of the youth described looking up to their older siblings or cousins, and felt that these older youth had greater influence on them than their own parents. Unfortunately, these older relatives or siblings, themselves unsupervised, often did not engage in positive behavior and undermined parental advice. One youth was trying to match his brother's rough reputation; the brother was serving a long state prison sentence.

“When I was growing up I didn't really have my dad around, he was in prison. So my brother was basically like a dad when my dad was locked up. My mom was a single mom, trying to work, take care of us; she wasn't around that much, she was working.”

Several youth reported feeling that their families expected them to engage in risky behavior or crime. For instance one youth said his family had always expected him and his cousin to get into trouble, even though his cousin had ended up going to college.

Stakeholders said that a recent increase in gang behavior among youth was due to some extent to recruitment by their older relatives returning home after 10- or 15-year prison sentences. Youth, especially those whose parents had trouble with the law, recognized the intergenerational cycles in which they were caught. As reported above, many reported system-involved parents and relatives, and some were recruited into criminal life by relatives.

“Ever since I was younger, I always wanted to be like my cousin, a gang member. My mom and my dad tried so hard to keep me away from that but, I don't know, I was being hella defiant, I wouldn't listen to my parents so much. They would tell me I couldn't go out and I would just leave; they had no control over me anymore. My cousin, he knew I wasn't a little kid no more, [he told me] ‘alright if you want to get into it, this stuff, I'm not gonna stop you.’ Then I started getting into gang stuff and from there it went all bad.”

**Family as motivation, for better or for worse.** Some youth were motivated to improve their lives because of the influence of their families; others had been drawn into risky behavior because of family; some had both seemingly contradictory forces at work, as family knowingly or unknowingly facilitated risk behavior and encouraged their children to leave it behind.

About half of the youth discussed their plans to help their families after release from custody. They were eager to begin to remedy the pain they had caused their families. Some of the youth only recognized their parents' support after being incarcerated; one youth said, “Nobody's there for me, not even my homies; my mom's here.”

“I'm not really scared to die or nothing like that but I know the pain and problems I would put my family through would be greater than any other suffering or pain. I hate to see my mom and my dad suffer like that...I know they love me a lot, they care for me so much.”

Several of the youth stressed that they reflected on their actions after realizing the pain they were causing their families. Often, family was the only motivator for change discussed by these youth. Other motivators to turn their lives around included personal development and success, teachers, or their own current or future children. In contrast, they rarely said that services provided by the justice system or schools, or individuals within those systems, had struck a chord with them and motivated them to change.

Some youth expressed the desire to protect their own young siblings or children from the cycle in which they had been caught. One of the two youth interviewed who had children said he hoped to “be a good father. I don’t want to be like my dad...I have a daughter...I don’t know what she’s doing, so basically right now, the truth is, right now I’m locked up: I did the same thing as my dad, basically I’m the same.”

Several of the young people also expressed concern over the example they were setting for their younger siblings; a couple of youth wrote letters to their younger siblings while incarcerated urging them not to follow their path. Still, a few mentioned that their younger siblings seem to be following in their footsteps.

### Difficult life events: “I started acting hella bad.”

At times, youth linked their negative behavior with specific events or trauma they had experienced. They described acting out after the event. A young woman who had been abused by her father said that after the incident, “I started, I dunno...I didn’t care about anything anymore. I was doing drugs and hanging out with kids in gangs and I went to jail. I was doing a lot of drugs and I didn’t care about anybody, nothing.”

And when his cousin and childhood friend was sentenced to 17 years in prison in the same month that another close cousin committed suicide, another youth “flew off the handle,” began acting out and starting fights while in youth camp, leading to a year being added to his sentence. “I lost the two male models that I look up to, I can’t see them no more, I can’t talk to them no more. It still bothers me but I try not to think about it...it was like my two closest siblings. Everybody expected me and my cousin to be hella bad, but the one that killed himself, he graduated from college, he did hella good in school. After he committed suicide I still had two to three months at camp and I started acting hella bad, I started messing up. I had a home pass and I caught a new charge: I tried to hit somebody with a shovel.”

## Neighborhood

*Summary. With unsettled home lives and extensive unsupervised time on their hands, the neighborhood was an influential aspect of these youth’s lives. Most of them described the difficult environments in their communities. Stakeholders reported that the neighborhoods and communities in which youth reside aggravate the situation at home. Both youth and stakeholder interviews stressed youths’ early exposure to gangs, drugs, and violence at a young age. Youth tended to link their criminal behavior to gangs or their desire to earn income, but their motivations were more complex and their alternatives limited.*



## Dangerous neighborhoods—“One-fifty for a .380.”

Youth tended to characterize their communities as poor, chaotic, and violent. Youth described fights in their parks and drug dealers in their streets. A stakeholder said that given the violence in some communities, she believed youths when they claimed to need to carry a gun for protection. Indeed, two youths said they carried weapons for protection due to the violence in their neighborhood. A youth said guns were easy to find on the street, and cheap: “One-fifty for a .380.”

Most of these youth, including some of the most serious offenders, were not involved with gangs. Even those who were not suggested that gangs and crews played a large role in their communities. They felt that such groups could not be simply ignored; they affected safety and social and economic opportunities, and seemed to have a hold of certain neighborhoods.

