



SYSTEMSTATS

North Carolina Criminal Justice Analysis Center

Governor's Crime Commission

UNDERSTANDING JUVENILE CRIME TRENDS AND WHAT CAN AND CANNOT BE DONE ABOUT THEM

In North Carolina, as in the rest of the nation, the public is becoming increasingly fearful of juvenile crime. Whether these concerns are based on media hype or real changes in the behavior of our children, the growing concern with juvenile crime is part of life today. The first part of this article will describe what we know about the changing juvenile arrest patterns and what this says about juvenile crime. The second part talks about the implications these trends have for public policy.

While the actual number of juveniles (children below age 16) arrested is still low, this number has risen rapidly. (Table 1) And, even though these numbers are not large, they increased despite the fact that the actual number of juveniles in North Carolina decreased (see Figure 1). Recent figures released by the SBI show that the total number of crimes committed in North Carolina declined over the last three years, but juvenile arrests continue to increase.

**Table 1:
Number of Juvenile
Arrests in North
Carolina for
Part I Violent Crimes
and Selected Part II
Crimes**

Offense	1985	1995	Percent Change	Change per Year
Murder and Manslaughter	5	16	+ 220.00 %	22.0%
Rape	35	38	+ 8.57 %	0.8%
Robbery	66	241	+ 265.15 %	26.5%
Aggravated Assault	294	782	+ 165.99 %	16.5%
Drug Violations	199	907	+ 355.78 %	35.6%
Weapon Law Violations	106	628	+ 492.45 %	49.2%

Table 1 not only shows that the number of crimes committed by juveniles appear to be increasing, it also shows that the nature of juvenile crime has changed in ways that are frightening to the public. Juveniles in North Carolina are committing more serious violent crimes, more robberies, more crimes against strangers, and more crimes involving drugs and weapons. Figures show that juveniles appear to be starting to commit those crimes at younger ages.

There are three factors that affect the number of juvenile crimes:

- the *number* of juveniles in the population
- the *rate* at which juveniles commit crimes
- the *age* at which juveniles start and stop committing crimes

Current data on each of these factors indicate that juvenile crime will continue to increase. This "triple whammy" is represented in Table 2, and Figures 1 through 7 which allow us to estimate how these factors will impact the amount and kind of juvenile crime we are likely to see over the next decade. Based upon the picture presented, we need to do something now.

Understanding Juvenile Crime Trends: What Can and Cannot be Done About Them

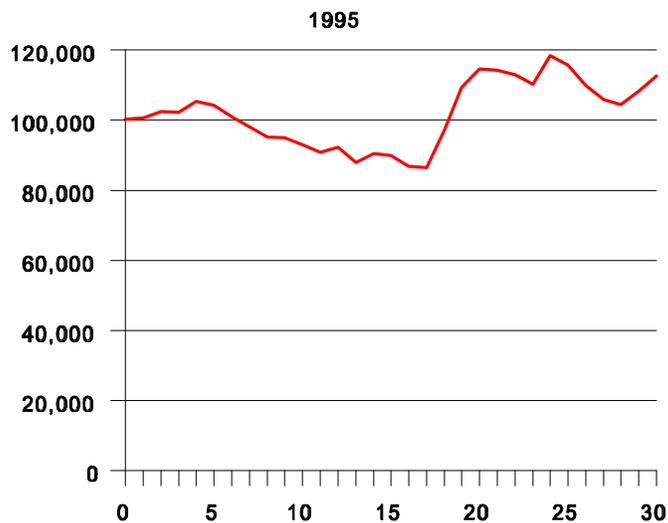
Table 2 represents the increasing *rate* at which young adults, those below age 19, are being arrested in North Carolina. Figures 2 through 7 show that the steepest increases in these rates are taking place among ever younger children under the age of 16 and must be addressed by the juvenile justice system.

