

How Is The Juvenile Justice Population Defined?

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How Many Juveniles Come Into Contact With The Juvenile Justice System?

The juvenile justice population can be defined as youth age 10 or older who come in contact with the juvenile justice system. The upper age limit for which youth are involved with the juvenile court system varies by jurisdiction. In general, most jurisdictions set the upper age limit at 17, although in some states it can be as young as 15 or 16. Additionally, there are a few states that allow juveniles as young as six or seven to be under juvenile system's jurisdiction.¹

Estimating the exact number of juveniles involved with the juvenile justice system is difficult to track at the national level for a number of reasons. Juvenile justice is primarily the jurisdiction of state governments, and each state tracks the number of juveniles involved with the system differently. Additionally, the current systems used to track involvement with the juvenile justice system both underestimate and overestimate the number of youth involved with the system.

The main source for tracking the number of youth involved with the juvenile justice system. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), Juvenile Court Statistics. Juvenile Court Statistics reports on the number of cases disposed. Cases disposed refers to the number of cases for which a definite action was taken, such as a plan of treatment, probation or detention. A "case" represents a juvenile processed by a juvenile court on a new referral, regardless of the number of law violations contained in the referral."² This means that a juvenile brought before the court on multiple violations is only counted once, but if the individual is brought before the court in two separate cases, they are counted twice.³

In 2014, there were about 73.5 million youth under the age of 18 and about 33.2 million were between ages 10-17.⁴ According to Juvenile Court Statistics, in 2013, there were 1,167,500 cases referred to juvenile justice courts.⁵ Of these cases, a total of 387,100 were dismissed and did not result in court-ordered treatment or sanctions. As a result, it can be estimated that there were about 780,400 juveniles receiving juvenile justice services in 2013. This equates to about 2.3% of the U.S. population between the ages of 10 and 17.

There is one additional caveat associated with the estimate of justice-involved youth. The estimate does not account for the number of youth who may be in contact with the juvenile justice system due to adjudication in a prior year. This means that the actual number of youth involved with the juvenile justice system is slightly higher than the Juvenile Court Statistics number of cases.

Number Of Juvenile Cases By State, 2013⁶

State	Delinquency	Status	Total
Alabama	14,430	10,102	24,532
Alaska	3,372	None	3,372
Arizona	21,530	6,396	27,926
Arkansas	7,056	4,143	11,199
California	Not available		
Colorado	8,808		8,808
Connecticut	11,686	2,454	14,140
Delaware	6,020		6,020
District of Columbia	2,393	274	2,667
Florida	73,394	354	73,748
Georgia	43,370	13,008	56,378
Hawaii	3,173	3,690	6,863
Idaho	14,436		14,436
Illinois	Not available		
Indiana	21,930	5,762	27,692
Iowa	16,300		16,300
Kansas	9,680		9,680
Kentucky	Not available		
Louisiana	Not available		
Maine	Not available		
Maryland	23,436	1,820	25,256
Massachusetts	7,670	5,108	12,778
Michigan	Not available		
Minnesota	18,110	9,650	27,760
Mississippi	0?		
Missouri	21,517	14,803	36,320
Montana	5,066	1,584	6,650
Nebraska	5,639	1,756	7,395
Nevada	Not available		
New Hampshire	Not available		
New Jersey	24,770	9,662	34,432
New Mexico	13,193	2,390	15,583

State	Delinquency	Status	Total
New York	Not available		
North Carolina	18,033	2,870	20,903
North Dakota	0?		
Ohio	65,968	16,062	82,030
Oklahoma	12,214	2,211	14,425
Oregon	14,129	8,458	22,587
Pennsylvania	23,857	442	24,299
Rhode Island	3,170	1,227	4,397
South Carolina	17,137	2,062	19,199
South Dakota	2,836	1,452	4,288
Tennessee	45,063	18,381	63,444
Texas	59,256	4,971	64,227
Utah	22,069	5,919	27,988
Vermont	700	95	795
Virginia	Not available		
Washington	24,319	2,253	26,572
West Virginia	1,837	1,977	3,814
Wisconsin	10,282	4,586	14,868
Wyoming	766	173	939
Total	698,615	166,095	864,710

Note: State data in chart does not add to the total number of juvenile court cases because estimates for the states with unavailable data were made by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Office.

