SERIOUS AND VIOLENT JUVENILE DELINQUENCY TRENDS AND UNIQUE FEATURES OF JUVENILE VIOLENCE

An unprecedented juvenile violence “epidemic” is said to have occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Blumstein, 1995a, 1995b; Cook & Laub, 1998; Fox, 1996b). In this chapter I examine the so-called epidemic, focusing on serious and violent juvenile delinquency trends in two time periods: from 1980 to the present and from the late 1980s through the early 1990s. The longer time frame serves to put in proper perspective the increases in violent juvenile delinquency reported for the period of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the first section of the chapter, I examine in detail the rates of serious and violent delinquency in both of the time periods; I then provide information on the distinguishing features of serious and violent delinquency.

Serious and Violent Juvenile Delinquency Trends

Three different kinds of measures are used to gauge changes in the levels of serious and violent delinquency: police arrests, victimization surveys, and delinquency self-report surveys. Observers can draw different conclusions regarding juvenile violence trends during the late 1980s and early 1990s, depending on the data sources they use to measure changes. The patterns of delinquency suggested by victimization reports, arrest data, and self-report measurements are distinctly different from one another for this period.

Arrest Data

The number of violent juvenile delinquency arrests increased in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Arrest data reported in the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s annual compilation of data reported by localities across the country (Uniform Crime Reports) are the most widely recognized juvenile delinquency trend data. State and federal legislators, the broadcast and print news media, and state and local policy makers most commonly refer to these FBI data in tracking juvenile delinquency trends and in making policy changes. It is important to note, however, that arrest data indicate society’s response to juvenile delinquency, not the actual level of delinquency. Police choose to make arrests depending on local policies, and arrest rates vary from community to community for the same kinds of offenses (Shannon, 1968, 1988).

Arrest data show that, after years of stability, the violent juvenile delinquency arrest rate began to increase in the late 1980s (see Figure 1.1). This focused national attention on the juvenile violence problem. In 1989, the violent juvenile arrest rate increased to its highest level since the 1960s (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999, p. 120). This rate continued to climb each year thereafter, until it reached a peak in 1994. In the period 1988 through 1994, the violent juvenile arrest rate increased 62% (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999, p. 120). From 1984 through 1994, the number of juvenile homicide offenders tripled (Snyder & Sickmund, 1995, p. 56; Snyder, Sickmund, & Poe-Yamagata, 1996, p. 22). This development grabbed headline attention, and it was repeatedly cited as evidence that juvenile delinquency was out of control in the United States. However, the juvenile murder arrest rate barely doubled, from just under 6 to 14 per 100,000 juveniles ages 10-17 (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999, p. 122). The murder rate for young adults (ages 18-24) was much higher: 25 in
Box 1.1

Uniform Crime Reports

The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), publications produced by a program begun in the 1930s, are based on voluntary reports that thousands of law enforcement agencies across the United States make each year on the following information:

- Number of reported index crimes (see explanation below)
- Number of arrests and the most serious charge involved in each arrest
- Age, sex, and race of arrestees
- Proportion of reported index crimes cleared by arrest and the proportion of these cleared by the arrest of persons under age 18
- Dispositions of juvenile arrests
- Detailed victim, assailant, and circumstance information in homicide cases

UCR data are not fully representative of the juvenile population. Agencies contributing data on reported crime in 1997 represented 95% of the U.S. population, but those contributing data on arrests represented only 68% of the population. Nevertheless, UCR data can provide estimates of the annual number of arrests of juveniles and certain information on them. The UCR program monitors the number of crimes that come to the attention of law enforcement agencies. Thus it is important to keep in mind that UCR crime data reflect only crimes that are actually reported to law enforcement, and therefore cannot be used to measure the number or proportion of crimes actually committed by juveniles or adults. Crimes are more likely to be reported if they involve serious injuries or large economic losses. The willingness of victims to report crimes and the inclination of the police to make records of incidents reported by victims are other factors that affect the actual number of reported crimes.

Crime Indexes of the Uniform Crime Reports

The UCR Crime Index is divided into two components: the Violent Crime Index and the Property Crime Index. The Violent Crime Index includes murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. Definitions of these crimes are as follows:

- Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter is the willful (nonnegligent) killing of one human being by another.
- Forcible rape is the carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will.
- Robbery is the taking or attempting to take of anything of value from the care, custody, or control of a person or persons by force or threat of force or violence and/or by putting the victim in fear.
- Aggravated assault is an unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury. This type of assault is usually accompanied by the use of a weapon, and attempts to harm another are included in this category.