Table 2:
Arrest Rates for
Young Adults
(to age 19) in North
Carolina per 100,000

Offense	1985	1995	% Change
Murder	1.56	4.86	+ 211.54
Robbery	13.21	50.5	+ 282.29
Aggravated Assault	53.72	120.53	+ 124.37
Drugs	124.35	218.38	+ 75.62
Weapons	35.75	90.04	+ 151.86

Figure 1 shows the population of juveniles of different ages in 1995. It also allows us to see how many 12 through 17 year olds there were ten years ago and how many there will be ten years from now. It shows that in 1995 the number of 12 through 17 year olds (the ages where young people are most likely to begin committing violent crimes) was at a thirty-year low. Over the next five to ten years, the number is going to increase although not to the high point it was ten years ago. Over the next ten years, today's five year olds, who now significantly out-number fifteen year olds, will begin to age into their most crime-prone years. This should have important implications for crime policy.

Figure 1:
North Carolina Population x Age
1995

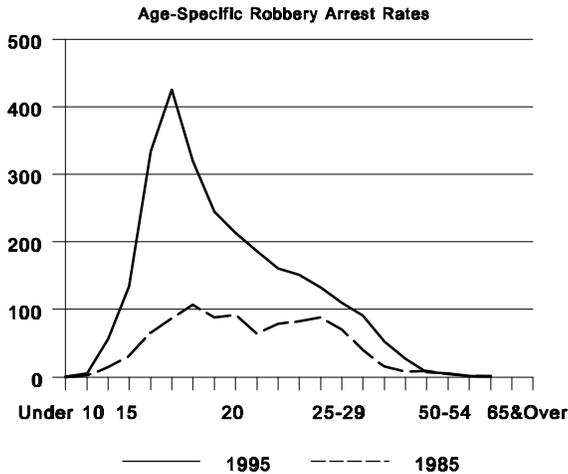


Taken together, Table 1 and Figure 1 show that despite the fact that the *number* of 10 to 16 year olds fell, the *number* of crimes committed by juveniles increased.

While there are fewer young people in their high crime years today than there were ten years ago, there is more crime because young people are committing crimes at a higher rate. Even if arrest rates remain flat over the next ten years, the increasing number of children in the population will overwhelm existing juvenile institutions unless we take action to reverse these trends. Furthermore, state and national trends indicate that the juvenile crime rate will continue to increase.

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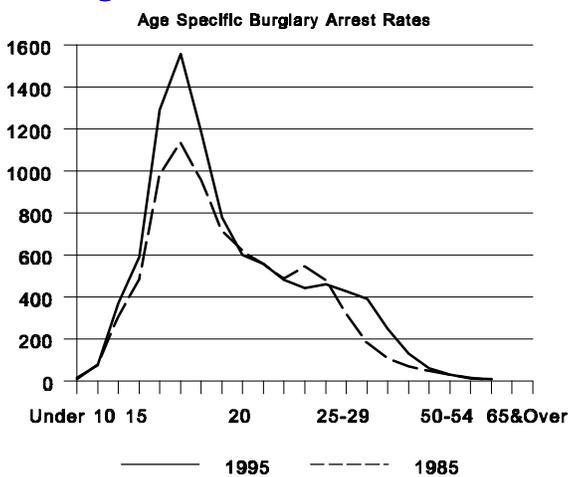
Figure 2:



Figures 2 through 7 illustrate the same point in more detail by looking at the *age specific arrest rate* (the rate at which people in different age groups commit crime) for murder, assault, robbery, drugs, burglary, and gun offenses. The age specific arrest rates allow us to estimate how the expected increase in the number of 12 to 17 year olds will impact on the total amount of crime.

When comparing 1985 and 1995 crime rates, a disturbing pattern emerges. While the overall rate of arrest, represented by the area under the curves, increases, as would be expected from Tables 1 and 2, the shape of most of the curves has also changed. For all crimes the curves are much steeper and further to the left of the graph, indicating that juveniles are committing more crimes at an earlier age— starting at about age 14. The same is true for victimization.