What Crimes Are Juveniles Most Often Charged With?

Juvenile offenses are broken into two categories: delinquency offenses and status offenses. Delinquency offenses are acts that if committed by an adult would result in criminal prosecution. Status offenses are acts that if committed by an adult would not be considered crimes, such as truancy or purchasing of alcohol. The majority of juveniles that come into contact with the juvenile justice system are charged with delinquency crimes.

Of the 1,167,500 cases referred to juvenile justice courts, 1,058,500 (91.7%) were for delinquency offenses and 109,000 (9.3%) were for status offenses. The most typical delinquency offense was simple assault, representing 18% of all cases, while homicide was the least typical of all offenses, representing 0.1% of all cases. The top status offense was truancy, representing 51% of all status offenses.⁷

Top Five Delinquency Offense, 2013		
Offense	Number of Cases	Percent of Cases
Simple assault	186,400	17.6%
Larceny-theft	183,400	17.3%
Drug law violations	141,700	13.4%
Obstruction of justice	132,000	12.5%
Disorderly conduct	74,500	7.0%

Status Offenses By Type, 2013		
Offense	Number of Cases	Percent of Cases
Truancy	55,590	51%
Liquor	16,350	15%
Curfew	9,810	9%
Ungovernability	9,810	9%
Runaway	8,720	8%
Miscellaneous	8,720	8%
Total	109,000	100%

What Are The Characteristics Of Justice-Involved Youth?

The characteristics of youth charged with delinquency versus status offenses varies; however across all justice-involved youth, the majority of offenders were male and white.

Juveniles Charged With Delinquency Cases

The majority of the juvenile delinquency court cases in 2013 were committed by youth under the age of 16 (53% of all juvenile court cases). However, the delinquency case rates increase with the age youth – with the case rate for 17 year-olds at twice the rate of 14 year-olds:

- 2.3 cases per 1,000 juveniles among 10 year-olds
- 22.3 cases per 1,000 juveniles among 13 year-olds
- 37.8 cases per 1,000 juveniles among 14 year-olds
- 53.8 cases per 1,000 juveniles among 15 year-olds
- 68.6 cases per 1,000 juveniles among 16 year-olds
- 76.1 cases per 1,000 juveniles among 17 year-olds

Males are much more likely than females to be tried in juvenile court. In 2013, 73% of juvenile cases were for males. Although, males overwhelming account for the majority of juvenile court cases, the number of juvenile cases involving females has continued to rise since 1985. In 1985, females accounted for 19% of juvenile cases and in 2013, they accounted for 23% of cases.

The large majority of juvenile justice court cases were for white youth in 2013 – 62% of cases involved white youth, 35% involved black youth, 2% involved American Indians, and 1% involved Asians. Importantly however, the proportion of cases involving black youth was much higher than juveniles of other races in 2013:⁸

- 74.3 cases per 1,000 juveniles among black youth
- 27.4 cases per 1,000 juveniles among white youth
- 29.6 cases per 1,000 juveniles among American Indian youth
- 7.3 cases per 1,000 juveniles among Asian youth

Juveniles Charged With Status Offenses

Like juveniles charged with delinquency cases, the older the youth, the higher the case rate. In 2013, the case rate among juveniles aged 17 was more than twice the rate among 14 year-olds:

- 0.3 cases per 1,000 juveniles among 10 year-olds
- 2.0 cases per 1,000 juveniles among 13 year-olds
- 3.7 cases per 1,000 juveniles among 14 year-olds
- 5.7 cases per 1,000 juveniles among 15 year-olds
- 7.6 cases per 1,000 juveniles among 16 year-olds
- 8.2 cases per 1,000 juveniles among 17 year-olds

Also like delinquency cases, the majority of cases involving status offenses were among males. However, the gender balance is much more equal with status offenses – 53% of petitioned status offenses involved males in 2013 and 47% involved females.

Although the majority of status offense cases involved white juveniles, the highest case rates were among American Indians. In 2013, the case rate for American Indians was 1.7 times higher than the case rate for white youth, 1.2 times higher than the case rate for black youth, and 4.2 times higher than the cases rate for Asian youth.

