Trends in Juvenile Offending

What You Need to Know

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Offending by juveniles (youth under age 18) has been the subject of significant local and national discourse over the last several decades, and especially during the last few years. Incidents of juvenile firearm violence, for example, have been the subject of extensive coverage by the mass media and on social networks.[1] Policymakers have also drawn attention to juvenile offending, as evidenced by recent legislation aimed at both reducing youth violence and revising juvenile justice system approaches to this population.[2]

Juvenile offending accounts for a notable share of crime committed in America each year. Over the period examined for this study (2016 to 2022), roughly 14% of crimes involved at least one reported juvenile offender to the findings in other research on juvenile offending that relied on similar data sources.[3, 4] The COVID-19 pandemic, however, may have altered some of these patterns.[5] Responses to the pandemic led to the closure of schools—a primary site of youth socialization and, consequently, some offending—potentially influencing juvenile offending patterns. School closures, combined with trends such as the recent shift to digital socialization, have resulted in youth spending more time at home.[6]

This report focuses on trends in violent and nonviolent juvenile offending from 2016 through 2022. Its analyses examine changes in the frequency of juvenile offending by crime type, demographics, and several other characteristics. The official law enforcement data used in this report are drawn from the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) program. The final sample used for the analyses includes 3,484 law enforcement agencies covering jurisdictions with an average of about 91 million residents per study year. Additional details and limitations of these data are discussed in the supplemental methodology report.

Key Takeaways

- Overall, there has been a **general decrease** in most forms of juvenile offending in recent years; notable exceptions include **more frequent use of firearms** among youth.
- Juvenile offending (total incidents) was about **14% lower**, and the total number of juveniles involved was around **18% lower**, in 2022 than in 2016, the beginning of the study period.
- **Trends in juvenile crime diverge by age group.** Offending among juveniles aged 15 to 17 was roughly 23% lower in 2022 than in 2016; offending among juveniles aged 10 to 14, however, was nearly 9% higher over the same period.
- **Homicides perpetrated by juveniles jumped 65%** from 2016 to 2022, while burglary (-62%), larceny (-46%), and robbery (-45%) experienced the steepest declines.
- **Violent crimes committed by White youth remained essentially unchanged during the study period,** increasing by less than one half of one percent (0.44%), **while violent offenses committed by Black youth decreased by about 20%.** Property crimes perpetrated by Black youth decreased by about 40%, while property crimes perpetrated by White youth decreased by roughly 52%.
- **The number of offenses committed by juvenile males was 21% lower** in 2022 than in 2016. There was no notable change in the offending frequency among juvenile females over the same period.
- **Crimes involving two or more juveniles (co-offending) were 26% lower** in 2022 than in 2016, and solo offending was about 10% lower.
- **Firearm involvement in juvenile offending was 21% higher** in 2022 than in 2016, while other weapon use was 6% higher. This suggests a more pronounced increase in the use of guns relative to other weapons, rather than increased weapon use generally. Firearm use has also increasingly resulted in serious injury for victims in recent years.

A Note on Limitations and the Difference Between Offense Counts and Participations

One characteristic of juvenile offending is the relatively high prevalence of co-offending, or

engaging in crime with another person. Because of this, it is sometimes important to disaggregate between offense counts (i.e., the number of crime incidents that occur, regardless of how many offenders are involved) and offense participations (i.e., the number of juveniles who have engaged in crime, regardless of the number of offenses committed).[7] In other words, offense participation counts refer to the number of juveniles who have offended, such that three co-offenders committing a single crime together would count as three offense participations. Unless otherwise noted, this report uses offense participations when referring to demographic trends to describe all juveniles involved in crime incidents and offense counts when referring to the frequency and trends in offenses.

Since the report relies on official data reported to and recorded by the police, analyses examining the factors or mechanisms driving any changes in trends could not be performed. Because NIBRS data only include crimes reported to the police, these results should also be viewed as undercounting the true frequency of each crime type.

Glossary

- **Aggravated Assault:** An unlawful attack by one person upon another wherein the offender uses a weapon or displays it in a threatening manner, or the victim suffers obvious severe or aggravated bodily injury involving apparent broken bones, loss of teeth, possible internal injury, severe laceration, or loss of consciousness

- **Burglary:** The unlawful entry into a building or other structure with the intent to commit a felony or a theft

- **Juvenile:** A person under the age of 18

- **Juvenile Offending/Delinquency:** The violation of a law committed by a person prior to his/her 18th birthday that would have been a crime if committed by an adult

- **Co-offending:** Situations in which two or more individuals are involved in the same

crime event(s)

- **Homicide:** The willful (nonnegligent) killing of one human being by another

- **Intimidation:** The unlawful placement of another person in reasonable fear of bodily harm through the use of threatening words and/or other conduct, but without displaying a weapon or subjecting the victim to actual physical attack