Youth rarely mentioned positive activities or contacts with adults in their neighborhoods. Stakeholders stressed that the neighborhoods lacked jobs, positive role models, and pro-social opportunities for youth and families, such as mentoring, mental health services, substance abuse treatment, family counseling, and parental training.

## Pathways to risk behavior, gangs and the drug trade: “I joined ‘cause I was down, I grew up to do this.”

**Early exposure and gang culture.** Youth were often exposed to—and made positive associations with—gangs, the drug trade, and violence at a young age. Fifteen of the 24 youth interviewed admitted to heavy alcohol and/or drug use; several drank alcohol and used drugs before age ten. A few joined gangs in fifth and sixth grade. One youth described running errands for the “old heads,” local drug dealers, as a seven year-old. He was impressed by them because they had “clothes, kicks, gold chains, cars” in contrast to the poverty faced by his family and much of his neighborhood. Another youth reported older gang members provided him with clothing as a token of appreciation.

Several youth suggested that they first began to engage in criminal behavior for financial reasons and for the status attached to it. These youth described being bullied and ridiculed for their poverty. They emphasized their eagerness to earn money, even illegally. One youth described the joy he felt the first time he sold drugs; he was able to buy clothes, presents for his mother and sister, and purchase more drugs to sell. He found the drugs in the hallway of his apartment building; since he spent time with the local drug dealers, he knew where and how to sell the drugs. “I love making money,” he said and told tales of renting hotel rooms and throwing parties. He was concerned as to what would happen upon his release, as he thought it would be difficult for him to restrain from selling drugs. Having money and wearing more expensive clothing, these young people felt they could exert more control over their image and life. No other options offered similar financial gains.

**Public image, street cred.** The youth did not seem aware specifically of how the media covered their lives, but they certainly had a sense, from peers, parents, other adults, authorities, and society at large, that they

were being judged for their socioeconomic status, race, behavior, or reputation—for being “bad” or for not being bad enough, depending on who was looking. For instance, many suggested they were ridiculed and bullied if they did not wear the right clothes. They looked up to those in the neighborhood that overtly displayed their wealth even though they knew income was illegal.

It is not unusual, of course, for youth to feel the pressures of self-image and status among their peers. These youth, however, described coping with those normal pressures with those of their home lives and neighborhood environments.

“When I was a kid, I was lower class, the type that didn’t have stuff. As soon as I started growing up, I started having my own money, you know, hanging out on the streets. I started to have my own clothes, I got nice stuff, I always wanted that stuff.”

Some stressed the community recognition they received. One of the young men interviewed had a brother serving a long-term prison sentence. Despite the possibility of facing a similar fate as his brother, the young man joined his brother’s gang and engaged in some violent behavior. He said that despite his brother’s long prison sentence, the fame he had achieved in the neighborhood seemed very appealing. He said, “I think I was so hyped up about everybody in my neighborhood that knew my brother’s name, everybody knew him right? And I wanted them to know my name. I was like ‘hey I want my name to be just as big as his’ and I was doing what I could do to pump my name up as big as his was.”

**Influences and expectations.** Many emphasized the negative influence their friends had upon them, promoting “things I knew I shouldn’t be doing, [like] drugs, partying, fornicating.” But others said the negative influences came more from family than friends (as described in the “Home life” section of this report), or from the community environment in general.

“My mom thinks it’s all because of my friends, but I got to thinking about it and I’ve been banging before any of them [because of siblings and cousins who were already in gangs]. We all came through in the same neighborhood, all had life experiences and here we are. I guess in a lot of cases you do evolve around your environment.”

This was a key problem according to stakeholders, who worried about the infiltration of “gang culture” into their cities, and particularly into poor neighborhoods. Stakeholders said that movies, television, video games, and the internet glorify money, drugs, violence, and sex. Some felt this image affected the ambitions and goals of youth, and minimized the negative aspects of a violent lifestyle. Since youth in poor neighborhoods may lack positive role models, these images may be particularly problematic.

Stakeholders also worried that youth in gang-filled neighborhoods put themselves in harm’s way by wearing gang clothing or imitating gang behavior; two stakeholders gave examples of youth unaffiliated with gangs who were wrongly targeted by gangs due to their clothing and claims they made about gang-style exploits. Youth have made claims, real or imagined, on personal webpages that translate into street activity, with real gang members then targeting the youth for intimidation or recruitment. A few youth confirmed this belief, including some of the gang members who said the neighborhood youth had assumed them to be part of

a gang before they joined, mostly due to where they lived. They faced harassment from rival gangs even before joining a gang.

**VOIDS FILLED, FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE.** Gangs and friendships made on the streets seemed to fill voids in the lives of these youth; they found the bonds and stability that was lacking in their families. Once youth joined a gang, they seemed to develop a strong sense of loyalty to their fellow gang members. As one young man said, “I love my homeboys, you know? They’ve always had my back for anything. They are my accomplices, but also my homeboys.” Another said, “It ain’t about hurting people or nothing like that; I like the parties, I like my homeboys.”

Those not in gangs felt similar affinity for their groups of friends. In Washington, few youth spoke specifically of gangs but rather their groups of friends and homeys. For instance, one non-gang youth—who, like many of these youth, described that he had trouble trusting others in general—said he loved both his parents, but that the only people in his life he trusted were his friends.