How Do Juveniles Move Through The Juvenile Justice System?

Each jurisdiction (usually a state) operates its own juvenile justice system and therefore, the process to move through the juvenile justice system is slightly different in every state. The information here is meant to provide a general overview of how juveniles move through the juvenile justice system and should not be considered concrete in every situation.

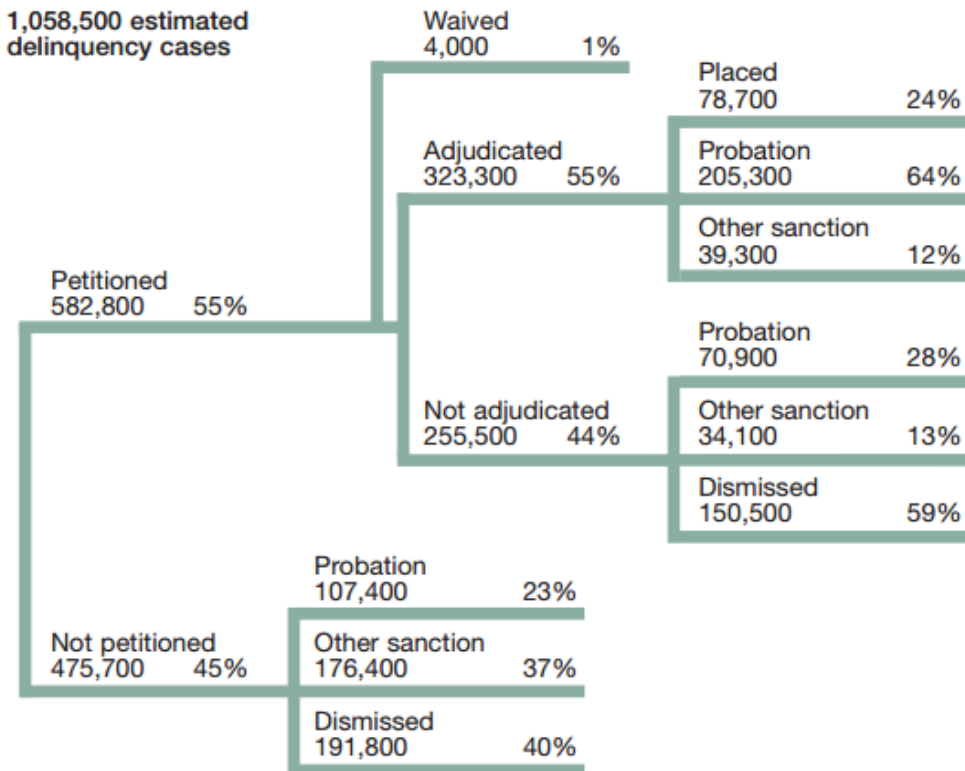
After a juvenile is arrested, law enforcement makes the decision to refer the case to the juvenile justice system or to refer the youth to alternate programs – depending on the nature of the arrest and the juvenile’s prior contact with the criminal justice system. Cases referred to by the juvenile justice system by law enforcement are processed through an intake department.

The intake department determines whether the case should be handled formally or informally, or dismissed due to lack of evidence. Most cases handled informally are status offenses because the prevailing opinion is that these youth are in need of social supports and services, rather than rehabilitation. Additionally, a case may be handled informally if the youth admits guilt. Usually in these cases, a consent decree is written up, which outlines conditions for the youth to meet such as attending counseling or agreeing to informal probation. If a juvenile violates the consent decree, the case will be handled formally. In 2013, 55% of cases referred to the juvenile court system were handled formally.