- **Larceny:** The unlawful taking, carrying, leading, or riding away of property from the possession, or constructive possession, of another person
- **Offense Counts:** The number of incidents that occur, regardless of how many offenders are involved

- **Offense Participations**: The number of youth who have engaged in crime, regardless of the number of offenses committed

- **Robbery:** The taking, or attempting to take, of anything of value under confrontational circumstances from the control, custody, or care of another person by force or threat of force or violence, and/or by putting the victim in fear of immediate harm

- **Simple Assault:** An unlawful physical attack by one person upon another where the offender does not display a weapon and the victim does not suffer obvious severe or aggravated bodily injury

- **Vandalism:** The willful or malicious destruction, damaging, defacing, or otherwise harming of real or personal property without the consent of the owner or the person having custody or control of it

Trends in Juvenile Offending

Overall Juvenile Offending Has Declined in Recent Years

Figure 1 displays the frequency of reported juvenile offending from 2016 to 2022. During this period, the frequency of juvenile offending varied seasonally, but decreased overall, according to analyses using both offenses and offense participations as an indicator of frequency. There is a slightly steeper decline in offense participations (an 18.6% decrease) relative to offense counts (a 14.2% decrease). The gap between offense participations and offense counts also decreased by 35.9%, indicating decreases in the proportion of co-offending incidents over time. There was a substantial drop in reported juvenile offending from April 2020 until the early summer months of 2021, indicating a decrease in youth offending during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1. Frequency of Juvenile Offending and Offense Participations, 2016 – 2022

Patterns in Juvenile Offending by Race and Sex

Juvenile Offending Has Decreased Among Black and White Youth

Figure 2 presents trends in offense participations by the race of juveniles (Black/White) by year and month. Because of limitations created by low counts, this analysis focuses on Black and White juveniles rather than those who identify with other races (e.g., American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, multi-racial). Offending among Hispanic-identified youth could not be examined due to considerable missing data for Hispanic ethnicity (information on perpetrator ethnicity was not collected until 2020 and is missing for more than 80% of crimes). Since the analyses rely on counts, not rates, the offending levels are not adjusted for population sizes.

White juveniles engage in slightly more offending than Black juveniles, but their offending patterns largely mirror each other, with decreases in the frequency of offending among both racial groups from 2016 to 2022, and similar dips in offending during the height of the

COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and early 2021. Overall, offending among White youth was about 16% lower in 2022 than in 2016, while it was roughly 17% lower for Black youth over the same period.

Figure 2. Frequency of Offense Participations by Race of Offender, 2016 – 2022

Figure 3 presents trends in juvenile offending by race, disaggregated by crime type (violent or property). There is significant variation by offense type. There were nearly 40% fewer reported property offenses perpetrated by Black youth in 2022 than in 2016 and 52% fewer perpetrated by White juveniles. For reported violent offenses, there were about 19% fewer offenses among Black juveniles and essentially no change in offenses committed by White juveniles (0.44% increase) for the same period.

Figure 3. Frequency of Offense Participations by Race and Crime Type, 2016 – 2022

Male Youth Offending is Lower in Recent Years, While Female Youth Offending is Largely Unchanged

Figure 4 presents trends in reported juvenile offending disaggregated by sex. Overall, there was considerably more male offending than female offending across the study period. Still, offending for male youth was about 20% lower in 2022 than in 2016, while offending by female youth was 2% lower. Because female offending dropped only a small amount, the overall decreases in juvenile offending are driven by decreases in male youth offending.

Figure 4. Frequency of Offense Participations by Sex, 2016 – 2022

Offending has Decreased Among Older Juveniles, but Increased Among Younger Juveniles in Recent Years

There was significant variation in the age of juvenile offenders over time. Figure 5 shows trends in offense participations by age for offenders aged 10 to 17, with breakouts for younger juveniles (10 to 14 age group) and older juveniles (15 to 17 group). While some

crimes were perpetrated by juveniles younger than 10, they were infrequent (less than 1% of offenses) and excluded.

Disaggregating offense participations in this way reveals important patterns. First, there is a clear and pronounced decrease in juvenile offending among the oldest juveniles, those aged 15 to 17. Specifically, offending among this age group was roughly 23% lower in 2022 than in 2016. Offending among juveniles aged 15 to 17 remained the most frequent over the study period, and decreases in criminal behavior by these juveniles helped to drive the overall drop in juvenile offending. Second, offending increased by nearly 9% from 2016 to 2022 for younger juveniles.