The Property Crime Index includes burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson. Definitions of these crimes are as follows:

- Burglary is the unlawful entry of a structure to commit a felony or theft.
- Larceny-theft is the unlawful taking, carrying, leading, or riding away of property from the possession or constructive possession of another. It includes shoplifting, theft from motor vehicles, and other thefts in which no use of force, violence, or fraud occurs.
• Motor vehicle theft is the theft or attempted theft of a motor vehicle of any type.
• Arson is any willful or malicious burning or attempt to burn a dwelling house, public building, motor vehicle, or personal property of another.

The overall Crime Index includes all eight crimes included in the Violent Crime Index and Property Crime Index.

Although the Violent Crime Index excludes some violent crimes, such as kidnapping and extortion, it contains most of the crimes generally considered to be violent. In contrast, a substantial proportion of the crimes in the Property Crime Index are generally considered less serious crimes, such as shoplifting, theft from motor vehicles, and bicycle theft, all of which are included in the larceny-theft category. Otherwise, the Property Crime Index contains what are generally considered to be “serious” crimes.

**Other Important Features of the UCR Program**

There are several drawbacks to using national arrest data published in the *Uniform Crime Reports* as a measure of delinquency (McCord, Widom, & Crowell, 2001, pp. 26-27). For example, not everyone who is arrested actually committed the offense for which he or she was arrested. In addition, the accuracy and completeness of the data are affected by the voluntary nature of UCR reporting (Maltz, 1999), and all states and localities do not report data every year. A person can be arrested more than once in a year. The UCR data reflect the numbers of arrests each year, but not the numbers of persons arrested. Each arrest is counted separately in the UCR data, and one arrest can represent many crimes. For instance, if a person is arrested for allegedly committing 40 burglaries, the arrest would show up in the UCR data as one arrest, with no indication of the number of burglaries. Also, one crime may result in multiple arrests. For example, three youths may be arrested for one burglary. A single crime with multiple arrests is more likely to occur with juveniles than with adults, because juveniles are more likely than adults to commit crimes in groups. In addition, UCR arrest data reflect only the most serious offense for which a person was arrested.

UCR data capture the proportion of crimes that were “cleared” (solved) by a juvenile arrest. Assessments of the juvenile contribution to the U.S. crime problem are often based on this proportion. Arrest and clearance statistics give a very different picture of the juvenile contribution to crime. A crime is considered cleared if someone is formally charged with the crime. To use the UCR data properly, one must understand this difference (for an excellent illustration, see Snyder & Sickmund, 1999, pp. 113-114).

In the late 1980s, the UCR program began to move from aggregate statistics to detailed incident-based reporting. The redesigned data-reporting protocol was labeled the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). NIBRS is designed to allow law enforcement agencies to report to the FBI information on many attributes of an incident, including the following (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999, p. 114):

• The demographic characteristics of the victim
• All the offenses involved
• The date, time, and place(s) of the incident
• The level of victim injury
• The weapon involved
• The type and dollar value of property lost
• The victim’s perception of the demographic characteristics of the offender(s)

NIBRS data have myriad uses (see Maxfield & Maltz, 1999). As of August 2001, the FBI had certified a total of 21 states for NIBRS reporting, representing 16% of the U.S. population and 13% of crimes (for information on NIBRS status, see the Web site of the Bureau of Justice Statistics at www.ojp.usoj.gov/bjs/nibrsstatus.htm). This reporting system is expected to replace the UCR program in the future.

1994, having increased from 15 in 1984 (Fox, 1996b, p. 4).

It is interesting to note that juvenile arrest rates for Property Crime Index offenses (larceny-theft, burglary, motor vehicle theft, and arson) changed little from the late 1980s to the early 1990s (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999, p. 126). These offenses showed a different pattern over the period 1988-1993 (pp. 128-129). Arrest rates for burglary declined consistently over the 6-year period, larceny-theft arrest rates remained rather constant, and both the motor vehicle theft and arson rates increased sharply. Both motor vehicle theft and arson are low-rate offenses among juveniles, however; thus increases in these rates did not appreciably affect the overall trend for Property Crime Index offenses. Because juvenile violence arrest rates increased and juvenile serious property arrests did not increase noticeably, the delinquency increase was characterized as a juvenile violence epidemic—not an epidemic of overall juvenile delinquency. The possible occurrence of an “epidemic” of juvenile violence without a similar increase in nonviolent delinquency suggests that juvenile offenses deemed violent were specifically targeted for arrest and prosecution (Zimring, 1998a).

