Youth Crime Before and After the Onset of COVID-19

A Survey of Middle and High School Students in the United States

September 2024

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On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic related to the emergence and spread of COVID-19. During the year that followed, the lives of youth were dramatically affected by school closures and limits on social interactions adopted to curb the spread of the virus. This analysis, commissioned by the Council on Criminal Justice Crime Trends Working Group, explores how the pandemic's abrupt and substantial disruptions of the day-to-day lives of the nation's youth influenced their involvement in criminal behavior.

The report examines the effect of the first year of the pandemic on youth crime by comparing self-reported non-lethal criminal activity among nationally representative samples of more than 24,500 students in the eighth, 10th, and 12th grade. The students were participants in the Monitoring the Future (MTF) study, a project launched in 1975 to study changes in the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of young people in the United States.[1] Some of the students used in this analysis were surveyed during spring 2021, while others were surveyed in 2019 and the first few months of 2020. The two time periods allow for a meaningful comparison because MTF students surveyed in 2021 were exposed to the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, while those surveyed earlier were not. Additionally, the MTF asked youth to provide confidential reports on their participation in several forms of non-lethal criminal activity during the preceding 12 months, while the second group of students reported on their activities between spring 2020 and spring 2021, which coincided with the widespread closing of U.S. businesses and schools and their gradual reopening in many communities over the subsequent year.

Data used for the analysis included the counties in which the survey participants lived. The county-level data on socioeconomic conditions and school closures were then combined with the youths' self-reported data on crime. This self-report data offers an important complement to more commonly used arrest data and crimes recorded by the police. The MTF provides information specifically about youth from different demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, the MTF surveyed youth about key risk factors for crime, such as their frequency of unstructured socializing and substance use. Thus, the MTF can be used to help explain why youth crime may have changed during the first year of the pandemic in ways arrest data cannot. Further details about the MTF, other data sources, and the methods used to produce the results reported below are available in the supplemental methodology report.

Key Takeaways

- **Self-reported crime among middle and high school students decreased substantially between spring 2020 and spring 2021.** Non-lethal violent crime dropped by 24% and property crime declined by 23%, large reductions compared to changes observed over similar time frames during the preceding three decades.
- **The declines in youth crime** did not vary by sex, race/ethnicity, or parental education.
- **Youth crime decreased during the first year of the pandemic** in part due to reductions in how frequently youth attended parties, went out with friends for fun, drank alcohol, or used cannabis.
- **The decreases in property crime and non-lethal violence were smaller among youth in disadvantaged counties.** Youth from counties that closed a larger share of their schools reported greater reductions in property crime, but not violent crime.

Glossary

- **Monitoring the Future (MTF) Study**: An ongoing study of the behaviors, attitudes, and values of American youth. Representative samples of high school seniors have been interviewed annually since 1976; representative samples of eighth- and 10th–graders have been interviewed annually since 1991

- **Youth**: Eighth, 10th, and 12th grade students surveyed in the MTF Study
- **Property Crime**: Stealing something worth less than $50, stealing something worth more than $50, and breaking into a house or building during the 12 months preceding the survey
- **Non-Lethal Violent Crime:** Hurting someone badly enough that they need bandages or a doctor's care during the 12 months preceding the survey
- **Offending Variety**: The number of distinct crimes youth reported having committed during the 12 months preceding the survey
- **Offending Prevalence:** The proportion of youth who engaged in non-lethal violent crime and/or property crime during the 12 months preceding the survey. This value ranges from 0.0 to 1.0. A prevalence of 0.15 means 15 out of 100 youth; a prevalence of 0.06 means 6 out of 100 youth.
- **Violent Crime Prevalence:** The proportion of youth who reported hurting someone badly enough to need bandages or a doctor's care during the 12 months preceding the survey