**PUBLIC PERCEPTION.** Finally, in terms of public perception, the appearance of gang culture and actual gang activity can be synonymous. As one law enforcement representative said, “Adults can’t tell the difference between a kid emulating gang dress and behavior from a real gang member.” Another stakeholder said “In the eyes of the public, all graffiti is gang graffiti.” Adults are left believing gangs are more prevalent than they are and, in turn, feel something needs to be done about it.

**LIMITED OPTIONS, LIMITED PERSPECTIVES...“THIS IS WHAT I KNOW.”** Some youth who did join a gang seemed to believe that joining was part of growing up in their neighborhood, particularly if their family and friends were already members. Not only did some youth feel they were assumed to be part of a gang by other youth, but some felt their own family assumed they would join gangs.

As one youth who officially joined in fifth grade said, “Some join [the gang] for protection, I joined ‘cause I was down, I grew up to do this.”

“I lost a couple [of friends] to the grave. I lost a couple to the Pen, too...my friend who was in diapers with me, he’s in [prison] doing 17 years.”

Some youth, especially those that had joined the gang at a very young age, seemed incapable of imagining a world in which they would no longer be part of the gang. As one youth in a gang said, “I’m not gonna change at least for right now, I’ve been doing this all my life you know? I just don’t want new friends, you know what I’m saying?...and you know I like representing where I’m from, this is what I know.” Another young man said, “That’s what I’ve dedicated and committed myself do doing, to being in a gang, to being part of a gang inside and outside of freedom.” Still another youth said “I’m still always going to be with the gang...just for, to help the homies out, help the next generation coming up taking their first steps” and also that he couldn’t think of the negative consequences or activity of the gang because “No, I was too deep into it, I just didn’t really care.”

One youth, contemplating being released after a two-year incarceration, reported he has begun to reassess some of his past behavior. “Sometimes I think to myself maybe it would be better if I didn’t have a conscience... Before I used to do things, you know what I’m saying; I used to be a gang member, gang banging, I used to do whatever I wanted, but I would never think about anything, about any of the consequences of what I was really doing.”

## School

*Summary. Perhaps like most adolescents, the young people interviewed stressed the social rather than academic aspects of school. They described school environments that lacked the necessary structure and stability to help them succeed academically. The youth interviewed reported high levels of truancy and suspensions; some had been expelled.*

*The majority of the stakeholders were very concerned with the school’s ability to positively intervene in the lives of young people. In particular they were concerned with truancy and dropouts, though reentry after expulsions or time spent in juvenile facilities was also a major concern. Both youth and stakeholders thought schools too often involved the police in problems on campus and in truancy issues. (Note that teachers or school administrators were not among the stakeholders interviewed.)*

**School environment.** The youth mostly described school environments that made it difficult for them to focus on their academics. The youth described schools that were dominated by rival groups of students or gangs. Stakeholders confirmed gangs were an issue in schools and among younger students than in previous generations. In San Mateo, the police department had instigated regular meetings with middle school administrators regarding gangs and crime in general. One youth commented that most of the fights were between Whites and African Americans, and that he and other Black youth in his school felt victimized by the system.

**No time for education.** The majority of youth had very high levels of truancy. Most had gotten into fights at school. Several had been expelled, stopped going to school altogether, or had been held back. The high rates of truancy and suspensions negatively affected academic performance; one young man reported missing many tests due to his suspensions. One youth claimed he had been suspended 100 days in a single school year.

**Difficulties with studies.** The young people interviewed had significant difficulties succeeding academically. Few discussed learning difficulties *per se*: four mentioned trouble reading and three trouble with math. More often, youth mentioned they never did homework, but not necessarily because it was hard. They were doing other things. Several said they had been better students in elementary school, but by middle school were distracted and getting into trouble.

A few kept up academically despite getting into trouble in and away from school. One youth said his grades were fine, even though he had been in four schools in two years because of his family moves and an expulsion.

**“That’s where I got my fame.”** Several young people stated that they enjoyed school, but they had trouble succeeding academically given their social ties.

Youth that liked school often discussed their friends and their popularity; “That’s where I got my fame...It was fun” one young man said about his middle school experience. He said he had been a good student throughout elementary school, but once he entered middle school and joined his brother’s circle of friends, he became a chronic truant, was involved in many fights, and was suspended numerous times.

“I’m getting my GED right now, because when I get out if I’m eligible to go back to high school I don’t want to go. High school is nothing but drama and I’m the kind of person, when I’m at school and I see another gang member, I’m a dumbass, I’m a hothead, I’m gonna get in a fight and I don’t want to do that.”

**Not fitting in.** Some of the young people’s complaints about school focused on the treatment they received from the other students. These youth were often ridiculed or bullied. Three youth said they were made fun of because of the clothing they wore. One female dropped out because her unpopularity made her unhappy. She said, “I was really made fun of in middle school, nobody really liked me. I had no friends and, I don’t know why I didn’t do anything, I was just a scapegoat. Everybody just found something to make fun of...I just dropped out, I couldn’t take it any more.”

### Over-reliance on police

Some of the youth felt that schools were overly reliant on suspensions and law enforcement. They suggested that schools criminalized schoolyard fights. Several of the young people interviewed first became involved in the juvenile justice system through their behavior at school, predominantly due to fights.

“They will give you assault charges and battery charges for a little fight and I’m like man it was a mutual fight and they are like take it to trial.”