Violent juvenile arrests have been in a sharp downturn since 1994 (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). In 1999, the United States experienced its fifth consecutive year of an unprecedented drop in the rate of juvenile arrests for violent offenses. The juvenile arrest rate (the number of arrests per 100,000 juveniles ages 10 through 17) for murder in the United States fell 68% from 1993 to 1999, reaching its lowest level since 1966 (Snyder, 2000). The overall juvenile arrest rate for Violent Crime Index offenses dropped 36% from 1994 to 1999, its lowest level since 1988. In addition to decreases in juvenile murders, there were substantial drops in the juvenile arrest rate for every other violent crime in this period:

- Forcible rape was down 31% from 1991 to 1999, the lowest level since 1980.
- Robbery was down 53% from 1994 to 1999, the lowest level since 1980.
- Aggravated assault was down 24% from 1994 to 1999, the lowest level since 1989.

The juvenile arrest rate for Property Crime Index offenses, which had remained fairly level for most of the 1990s, fell 23% from 1997 to 1999. Each individual property crime also showed declines:

- Burglary was down 60% from 1980 to 1999.
- Larceny-theft was down 23% from 1997 to 1999.
- Motor vehicle theft was down 52% from 1990 to 1999.
- Arson was down 25% from 1994 to 1999.

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**Figure 1.1**  Juvenile Violent Crime Index Arrest Rates: 1981-1997

In addition, the juvenile arrest rate for weapons law violations fell by 39% from 1993 to 1999—its lowest level since 1988. Even juvenile arrest rates that increased during most of the 1990s have declined in recent years. The rate for drug abuse violations dropped by 13% from 1997 to 1999, and the rate for curfew and loitering violations dropped 17% over the same period. However, when we examine the more long-term trend (1994-2000), we see that juvenile arrests for a number of high-volume offenses—drug abuse violations, liquor law violations, nonserious assaults, and curfew violations—increased sharply, indicating that more and more juveniles are being arrested and brought into the juvenile justice system for minor offenses.

The decrease in juvenile violence persisted into 2000, marking 6 consecutive years. The added drop from 1999 to 2000 brought the overall violent juvenile crime arrest rate down to the 1980 level—before the sharp increase (Butts & Travis, 2002, p. 5). Moreover, the juvenile arrest rate for murder dropped to a level below the 1980 rate. From 1994—the peak year of violent juvenile arrests—to 2000, juvenile arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses dropped 34%, and Property Crime Index arrests dropped 31% (Butts & Travis, 2002).

The violent crime arrest rate for juveniles dropped twice as much as the adult rate from 1994 to 2002 (Butts & Travis, 2002, pp. 4-5). The juvenile arrest rate for murder plummeted 71% during this period, whereas the drop in rate for young adults, ages 18-24, was about half that. This sharp decrease in the juvenile arrest rate for murder dropped it even below the 1980 rate.

Victimization Trends

Victimization data collected in the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics show that violent juvenile victimizations increased during the late 1980s and early 1990s. In an analysis of NCVS data covering the period 1987-1992, Moone (1994) found that the juvenile violent victimization rate increased 23%. However, two-thirds of the violent juvenile victimizations (rape, robbery, aggravated...
assault, and simple assault) during this period were simple assaults that did not involve weapons and resulted in nothing more than minor injuries. Juvenile serious violent victimizations (rape, robbery, aggravated assault) did not increase significantly in this period. In fact, the proportion of violent juvenile victimizations that resulted in serious injury declined from 11% to 7% from 1987 to 1992, and the percentage of serious violent incidents resulting in injury and hospital stays and that involved the use of weapons remained essentially the same (Snyder & Sickmund, 1995). Figure 1.2 shows that the increase in assaults was accounted for mainly by simple assaults that did not result in serious injury.