Figure 5. Annual Frequency of Offense Participations by Age Group, 2016 – 2022

Juvenile Co-offending Decreased More Than Juvenile Solo Offending

Figure 6 shows trends in offense counts disaggregated according to whether the offense involved a single juvenile or an incident of co-offending (i.e., two or more offenders). While most juvenile co-offending involves participating in the same crime with other juveniles (i.e., juvenile-juvenile co-offending), juveniles sometimes commit crimes with other people 18 or older (i.e., juvenile-adult co-offending). Thus, while all incidents in Figure 6 include juveniles, some instances of juvenile co-offending also involve adults as co-offenders. The patterns indicate that there was a larger decline in co-offending than solo offending over the study period. Co-offending was roughly 26% lower in 2022 than in 2016, while solo offending was 10% lower.

Figure 6. Frequency of Juvenile Solo/Co-offending, 2016 – 2022

Trends in the different forms of co-offending are presented in Figure 7. Juvenile-juvenile co-offending was nearly 20% lower in 2022 than in 2016, and juvenile-adult offending was about 35% lower over the same time period. From 2019 to 2020, juvenile-juvenile co-offending dropped 24%, while adult-juvenile offending fell 4%.

Figure 7. Variation in Co-offending Composition, 2016 – 2022

Patterns in Juvenile Offending by Offense Type

Crimes examined as part of the study were grouped into three categories: (1) violent offenses (murder, manslaughter, aggravated assault, simple assault, intimidation, robbery, and sex offenses); (2) property crimes (arson, burglary, forgery, larceny, shoplifting, theft of motor vehicle parts, motor vehicle theft, stolen property offenses, and vandalism); and (c) other offenses (animal cruelty, gambling offenses, drug offenses, human trafficking, kidnapping, and weapons law violations). These patterns are presented in Figure 8. Property crime offenses committed by juveniles were 36% lower in 2022 than in 2016. After dropping 25% from 2019 to 2020, juvenile violent crime incidents essentially returned to pre-2020 levels by the end of 2022 and higher that year than in 2016. Other offenses were 11% lower in 2022.

Figure 8. Frequency of Offenses by Crime Type, 2016 – 2022

Figure 9 presents patterns in select crime types . Juvenile-perpetrated homicides were 65% higher in 2022 than in 2016, increasing from 315 homicides in 2016 to 521 homicides in 2022. Compared to other violent offenses, homicide experienced the largest percentage change during that period. However, given the relatively low number of homicides that occur compared to the number of assaults and robberies, the percentage change is more heavily influenced by smaller increases or decreases.

Figure 9. Frequency of Homicide Offenses, 2016 – 2022

Figure 10 presents patterns in aggravated assault, simple assault, and intimidation/harassment offenses. These offense types were relatively stable over the study period, but there was a 28% drop in simple assaults from 2019 to 2020. By the end of 2022, aggravated assault and intimidation/harassment were about 9% higher than in 2016, while simple assault was 2% higher.

Figure 10. Frequency of Aggravated Assault, Simple Assault, and Intimidation/Harassment, 2016 – 2022

While robberies are considered a violent crime because they involve taking by force or intimidation, the trends for robbery roughly followed property crime trends. These trends are presented in Figure 11, which shows a pronounced and steady decrease in juvenile robbery offending over the study period. From 2016 to 2022, robberies perpetrated by juveniles decreased by roughly 45%. Juvenile-perpetrated sex offenses, by contrast, were relatively stable, decreasing by 1% from 2016 to 2022. Rape decreased by one quarter of one percent (0.25%) from 2016 to 2022. Between 2019 and 2020, however, there was a 10% decrease in rape offenses, followed by an 18% increase from 2020 to 2021.

Figure 11. Frequency of Robbery, 2016 – 2022

Burglary, larceny, and vandalism trends are presented in Figure 12. These crimes represent the three property offenses committed most frequently by youth over the study period. Each of these offense types decreased from 2016 to 2021, before plateauing from 2021 to 2022. Juvenile-perpetrated burglary was 62% lower in 2022 than in 2016. In 2016, juvenile-perpetrated larceny was the most common youth property crime; from 2016 to 2022, larcenies decreased 45%. and vandalism was the most frequent property offense in 2022. Juvenile-perpetrated vandalism decreased by roughly 27% between 2016 and 2022.

Figure 12. Frequency of Burglary, Larceny, and Vandalism, 2016 – 2022

Firearms and Juvenile Offending

Use of Firearms Among Youth Has Increased, Along With an Increase in Firearm-Related Injury

Recent popular media and policy discourse has highlighted the changing nature of juvenile violence, especially crimes involving the use of firearms.[8] Figure 13 examines the use of firearms and other weapons for juvenile-perpetrated violence, showing the frequency of incidents involving each weapon type. In this context, the notion of firearm “use” refers to the use of a firearm in any capacity during a crime, including instances in which a firearm is but not fired.[9] “Other weapons” include incidents in which offenders used something in addition to their hands and feet (e.g., a knife, blunt object, etc.), but did not use a firearm. A

complete list of weapons included in the “other weapons” category is available in the supplemental methodology report.