Stakeholders agreed with youth, feeling strongly that the schools tried to rid themselves of difficult children, through over-reliance on suspensions and expulsions, by keeping reentry children out of their schools, and by referring youth to law enforcement for truancy. As one stakeholder said, the “School system isn’t as helpful as it could be because many schools are quick to banish kids.” Another stakeholder stressed the school system treated probation as a “dumping ground” for truant children. Indeed, a couple of stakeholders said they hired advocates to work with youth to ensure that they could re-enroll in school.

**Savvy kids.** Some of the youth shared the techniques they used to hide their truancy from their parents. They provided their school with wrong numbers or disconnected their phones when they knew the school would call. One youth said that if police ever asked why he was not in school during school hours, he would tell them he had been suspended.

## Teachers

A few of the young people did not feel that they had support at school and one young woman said school staff thought she was a “bad person.” Another youth, who had been suspended three times for fighting, said he felt he got along with his teachers, but that when he tried to talk to them about things they were never helpful. Another mentioned she never got special help or understanding from school staff; she eventually dropped out of school after getting in fights that she didn’t think were all her fault.

However, several youth mentioned hard-working supportive teachers. Several youth spoke of specific teachers or teaching styles—usually one-on-one—that they liked. One young male said that his teachers worked hard to support him, and he felt disappointed that he had let them down; he said, “Man, these people care about me and I’m just making myself look bad, not holding my side of the bargain.”

A few stakeholders questioned the quality of the teaching, but stakeholders recognized that schools had limited resources and that a couple of difficult students could make it very difficult to teach a crowded classroom. One stakeholder stressed that schools needed to focus on early education as it was hard to promote school attachment when children had faced failure at school since early childhood. However, some stakeholders recognized that schools had significant resource and political constraints. In DC in particular, stakeholders suggested the school system feared it would be taken over by the federal government.

## Juvenile justice system

*Summary. Some of the youth reported that time in confinement allowed them to think about their lives and past actions, and expressed a desire to change. However, this desire did not necessarily translate into concrete plans for a positive future. Most youth interviewed felt—and stakeholders generally agreed—that during their confinement they were not making positive progress towards creating a better life for themselves. They felt removed from their social, family, and economic obligations back in their community. Further, they felt some of their experiences, including failure to complete probation, made it difficult to turn things around. The youth mentioned very few resources that had been helpful to them.*

*Although they had concerns, stakeholders generally commended the efforts of law enforcement and juvenile justice agencies to address the needs of youth. Stakeholders discussed innovative youth programming within the police department, probation, detention, and the increased resources available to youth once in the system. However, some stakeholders questioned whether the juvenile justice system was right for delivering services, given its main function as law enforcement.*

### Early system contact, lost opportunities

Several of the young people described prior contact with the police that had not led to placement or formal probation; as they did not receive resources or punishment, they seemed unaffected by such contact.

The stakeholders agreed with this assessment. They felt that by the time a child has made contact with law enforcement or with the juvenile justice system, it is likely that many chances for prevention have been missed. One stakeholder said, “The system shows interest in kids when they’re a burden but doesn’t engage them before it gets to that point.” Stakeholders felt it was much more difficult to work to rehabilitate a youth that was already severely behind in school and had experienced trauma in his life, than to work to prevent these occurrences. Unfortunately, it was only possible to provide needed resources to children once they became part of the juvenile justice system.

### Arrested for Being Young

As reported earlier, some youth and stakeholders alike felt that youth were being arrested and entering the juvenile justice system for youthful behaviors that would not have been criminalized before, such as neighborhood and school fights among children, and running away from home. Stakeholders suggested parents, community members, and schools were overwhelmed by youth behavior in their communities, and turned to law enforcement.

### Benefits of placement: programming and services

While some certainly felt they had benefited from services offered while in custody, others did not. Some youth reported the services seemed inconsistent or not beneficial.

Several youth did not feel they had a feasible or helpful re-entry plan set up for after their release. A few also described specific programming, such as camps that emphasized manual work, as irrelevant and unhelpful to their lives. Several youth suggested that educational opportunities were severely limited; they reported that the limited classes available did not prepare them to return to school.

Success is difficult and not always purely a function of the quality of individual programs. One youth said she had been entered into a drug treatment program after failing drug tests; however, she kept running away from home during the program, which she felt was of no benefit to her.

Stakeholders described a range of programs within law enforcement and the juvenile justice system that tried to address some of the issues youth had experienced throughout their lives. Probation in each city provided mental health and substance abuse counseling, as well as conflict resolution, yoga, and anger management classes. Whether a youth was in detention or out on probation, these programs, especially in San Mateo, often involved community-based providers, allowing the youth to maintain a connection with the community and facilitating continuity of care after release.

Stakeholders also spoke of creative ways they had tried to reach youth. A judge assigned biographical essays of the victim to two youth who had been found responsible for her drug overdose. Stakeholders in Washington also described trips planned by DYRS and Court Social Services to other cities, such as New Orleans and New York, to expose youth to new environments and help youth recognize that there are opportunities and life options beyond those they see in their communities. Several Dallas stakeholders noted the Success-

ful Thinking and Responsible Sexuality (STARS) program as a promising comprehensive youth treatment and supervision program for sex offenders.

Without offering any opinion of the effectiveness of the services she received, another youth said she was being treated for an emotional disorder with medication and counseling, and that she attended anger management sessions. She added, “I get mad when I get sad.”