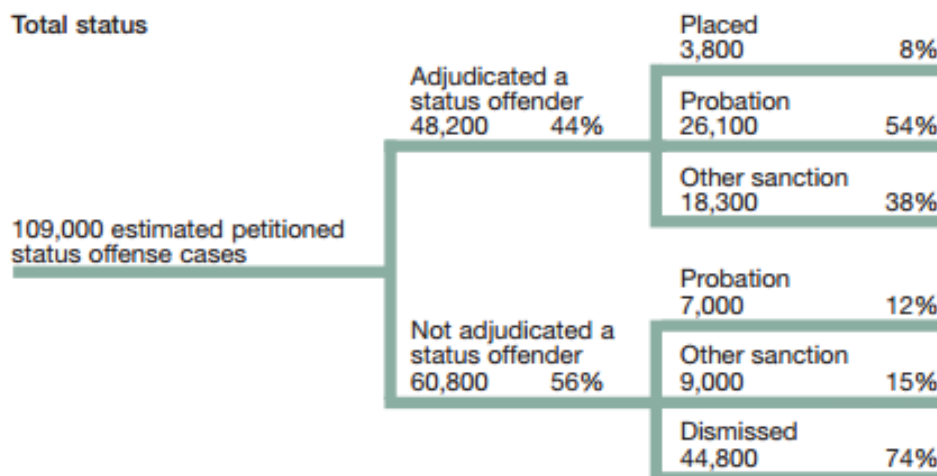
If the case is handled formally, a petition is filed with the court and at this point it is decided whether to try the case in the juvenile justice system or criminal court system. A judge may waive the case to the criminal court system if this is believed to be a more appropriate setting. In 2013, only 1% of all cases were waived to the criminal court system.

If handled in the juvenile justice system, an adjudicatory hearing, known as a trial in the criminal court system, is held. Most often the judge determines the juvenile’s guilt, although in some cases the hearing includes a jury. Juveniles found guilty are referred to as adjudicated delinquents. In 2013, about 55% of juveniles who had a hearing were adjudicated. Finally, a disposition hearing is held, which determines the juvenile’s sanctions or treatment for the offense committed.

Juvenile Case Processing Overview For Delinquent Offenders, 2013⁹



Juvenile Case Processing Overview For Status Offenders, 2013¹⁰



What Are The Most Common Outcomes Of Cases In The Juvenile Justice System?

There are two main types of dispositions that are imposed on juveniles: out-of-home placement and community-based treatment. Out-of-home placement includes both secure detention facilities, as well as other types of facilities, such as residential centers, group homes, and wilderness camps. Community-based treatment is a much broader category and the treatment options vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction depending on service availability. Common community-based treatment for justice-involved youth include cognitive behavioral therapy, multisystemic therapy, functional family therapy, aggression replacement therapy, and functional family parole.

There is one other important disposition that may be imposed on juveniles, which is probation. In some states, the probation system functions much like the adult system with limited services available. In these states, probation can be seen as a third main disposition option. In other states, probation is less traditional and more focused on providing community-based treatment options. In these cases, probation can be considered a community-based treatment option. It is important when looking at individual states to determine how the state is defining and what they are calling each types of service.

For juveniles with delinquency cases in 2013, 7.4% of cases resulted in out-of-home placement, 36.2% in probation, and 23.6% in other sanctions. Of the petitioned status offenses, 3.5% resulted in out-of-home placement, 30.4% in probation, and 25% in other sanctions. Other sanctions may refer to fines imposed on the juvenile, community-based treatment, or other available sanctions.

Is The Juvenile Justice Population Growing Or Declining?

The number of juvenile court cases has been steadily declining for both status offenses and delinquency offenses. The 780,400 total justice-involved youth in 2013 is a drop of about 18% from 2011, when there were an estimated 924,100 justice-involved youth.¹¹ Delinquency offense cases peaked in 1997, and declined 44% between 1997 and 2013. Status offense cases peaked slightly later in 2002, and declined 46% between 2002 and 2013.

There are two possible explanations for the decreasing juvenile justice population. The first is that these trends may reflect the tough on crime laws passed in the 1990s that resulted in the largest overhaul of the juvenile justice system to date. These laws removed many juveniles from under juvenile jurisdiction and automatically transferred them to adult courts.¹² Although, states have passed some laws that return juveniles to the jurisdiction of the juvenile court system, no reform has been as comprehensive as what occurred in the 1990s.

The second explanation may be that fewer juveniles are being arrested, resulting in a smaller juvenile justice population. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, which tracks arrest rates for certain violent crimes, such as criminal homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, and motor-vehicle theft. Juvenile arrest rates for violent crimes has decreased 64% since 1994 and has reached its lowest levels in 2013.¹³ Although, this data cannot necessarily be used as an indicator of arrest rates for less serious juvenile offenses, the trend does parallel the decrease in juvenile court cases. The decrease in juvenile court cases is likely a combination of these two trends, which run in tandem to one another.