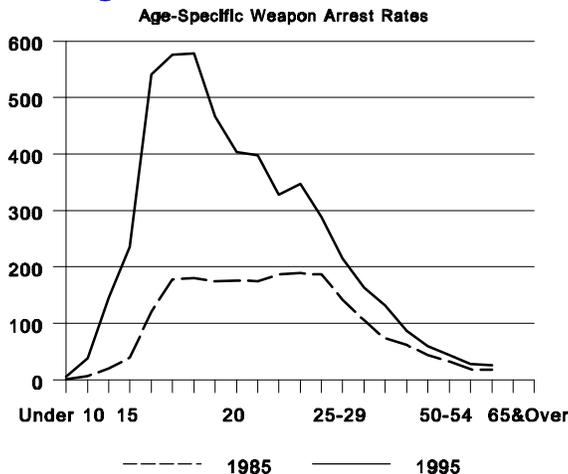
Figure 3:



For example, Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the age specific arrest rates for robbery and burglary. The distance between the 1985 and 1995 lines shows that for both crimes the arrest rate for young offenders increased. While the arrest rates for both crimes increased, the change was more pronounced in the robbery arrests than the arrests for burglary. Between 1985 and 1995 the pattern of burglary arrests remained essentially the same, but the rate increased. For robbery there was not only an increase in the rate, but also a dramatic shift in the pattern of arrests.

While Figures 2 through 7 each show a slightly different pattern, all these figures show that not only are more children involved in the criminal justice system, but younger children are starting to commit violent crimes at much higher rates than they were ten years ago. Younger children are starting to be arrested for more serious crimes.

Figure 4:

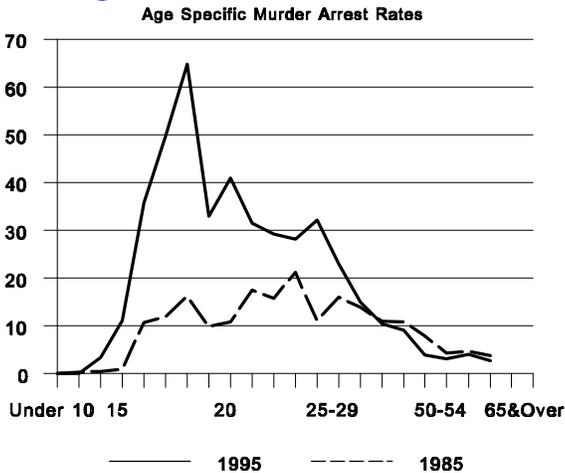


Arrests for robbery, murder, drugs, and weapon violations show steep increases in the pattern of arrests among juveniles before they reach the age of 16. These are also the crimes that are most frightening to the public. Burglary, a crime juveniles have always committed in great numbers, shows the smallest change in the pattern of arrests.

Interestingly, as the charts show an increase in the number of young children coming into the criminal justice system, treatment professionals also report that the number of younger children abusing drugs and alcohol is increasing.

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Figure 5:



It is important to remember that juveniles are victims as well as perpetrators of crime. Research on victimization indicates that the age specific victimization rates should show a pattern similar to the arrest rates. Figure 8 shows this to be the case for homicide victims. *Between 1985 and 1995 the victimization rate for murder has more than doubled for sixteen to twenty year olds.*

We must remember that juveniles have borne the brunt of the increase in crime over the last decade. Unless we can change this basic pattern, they will continue to bear this burden into the future.

What We Can and Cannot Do

Public policy cannot change the number of juveniles coming of age over the next decade. But public policy can determine whether the number of juveniles who become repeat offenders with access to weapons, alcohol and drugs will continue to increase. We can take steps to control whether juvenile crime continues to become more serious, more violent, and more frightening to the public.

Our children are remarkably resilient. No matter how dire the conditions in which they live, most do not become delinquent. There are forces in every community that pull children toward doing what is right and toward doing what is wrong. We must look for ways to reinforce those factors that make children resilient, while we look for ways to limit exposure to forces that pull them toward delinquency.

Early childhood programs like Smart Start have been shown to decrease the rate at which children will become serious violent offenders. Day care centers and schools can identify children likely to become delinquent. These children can be helped by intervention services. Programs that provide prevention services to targeted populations have been shown to work effectively.

We need to provide juveniles with more, not less, adult supervision. Public policy can ensure that children suspended or expelled from school are placed in alternative schools, not on the street where delinquent behavior will be reinforced. Since most juvenile crime happens after school, between 2:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m., we need to increase after school programs such as mentoring that keep juveniles in a learning environment, teach important social skills and limit unsupervised time on the street.