Some youth mentioned positive effects of their involvement with the justice system. They suggested that some resources within the justice system had been helpful. A few of the young people found it helpful to meet with former offenders; as one young man said, “He’s the only guy that I’ve ever been able to open myself up to...what’s really going on, and what I’m really doing, I have a lot of respect for that guy, I dunno this guy is like he knew me, he never lied to me.” A preteen girl adjudicated for a domestic violence incident said her team management program was helping with her family issues; she had brought her family out to dinner as part of the program.

Many mentioned that their time in confinement had allowed them time to reflect on their actions and on their life trajectories. They reflected on the impact their behavior was having on their family, on their lifestyle choices, and on their future plans. They looked back at what actions led them into trouble and questioned whether the actions were worth the consequences.

Youth in Washington gave Juvenile Services credit for reentry plans. Several of the youth there said they felt their chances to do well were better because they were being enrolled into a school before leaving and had jobs lined up. Still, a couple of these youth said that they felt too much was required of them after release.

## Probation compliance

Some of the youth felt that their attempts at improving their behavior were thwarted by overly harsh probation requirements and practices. Some original probation dates of six months had expanded to three years due to continual violations. While youth might be willing to take steps towards improving their life chances, they had a difficult time, for instance, ending relationships with their best friends or quickly stopping their drug use. Several youth gave statements such as, “It seems like on probation everything’s a violation,” or “Once you go on probation they are on you for every little thing.” In particular, youth struggled with curfews, drug testing, clothing restrictions, and limitations on the individuals with whom they could spend their free time. “Some people can’t stop just [taking drugs] all of a sudden, like they used to pee test me three times a week, some people can’t get out of it that fast. It’s hard! It’s hard to get off probation.”

Also, several of the young people thought their probation officers were more concerned with them complying with their probation terms than their well being. Some youth implied that probation might go differently if they had more of a personal connection with their probation officer; as one stakeholder said, they are “Just policing, not really caring! They don’t ask ‘how are you?’”



The youth recognized the need for most of the probation-related restrictions, acknowledging, for instance, that drug use kept them from success in other parts of their lives and that hanging out with their old friends, especially on the streets at night, was a bad idea; one said, “Trouble happens late night on the street.” Yet the youth felt the parameters were too strict too soon and that they did not allow for the many factors that kept youth from fulfilling them. The youth felt they had few alternatives to their old ways and would continue to have trouble completing probation.

### *Self-perspective of youth*

There were various indications that youth had realistic and rather astute perspectives on their own lives. It was not the impression of the interviewers that these youth were just saying what they understood adults wanted to hear or reiterating words they had heard adults use to describe them, whether in sympathy or judgment. Like any group of youths, some had a flare for the dramatic, some were inclined to self-aggrandize, and some were reserved and a bit sullen. But the youth seemed to be speaking honestly and offering their own assessments of their circumstances.

Several young people recognized the environmental factors that affected their past behavior, but still stressed their personal responsibility. “I made my own decisions and I don’t blame nobody but myself. I can’t blame no one for my actions. I have to be responsible for my actions.”

Others were keenly aware of contradictions in their lives. One, for instance, contrasted his street life with more traditional lifestyles, and said he tried his best to “leave school for school” knowing that he could not succeed academically otherwise. Stakeholders agreed that some youth walk in two worlds. One spoke of a youth in placement for a violent offense and drug use who had letters sent to the court on his behalf saying he was a good student and conscientious employee.

### *“The lucky ones”?*

For every risk factor for system-involvement and delinquency described by these youth—broken homes, violent victimization, drug abuse, gangbanging, school problems—they also described strengths and protective factors—loving, present parents and stable home life, no victimization or drug use, never joined a gang, did well in school. Yet still they had still ended up in juvenile placement. More common were youth with many risk factors. For instance, one young woman had joined a gang, but did no illicit drugs herself. Both her parents were incarcerated, and the grandmother with whom she lived was a crack cocaine user. The young woman was in placement for a domestic assault.

“I might be one of the lucky ones that have their little things on the street, but when it comes to school I have success there too. I don’t really try to get my street life mixed up with my school life because I do like to get educated.”

Perhaps revealing a professional’s perspective on root causes of crime, several youth made efforts to dissociate themselves from the perception that their families, or their personal psychology, had caused their delin-

quency. When asked generally about growing up, one youth quickly pointed out his parents were good to him, “didn’t abuse me or each other,” and that they had always lived in a safe neighborhood.

Further, despite similar backgrounds and situations, not all these youth were motivated by the same internal or external factors. Some seemed more motivated by social concerns and made decisions to better their image among their peers, with drug sales or the gang life. This type of youth might have thought that selling drugs would increase his buying power and ability to control his image.” Others seemed motivated by more personal or internal conflicts, often related to their home life. Some admitted that they were mainly followers and that their peers or older people around them led them into trouble. They did not consider the bigger picture. And for a few, their troubles were exacerbated by events such as the loss of someone important through death or imprisonment.