Additional Reading

1. [Federal Investigation Finds St. Louis Juvenile Justice Court Violates Youth Due Process Rights, Discriminates Against Black Children](#) (2015, August 16). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.
2. [Half Of States Incarcerate Juveniles For Status Offenses](#) (2015, May 10). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.
3. [Majority Of Juvenile Offenders In Held In Public Facilities](#) (2015, May 3). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.
4. [Illinois Unveils Plan To Improve Juvenile Justice System Through Best Practices](#) (2015, April 12). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.
5. [Kansas Considering Recommendations To Improve Juvenile Justice System & Reduce Recidivism Rates](#) (2015, April 9). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.
6. [Multi-Systemic Therapy Improves Outcomes For Minority Juvenile Offenders](#) (2015, March 1). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.
7. [New York To Raise Age For Juvenile Justice Jurisdiction To 18 By January 2018](#) (2015, March 1). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.
8. [Juvenile Justice Reform Bill Introduced In South Dakota Legislature](#) (2015, February 15). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.
9. [South Dakota To Revamp Juvenile Justice System To Reduce Residential Placements By 64% By 2020](#) (2015, January 4). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.
10. [75% Of West Virginia Youth In Juvenile Justice Out-Of-Home Placements Were Low-Risk Offenders](#) (2014, December 21). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.
11. [Maryland To Launch Pilot Program To Support Youth Involved In Foster Care/Juvenile Justice Systems](#) (2014, October 26). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.
12. [Less Than Half Of Youth In Juvenile Justice Schools Earned Course Credits In 2009](#) (2014, May 11). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.
13. [Massachusetts Expands Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative Into Sixth County](#) (2014, April 6). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.
14. [New York City To Implement Respite Care Services For Youth At-Risk Of Entering Juvenile Justice System](#) (2014, March 30). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.
15. [Up To 70% Of Youth In Contact With Juvenile Justice System Have Mental Health Needs](#) (2014, March 16). *OPEN MINDS Weekly News Wire*.

Sources

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² Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2015, October). Juvenile Court Statistics, 2013. Pg. 1. Access online November 16, 2015 at <https://www.openminds.com/market-intelligence/resources/juvenile-court-statistics-2013.htm/>

³ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2015, October). Juvenile Court Statistics, 2013. Access online November 16, 2015 at <https://www.openminds.com/market-intelligence/resources/juvenile-court-statistics-2013.htm/>

⁴ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2014, December). OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book. Accessed online November 16, 2015 at <http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/qa05103.asp?qaDate=2012>

⁵ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2015, October). Juvenile Court Statistics, 2013. Access online November 16, 2015 at <https://www.openminds.com/market-intelligence/resources/juvenile-court-statistics-2013.htm/>

⁶ Hockenberry, S., Smith, J., and Kang, W. (2015). Easy Access to State and County Juvenile Court Case Counts, 2013. Accessed online November 16, 2015 at <http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezaco/>

⁷ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2015, October). Juvenile Court Statistics, 2013. Access online November 16, 2015 at <https://www.openminds.com/market-intelligence/resources/juvenile-court-statistics-2013.htm/>

⁸ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2015, October). Juvenile Court Statistics, 2013. Access online November 16, 2015 at <https://www.openminds.com/market-intelligence/resources/juvenile-court-statistics-2013.htm/>

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¹⁰ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2015, October). Juvenile Court Statistics, 2013. Access online November 16, 2015 at <https://www.openminds.com/market-intelligence/resources/juvenile-court-statistics-2013.htm/>

¹¹ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2014, July). Juvenile Court Statistics, 2011. Access online November 16, 2015 at <https://www.openminds.com/market-intelligence/resources/juvenile-court-statistics-2011.htm/>

¹² National Center for Juvenile Justice. (2014, December). Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2014 National Report. Pg. 93. Accessed online November 16, 2015 at <https://www.openminds.com/market-intelligence/resources/020915ojjdpjuvenilejustice2014.htm/>

¹³ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2014, December). OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book. Accessed online November 16, 2015 at <http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/qa05301.asp?qaDate=2012>