Figure 6:

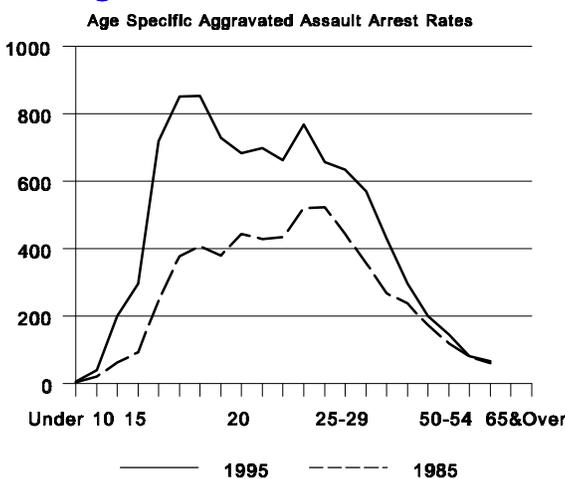
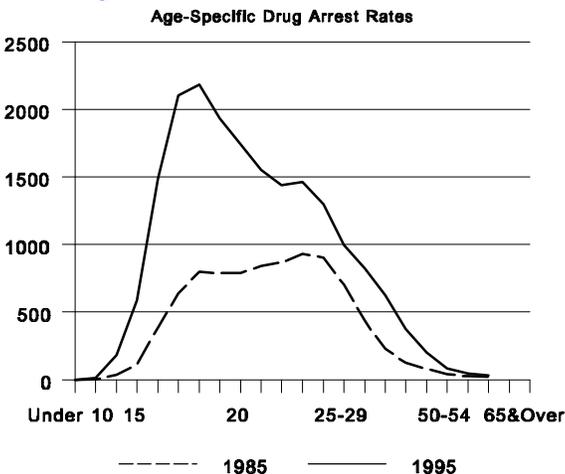
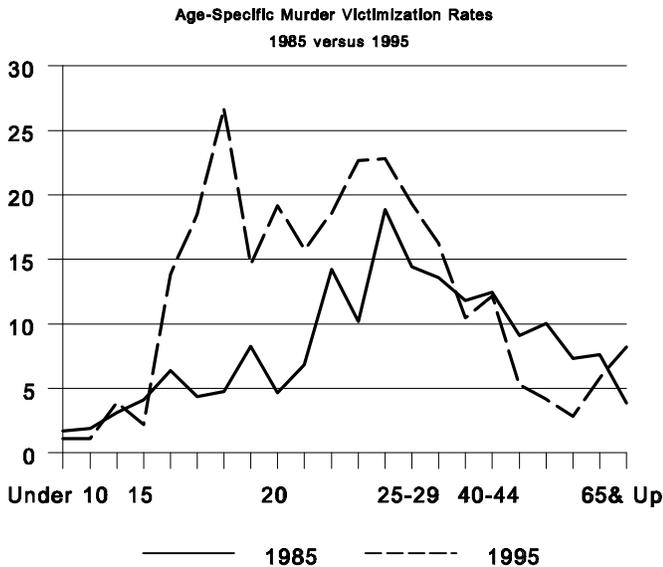


Figure 7:



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Figure 8:



Most violent offenders start out as property offenders and are caught for the first time when they are very young. How we respond to juveniles the *first time* we catch them breaking the law can reduce the number who later become repeat violent offenders. Juveniles must learn that actions have consequences, and equally important, that the sanctions imposed by adults are fair, proportionate and justified.

Some children will break the law, and break it repeatedly. When we punish these juveniles, the sanctions we use should become more serious each time they come to court. When we sanction juveniles, we should make every effort to keep these children as close to home as possible to strengthen positive community ties. This means more community based programs. When we are forced to separate children from their home and their community, we must provide aftercare to strengthen their ability to resist the pull of crime when they return home. Some children should be separated permanently from their communities, but this number is much smaller than most people think.

With careful planning, increased interagency coordination and carefully targeted spending, we can mitigate the effects of demographic change. By improving our present system and preparing ourselves for the increased number of children we will have to serve in the near future, this “triple whammy” (increasing crime rates, increasing numbers of kids, earlier onset of delinquency) will not overwhelm us.



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