Among the youth perhaps one or two were seriously hardened cases. One judge described these youth as likely lost causes, with a look in their eye and an attitude that said “they just don’t care.” She said in all her various jobs in the system, those were about 2% or fewer of the youth she saw. As an example, she described a youth who had “committed a very bad crime; had been abused, burned, sexually abused; mom is a junkie; never finished school in the same one he started the year in; through five different foster care settings. When that kid looks at you with those ‘dead eyes’ you know the ability to build the core of empathy that the kid needs to not commit future crimes is not there, the raw material is not there; that kid is a sociopath, one of the 2%.” Two other stakeholders mentioned kids that lacked conscience and who never responded to rehabilitation efforts. Youth who joined gangs very early were sometimes this type. The judge stressed, however, that they were the exceptions, that most kids can change, and she spoke of how gratifying it was to see previous wards on the street doing well, years free of the system. She estimated 85% of the youth in her courtroom are one-timers.

## The Future

“What am I doing with myself? Where am I going? What am I going to be doing when I am 25?”

The young people interviewed expressed an interest in avoiding future involvement in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Various among them felt that if they did not change their behavior they would end up incarcerated or dead. Several young people expressed concern that they would not be able to clear their record by the time they were 18 and would have to face the consequences of their actions then; “I’m not even 18 yet. I don’t want to start on the wrong foot.” Those already or planning to be parents were concerned they were not and would not be there for their children. They wanted to make their families proud, break the intergenerational cycle of system involvement, and not be locked away as their own children grew. Some felt that being inside would make it very difficult to catch up in school and that they would lose their jobs permanently.

Some of the young people discussed returning to school or completing their GED while confined; they thought these academic accomplishments would help them better succeed upon their release, although some were concerned a degree from a high school within a correctional institution would in some way mark

them and not be as useful as a degree from a regular high school. Others mentioned counselors that helped them explain their absence to employers or schools, or plan for their future. A few mentioned future ambitions; they wanted to graduate high school, obtain a well-paying construction job, own a barbershop, start a daycare center, work as a medical assistant, or get a college scholarship playing football. Some of these youth had demonstrated their capacity for hard work by obtaining their GED, securing post-release housing, ending long-term drug addictions, and behaving well while incarcerated. While one youth was incarcerated she was able to obtain her GED, secure affordable transitional housing for her release upon turning 18 years old, and look into grants for a technical certification.

Unfortunately, it was more often the case that the youth tended to sound vague when discussing their future, unclear of how to make or achieve goals. Although a few had taken concrete steps to pursue particular professions or occupations, many seemed unaware of the possibilities. Several youth said they really didn't know, even in broad terms, what their interests were and couldn't tell the interviewer anything that they considered themselves "good at." These youth, in turn, had no specific plans for the future.

Most youth were likely to face a difficult time upon release. The majority had already been released from secure facilities and had been unable to remain away. Instead of emphasizing their plans for the future, most of the youth discussed feeling left out of their lives. They were missing out on their family, friends, school, and jobs.

"A release date, it feels so good; a release date, at the same time, I'm about to get out... what am I gonna go do? It's hard, people tell me 'You get out and you are going to go back to the same thing and you are gonna come right back,' and I'm like 'Yeah, but what else is there to do?' All this time, the only thing I'm thinking about is reminiscing on old memories. [But] the old memories I had are all negative; I don't have anything positive lined up for me."

Another youth seemed content to be in secure placement for the time being. She was a gang member; she had an emotional disorder; she reported that she had been abused at home; she said her father had been arrested for drug use and sexual assault (she did not imply the assault involved her). She said, simply, "I don't mind being in Juvie. Better to be here and be safe."

## *The role of the juvenile justice system*

*Summary. As would be expected, stakeholders generally had a broader perspective than youth regarding the successes or failures of the juvenile justice system and its appropriate role in the lives of youth. Although stakeholders mainly agreed on what got youth into the system, they disagreed on what should be done and the appropriate role of law enforcement and the juvenile justice system. Though they commend attempts by law enforcement and juvenile justice agencies to address the needs of youth, some stakeholders expressed reservations, saying that other city agencies should be handling much of that work, preferably earlier in the youths' lives.*

### **Police as social workers and juvenile justice as catch-all**

Stakeholders elaborated on the issue of an over-reliance on the police. They agreed with the youth that law enforcement officers were often called to address minor issues, such as fights, pranks and mischief, and rebelliousness. The emphasis on community policing meant the police's role had "evolved into quasi-social worker." Stakeholders described how youth became involved in the juvenile system for behavior that was not always considered a crime. Law enforcement officers did not have the proper training to address the needs of youth. They are trained to react to situations and to arrest individuals. According to one stakeholder, the result of involving the police was to "...criminalize basic teen behavior. Once you start that process of locking kids up for being kids, where does that stop?" She suggested that police needed to be trained in dealing with youth effectively through understanding their development.

Other stakeholders felt that staff *have* been trained to address the development and social needs of youth in such departments as San Mateo's Youth Services Center and, in Washington, the Oak Hill and Youth Services Center and the Court Social Services drop-in center.

Several stakeholders expressed concern that enforcement agencies might control too much of needed resources. They stressed that an awareness of the root causes of crime by probation, police, and juvenile justice is not equal to increased investment in the communities and families affected by violence. A few stakeholders suggested the cities were not as willing to fund community-based organizations as they were to fund probation or police departments to address the issues faced by youth.

### **Serving more youth or net widening?**

Some expressed concern that enforcement agencies were not the best suited to address the needs of the youth and that those agencies' efforts could lead to an increase in the number of youth involved in the juvenile justice system. They felt the needs of at-risk youth certainly should be addressed, but that the juvenile justice system was not the system to do it.