- **Property Crime Prevalence:** The proportion of youth who reported that they had stolen something worth less than $50, stolen something worth more than $50, or broken into a house or building during the 12 months preceding the survey
- **County-Level Socioeconomic Disadvantage:** A composite index that describes youth from counties with different levels of unemployment, poverty, median income, educational attainment, and single-parent families
- **Affluent Counties:** Counties that rank in the lowest 10% on levels of socioeconomic disadvantage
- **Highly Disadvantaged Counties:** Counties that rank in the highest 10% on levels of socioeconomic disadvantage
- **County-Level School Closure Rate:** Share of county schools that exhibited a 75% or greater reduction in cell phone-measured visits during the first year of the pandemic compared to 2019
- **Unstructured Socializing:** The degree to which youth congregated and socialized with peers in unsupervised settings, as measured by how often in an average week they: 1) went to parties; and 2) spent evenings out for fun and recreation

- **Substance Use**: Past-year frequency of drinking alcohol and using cannabis

Youth Crime Before the Onset of COVID-19

The prevalence of youth crime in the U.S. was historically low in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 1 shows changes in criminal activity among MTF-surveyed youth from 1991 to 2019, focusing on changes in overall offending variety (i.e., the number of distinct crimes youth reported having committed during the 12 months preceding the survey) and offending prevalence (i.e., the proportion of youth who engaged in non-lethal violent crime and/or property crime during the 12 months preceding the survey). While there were notable fluctuations, between 1991 and 2019 youth offending variety declined by 38% and offending prevalence dropped by 33%. This substantial reduction in youth offending since the early 1990s occurred for both property crime and non-lethal violence.

Figure 1. Changes in Criminal Activity Reported by Youth (8th, 10th, and 12th Graders) in the Monitoring the Future (MTF) Study, 1991-2019

Youth Crime Before and After the Onset of COVID-19

Youth crime decreased substantially during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 2 shows a decrease of 23% in property crime prevalence from 0.257 to 0.197 (or about one out of four to one out of five) and a 24% reduction in violent crime prevalence (from 0.091 to 0.69). Given the historical context of changes in youth crime over the past three decades (Figure 1), the size of this short-term decrease in offending is significant.

Figure 2. Youth Violent Crime and Property Crime Reported in the MTF Before and After the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, middle school and high school youth reported less offending, regardless of their sex, race/ethnicity, and their parents' educational

attainment. Large reductions in crime were reported by youth in the eighth, 10th, and 12th grade, for male and female youth, for those from each of the five largest racial-ethnic groups (American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic White), and for those youth whose parents span the educational attainment continuum from "high school graduate or less" to "graduate school."

Several key risk factors for youth crime, including the frequency of unstructured socializing and substance use, decreased significantly during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Figure 3 shows, the frequency of youth going out with friends for fun decreased by 11% (from 0.466 to 0.416) and the frequency of attending parties declined by 22% (from 0.569 to 0.446). In addition, the frequency of alcohol consumption dropped by 9% (from 1.78 to 1.62), and the frequency of cannabis use fell by 12% (from 1.72 to 1.52).

Figure 3. Changes in the Frequency of Youth Unstructured Socializing and Substance Use Before and After the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic

After accounting for changes in unstructured socializing and substance use between the two periods, youth crime was still about 20% lower during the pandemic period compared to the period before the start of the pandemic. This finding suggests that youth crime declined from spring 2020 to spring 2021 in part due to reductions in how frequently youth attended parties, went out with friends for fun, drank alcohol, and used cannabis. See the supplemental methodological report for estimation details.

County-Level Differences in Youth Crime Before and After the Onset of COVID-19

During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, youth living in socioeconomically disadvantaged counties experienced the smallest reductions in crime. Figure 4 documents changes in the prevalence of property crime and violent crime by county-level socioeconomic disadvantage (a composite index that describes youth from counties with different levels of unemployment, poverty, median income, educational attainment, and single-parent families). It compares youth living in disadvantaged counties (i.e., those that rank in the highest 10% on levels of socioeconomic disadvantage) with those in affluent counties (i.e., those that rank in the lowest 10% on levels of socioeconomic disadvantage). The prevalence of property

crime decreased by 14% (from 0.251 to .216) among youth from disadvantaged counties, while dropping 31% (from 0.275 to 0.19) among youth from affluent counties. The differences for violent crime were even more substantial. Violent crime decreased by 5% (from 0.099 to 0.094) among youth from disadvantaged counties, while falling by 39% (from 0.087 to 0.053) among youth from affluent counties.