From 2016 to 2018, the number of juvenile offenses involving firearms mostly stayed flat. From 2019 to 2022, however, the number of these incidents increased by 24%, about 21% higher than in 2016. Incidents involving the use of other weapons dropped by 18% from 2016 to 2020, but by 2022 these incidents were 6% higher than in 2016.

Figure 13. Frequency of Weapon Use in Juvenile Offenses, 2016 – 2022

Figure 14 highlights trends in victim injury outcomes for incidents of youth offending involving use of a firearm. The number of victims seriously injured during gun-involved youth crime was 23% higher in 2022 than in 2016. Over this same period, the number of victims with minor injuries was 6% lower, and the number with no injuries increased by 0.4%. These patterns suggest that firearm use is not only increasing among youth offenders in recent years, but that firearm use is increasingly resulting in serious injury for victims.

Figure 14. Frequency of Injurious Outcomes Among Gun-Involved Juvenile Offenses, 2016 – 2022

School-Based Offenses

Juvenile Offending Increased in School Settings in Recent Years

Some of the most well-supported theories of juvenile offending note that the motivation for crime can be situational and vary across settings. Specifically, when adolescents spend time—particularly with other adolescents—in unstructured and unsupervised settings outside the home, the tendency to engage in delinquency increases.[10] This analysis examined juvenile offending by location type to highlight patterns related to where juveniles are mostly likely to spend their time: at home, in school, or in other public locations.

Figure 15. Frequency of Juvenile Offenses by Offense Location, 2016 – 2022

These patterns are presented in Figure 15. Offending within the home was the most frequent crime location, but at-home offending decreased from 2016 to 2022, dropping by roughly 20%. School offending, on the other hand, was roughly 16% higher in 2022 than 2016. The notable exception to this pattern is 2020, when many schools were closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Offending that occurred in other locations was 15% lower in 2022 than in 2016.

Conclusion and Implications

Overall, analyses of trends in the NIBRS data over a six-year timeframe indicate that juvenile offending has generally been on the decline. But there was substantial variation in this pattern. Juvenile-perpetrated burglary, larceny, and robbery all fell substantially (by 45% or greater), while levels of other crimes have remained relatively stable and some, such as homicide, increased. Examining trends by race and sex reveals some demographic differences. Violent and property offending decreased among Black juveniles from 2016 to 2022; property offending among White juveniles also decreased over this period, but violent offending did not. The number of offenses committed by male juveniles was also much lower in 2022 compared to 2016, while the number of offenses committed by female juveniles remained essentially unchanged. These trends suggest a narrowing of the well-documented gap between male and female juvenile offending.

The analyses also point to several notable shifts in the nature of juvenile offending from 2016 to 2022. For example, co-offending, or the participation in crime with others, decreased more substantially than solo offending, suggesting a potentially important shift from social to solitary offending among juveniles. Decreases in juvenile-juvenile co-offending were responsible for the majority of this drop, perhaps pointing to the changing nature of peer social relationships among youth. Additionally, the findings suggest that in some circumstances, juvenile offending may be becoming increasingly violent. Although the use of weapons other than firearms increased slightly from 2016 to 2022, incidents that involved a gun or resulted in serious firearm-related injury for victims increased substantially. When considered together, these patterns show a complex picture of juvenile offending. While overall juvenile violent crime is lower, the increased firearm use among juveniles warrants further exploration.

Juvenile offending also exhibited substantial changes during 2020 and 2021 (the years most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic). Violent offending was more affected than property offending, perhaps because of reductions in interpersonal interactions between youth during

this period. Juvenile-perpetrated violent crimes dropped sharply during this timeframe, while property offenses did not. From 2021 to 2022, juvenile offending in school settings increased substantially, surpassing pre-COVID levels.

Each of these changes offers a window on what's driving juvenile offending and can help policymakers and others develop effective interventions to address youth crime. To further advance our understanding, future analyses should explore some of the major patterns identified during the study period for this analysis, such as the increase in firearm use and the variation in violent offenses. In addition, while these findings create an important snapshot of juvenile offending in America, they are limited to those agencies that consistently report NIBRS data. Many agencies do not, and without timely national data that cover the entire country, it's unclear how these patterns may differ in other jurisdictions. Moving forward, we need a nationwide strategy to improve data collection.

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Endnotes

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[9] NIBRS includes a data element for "assault with a firearm," which records whether a firearm was used in an incident, but this element does not allow specification of whether the gun was fired, a person was shot, a gun was used as a blunt instrument (e.g., pistol-whipping), a gun was brandished (i.e., unlawfully displayed), or a gun was otherwise used in the assault. Firearm-related injury thus refers to any incident involving a firearm that results in an injury, but this cannot be broken down according to whether the injury occurred specifically because of the firearm.

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