According to stakeholders, deeper system involvement may follow an initial police contact for reasons apart from the seriousness of the offense. In impoverished communities and families, stakeholders worried that

the only way to provide resources is to keep children under the jurisdiction of the court or in a committed facility. A couple of prosecutors stressed that they engaged in civil proceedings simply to ensure that youth with serious mental health issues that had engaged in criminal behavior could receive needed mental health services. A Dallas stakeholder suggested that “We over-detain, over-commit to get kids services; if kids could get access to services they could be stabilized out of the system.” Because youth need to learn to live in a positive manner in their communities, some stakeholders suggested that community-based resources would be more appropriate in many cases.

**Including at-risk youth.** Resources for youth outside the juvenile justice system are limited. To remedy this situation, San Mateo’s Youth Services Center’s assessment center provides resources for youth not involved in the system. Stakeholders said that Center staff worked to assess all the factors—history, family, mental health issues, substance abuse, etc.— of at-risk youth then decide what to do, emphasizing community-based services though residential placement as an option. The Center accepts self-referrals or referrals by parents, school personnel, or other concerned adults and is staffed with representatives from probation, mental health, and social workers. Center workers conduct comprehensive assessments and create individualized plans for the referred youth.

**One-stop services.** To provide continuity of services and reduce the likelihood that youth “fall through the cracks” between levels of the system, the San Mateo probation department supervises all the youth services: the detention programs, the placement programs, the non-placement programming (e.g., family preservation, intensive supervision, wraparound programming, camps, drug court, intensive drug court, mentoring for young gang members by former gang members) and the post-placement follow-ups. Often the same probation officers will stay with a youth through all the steps of the system. This continuity was certainly considered beneficial to the youth, except for those stakeholders who felt the juvenile justice system was simply not the right venue for these services.

### Misdirected resources?

Regarding the success of current approaches, the youth seemed to confirm that the services they received and even the supervision style of the professionals responsible for them often fell short. Youth described a small number of programs or services in positive terms. They reported difficulties in completing probation and in connecting with their probation officers, and they had a general sense that their lives were not moving forward while in placement.

### Steps taken: reduced reliance on detention, increased community-based efforts

Stakeholders in all three cities described their efforts to reduce the number of youth in their secure facilities and to instead provide more resources in the community. These cities are using risk assessments to assess whether youth need to be detained because of public safety concerns. If they are not a threat to public safety but have pressing social needs, these can be addressed in a non-secure environment. DYRS stakehold-

ers asserted that they have considerably reduced the population inside their commitment facility (Oak Hill), and have plans to replace it with a smaller facility.

Stakeholders in Washington and Dallas credit the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), which has been implemented in both cities, with drawing attention to the over-reliance of detention in the juvenile justice system. Stakeholders asserted that JDAI, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, helped bring stakeholders together to look at data related to the detention of youth. Often, reliable data had been missing from these conversations; JDAI creates a shared set of information to help shed light on issues such as the detention of low-risk children. One stakeholder claimed that this initiative changed the way she responded to kids in her court room; now she tries to look for alternatives to detention and to see what services she can provide to stabilize children outside of confinement. JDAI was mentioned as providing various improvements to the systems in Washington and Dallas, including helping to channel money to where it is most needed. Dallas stakeholders also reported changes to the way probation officers approach work, including more specialized case loads, working with youth where they live, and training in handling difficult youth.

A few stakeholders expressed concern that reforms were too focused on detention and felt that other parts of the system deserved attention. Nevertheless, the majority of stakeholders credited JDAI with getting people to think about detention differently and to work to reduce it in both cities.

### Tough enough?

Some stakeholders worried that by changing the role of law enforcement under the guise of addressing the development and social needs of youth, some enforcement agencies, particularly DYRS' Oak Hill and San Mateo's Youth Service Center, were not holding youth accountable for their actions. These stakeholders stressed that some youth thought it was a status symbol to be placed in a secure facility. If their stays were short and fairly pleasant, they would have less of an incentive to avoid them. A couple of stakeholders suggested that new policies in Washington were leading to increased recidivism. Contradicting that argument, another stakeholder, a juvenile court judge in firm support of alternatives to detention, said a short detention was sometimes a useful tool to show minor offenders that their freedoms could be taken away from them if they continued their risky behavior.

### Community engagement and education

There were many ways stakeholders were reaching out to their communities to correct misperception, explain the purpose and tactics of the juvenile justice system, get community support for those activities, and help parents and community members address youth issues. Several of these efforts were described in earlier sections of this report. Probation officers said they conducted parenting classes and taught parents about youth behavior that may be indicative of gang involvement. They hoped to help parents instill order in their household. Law enforcement and probation officers also spoke to community groups about the benefits of various alternatives to incarceration, such as first offenders diverted to early prevention programs. A key

message, they say, is assuring the public that police will still enforce the law, still protect the community. The public response to these efforts seemed to be very positive.

Noting changing demographics of San Mateo (which was less of an issue in Dallas and Washington), the police and probation made special efforts to reach out to individual communities within San Mateo and applied cultural competency standards to all of their activities.