Figure 4. Youth Violent Crime and Property Crime Reported in the MTF Before and After the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic, by County-Level Socioeconomic Disadvantage

During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, youth property crime declined the most among youth from counties in which a larger share of schools closed. Figure 5 shows changes in the prevalence of property crime and violent crime among youth from counties with low school closure rates during the first year of the pandemic (i.e., rank in lowest 10% of counties) and counties with high school closure rates (i.e., rank in the highest 10%). Property crime decreased by 36.5% (from 0.271 to 0.172) among youth from counties with high levels of school closure, compared to a drop of 15.5% (from 0.252 to 0.213) among youth from counties with low levels of school closure. Youth violent crime, however, dropped substantially regardless of counties' school closure practices; the decrease was somewhat larger among youth from counties with high rates of school closure (31% compared to 24%), but the difference was not statistically significant.

Figure 5. Youth Violent Crime and Property Crime Reported in the MTF Before and After the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic, by School Closure Rates

Conclusions

This study found that self-reported property crime and non-lethal violence among middle school and high school students decreased substantially during the first year of the pandemic. These decreases were the largest in counties in which a larger share of schools closed. They also coincided with significant reductions in the amount of unstructured time youth spent with their peers outside of school and their frequency of substance use. These findings suggesting that the first year of the pandemic dramatically limited situational opportunities conducive to criminal activity.

The reductions in crime between spring 2020 and spring 2021 were broad in scope, and were seen among middle- and high-school youth regardless of their demographic background and their parents' educational attainment. The decreases were especially large among youth from affluent counties, where violent crime dropped 39% in the pandemic's first year. In highly disadvantaged counties, violent offending did not decrease significantly, and the reduction in property crime was less than half the drop recorded among youth in affluent counties. These patterns suggest that the risk factors for crime during the first year of the pandemic differed for youth who lived in highly disadvantaged counties.

This study complements police reports on youth offending, but the findings from this data do not speak to changes in youth's involvement in lethal offending. Police data have shown that homicide rates among youth increased during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.[2] Homicide accounts for approximately one-tenth of one percent of all youth crime, and so the pandemic's impact on youth homicide may have been unique. Overall, this study shows large reductions in non-lethal violent crime and property crime (declines of 24% and 23%, respectively) during the first year of the pandemic, especially when compared to changes observed over similar time frames during the preceding three decades.

About the Authors

Eric Baumer, Ph.D., is professor of sociology and criminology at the Pennsylvania State University. His work explores criminology, communities and urban sociology, the sociology of law, and social demography, with particular attention to assessing social change and spatial variation in levels of crime and victimization, the mobilization of law, and the application of legal sanctions. Baumer is currently leading research on the impact of social change on youth crime and an examination of the influence of community context on both crime and victimization.

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Acknowledgements

This paper was produced with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Arnold Ventures, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, Southern Company Foundation, Stand Together, and CCJ's general operating contributors.

The authors express their gratitude to the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) and Monitoring the Future (MTF) research team for facilitating access to the data used in this report. The MTF is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). The original collector of the data, ICPSR, and NIDA bear no responsibility for use of the data or for interpretations or inferences based upon such uses. We are also deeply appreciative of CCJ Policy Director Stephanie Kennedy and Senior Research Specialist Ernesto Lopez for their invaluable input throughout the development of this work.

Finally, we acknowledge Richard Rosenfeld, who encouraged us to embark on this study before his passing in January 2024. His unparalleled contributions to the study of crime trends were a significant source of inspiration for our work.

Suggested Citation

Baumer, E., & Staff, J. (2024). *Youth crime before and after the beginning of COVID-19: A survey of middle and high school students in the United States*. Council on Criminal Justice. https://councilоncj.org/youth-crime-before-and-after-the-beginning-of-covid-19-a-survey-of-middle-and-high-school-students-in-the-united-states/

Endnotes

[1] Monitoring the Future. (2024). *Data access*. https://monitoringthefuture.org/results/data-access/

[2] Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2023). *Crime data explorer.* https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/explorer/crime/crime-trend; Makridis, C. A., & VerBruggen, R. (2022). *Breaking down the 2020 homicide spike*. New York: Manhattan Institute. https://manhattan.institute/article/breaking-down-the-2020-homicide-spike