In San Mateo, police and probation worked with the Tongan Interfaith Council to address violence in the community. By targeting community leaders and focusing on providing information in a culturally appropriate manner, the San Mateo police were able to reach parents and families that before remained distant from city and county agencies. Through the Police Activities League, police officers in San Mateo work as coaches, teachers, and mentors to youth in the community.

## *Summary of Findings*

It is usual for crime rates to fluctuate; however, newspaper reports as a whole emphasize—and often exaggerate—rises in crime, while drops in crimes are minimized. When overall crime rates are static or dropping, the media look for change in individual types of crime. Increases in crime do not warrant the exaggerated coverage typically found in newspaper reports, which are typically focused on particularly shocking crimes and seldom provide a complete picture of the many factors affecting rates of crime. Further, crime in general is often attributed to youth when, in fact, adults commit the vast majority of all types of crime. Positive stories about youth, as opposed to those emphasizing trouble and violence, are hard to find, leaving the public with a distorted view of youth and their role in crime.

Interviewed stakeholders did not necessarily share the same political views on delinquent youth: some preferred greater emphasis on law enforcement, accountability, and public safety, while others preferred to emphasize programming, community-based efforts, and prevention. However, regardless of these views, in doing their work stakeholders considered the full range of factors that influence youth behavior, little of which can be found in newspaper coverage of youth or crime. While elected officials may feel the need to respond to crime as reported in the media, or may use such coverage as leverage for pushing through their preferred programs, stakeholders recognize the cyclical nature of crime and the need to focus on long-term strategies rather than short-term changes. Stakeholders felt that some policies that focused on short-term crime trends or particularly heinous crimes used resources that would be better spent on more long-sighted methods and that shortsighted policies may, in fact, make the situation worse.

**Ask the youth!** Perhaps the most interesting findings stem from what NCCD learned in the youth interviews. The stories they told were common to other youth involved in the justice system: unsettled households, violent communities, the inexorable draw of drugs, gangs and delinquent behavior, inconsequential early system contacts, and gradually deeper movement into the system.

Put together, the stories serve as an outline of the root causes of crime and a blueprint for early intervention and prevention programs. In effect, they are an evaluation of how the adults in their lives and society at large had met their responsibilities to young people (we did not fare very well). They suggest how to do better, if not for them, then for their young siblings and the next generation. The youth told their stories with insight and, notably, without passing the sort of judgment that others had passed on them throughout their lives. Most of these youth had a clear idea of why things turned out the way they had for them. Most took personal responsibility for their plight; while acknowledging the failures of the adults responsible for their care, few blamed anyone in particular but themselves. Furthermore, the youths' assessment of their own situation agreed in almost every respect with how the stakeholders—experts in the field—assessed the same thing. The youth were, in short, experts on themselves. And they added a personal element that illuminates how society can better serve them, and others like them, to avoid system contact.

Although these youth were among the most serious offenders in the system, they were not the heartless monsters described in many news reports. Interviewers found the youth to be funny, engaging, and thoughtful; even those not particularly engaged in the interview treated the interviewers with courtesy and respect. Their motivations for high-risk and delinquent behavior were complicated, but often involved common adolescent needs for interpersonal connections and a sense of belonging and self, and perhaps seeking a little order among the chaos that characterized their lives at home and in their neighborhoods.

In short, trends in crime do not indicate tougher responses to youth crime—these youth are not superpredators—but system reform, nevertheless, is necessary, and demands a comprehensive, long-term approach based on the perspective of the youth, families, and community.

### *What the public should know about crime, about the system, and about youth.*

This final section very briefly catalogs various observations made by youth and professional stakeholders, as well as NCCD insights gleaned mostly through the youth interviews. The observations may inform efforts to improve media coverage and public perception of youth, crime, and the justice system and to improve the system itself.

**Educate the media.** Justice agencies need to make special and ongoing efforts to provide both interesting and factual information to news agencies.

**Educate the public directly.** Public perception impacts the system and those involved in it at almost every level, from funding for new programs to crime-focused legislation and propositions, to understanding the benefits and detriments to system involvement for youth, to improved intergenerational communication and relations in the community. This can include involving the public in justice system events and programs and linking justice facilities with community volunteers and community-based services. Cultural sensitivity is essential to forming productive relationships among agencies, community groups, and individuals.

**Promote healthy families and effective parenting.** Frustrated and bewildered parents that engage police and probation officers as a parenting tool can be aided through early intervention and community-based parenting programs.



**Establish access to better and quicker data sources** to assist both law enforcement and the media.

**Broaden training for police and probation officers.** As police and probation officers take on broader roles, appropriate training and institutional support is essential.

**Remember that system-involved youth are youth.** To better understand and engage system-involved youth, the first step is to understand their development. Those convicted of serious crime are not so unlike average youth. They are observant, they have a sense of themselves, they are proud, yet they are often immature.

They need help contemplating the consequences of their actions beyond punishment and loss of freedom. The youth themselves felt that their early contact with adults—teachers, police, or others—had the potential to make a difference in their lives.

They have complicated lives and motivations. Chaotic home lives and early exposure to risky behavior are not things most adults can relate to. Their homes may be less than ideal, but they are all they know.

Youth need help seeing the big picture, the purpose of services. For example, they need help developing reentry plans and understanding why they them. They need help seeing past their release date and reunion with their troubled homes and communities.

They are not superpredators, they are not lost causes, but rather have made mistakes. They may be in dangerous ruts, but they maintain hope for new directions.

*This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.*