The 23% increase in reported violent victimizations from 1987 to 1992 shown in Moone’s (1994) analysis is only about one-third as large as the increase (62%) in juvenile arrests for violent crimes between 1988 and 1994 (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999, p. 120). These sources would not show such a large discrepancy if both of them were valid measures of delinquency. Remember that arrests are official police responses to delinquency; arrest rates are not an actual measure of delinquency. Because of the limitations of national arrest data (see Box 1.1), victims’ reports are more valid than arrest rates as a measure of delinquency (see Box 1.2).

Violent juvenile victimizations began dropping before the mid-1990s. From 1993 through 1997, the number of serious violent victimizations with at least one juvenile offender dropped 33%; the drop in such victimizations in which all offenders were adults was lower, 25% (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999, pp. 62-63). Thus serious violent victimizations involving juvenile offenders dropped at a much faster rate than those involving adults.

Self-Reported Delinquency Trends

In self-reports obtained through surveys of juvenile populations, respondents give information on their own delinquent acts. These data are generally recognized as the most valid measure of delinquent behavior (Dunford & Elliott, 1984; Huizinga, Esbensen, & Weiher, 1996).

Data from two national self-report studies show that there was no sharp increase in juvenile violence in the 1980s and early 1990s (see Box 1.3). In an examination of trends in the Monitoring the Future (MTF) survey over the 1982-1994 period, Johnston, Bachman, and O’Malley (1995) found that high school seniors did not report more significant involvement in any of the 15 behaviors (except theft over $50) over the course of the 13 years of the survey; in fact, they reported modest decreases in involvement in most of the behaviors measured by the survey (Maguire & Pastore, 1995, pp. 258-259). The MTF violence Index offenses also remained relatively stable for the longer period 1980-1998 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, p. 27).
Other self-report studies that include younger adolescents suggest a slightly different pattern. Elliott (1994b) notes that, based on the National Youth Survey (NYS) and other self-report studies, it appears there was a relatively small increase (8-10%) in the proportion of adolescents involved in some type of serious violent offending in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but the frequency of offending remained about the same. In other words, Elliott suggests that the prevalence of adolescent violence increased during this period, but the violent incidence rate did not. Thus in the early 1990s, compared with the late 1980s, a slightly larger proportion of juveniles were committing serious violent acts, but they were not committing those acts at a higher rate.

**Box 1.3
National Self-Reported Delinquency Surveys**

The most direct method of measuring the incidence and volume of juvenile delinquency is through self-report surveys in which adolescents are asked to admit what offenses they have committed. Unfortunately, there currently is no standardized national self-report survey of juveniles that can be considered to be fully representative of both the juvenile population and the full range of delinquency offenses.

The National Youth Survey (NYS) is the most cited and analyzed self-report survey. It was a prospective longitudinal study of a national probability sample of 1,725 youths ages 11-17 in 1976. The researchers designed the survey to measure delinquent behavior and drug use, and they selected youths from a national probability sample of U.S. households. The panel was interviewed annually from 1976 to 1980 and every 3 years thereafter. At the time of the last interview, in 1993, the members of the panel were ages 27-33. Official arrest record data are available for all respondents.

The Monitoring the Future (MTF) study continues to measure illicit drug use and delinquency among a national sample of high school seniors (eighth and tenth graders were added in 1991). Beginning in 1982, students have been asked to report their involvement during the preceding 12 months in 15 behavioral areas. The survey includes six questions covering violent acts (called the MTF Violence Index): arguing or fighting with parents, hitting an instructor or supervisor, getting into a serious fight at school or work, group fighting, hurting someone so seriously they needed medical attention, and using a weapon to take something. (More information about the MTF study is available online at www.monitoringthefuture.org.)

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) began surveying a nationally representative sample of 9,000 youth between the ages of 12 and 16 in 1977. The main purpose of the NLSY is to study school-labor market issues. The survey also asks youth to self-report having engaged in a variety of deviant and delinquent behaviors. The NLSY is conducted every 2 years.

The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (YRBS) system was designed to determine the prevalence and age of initiation of health risk behaviors; to assess whether health risk behaviors increase, decrease, or remain the same over time; and to provide comparable national, state, and local data. Developed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in collaboration with federal, state, and private-sector partners, this voluntary system includes a national survey and surveys conducted by state and local education and health agencies. School-based surveys were last conducted in 1999 among students in grades 9 through 12 in 42 states, 16 large cities, and 4 territories. The average sample size was 2,200. In addition to assisting states, CDC conducts a national survey every 2 years to produce data representative of students in grades 9 through 12 in public and private schools in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The 1999 survey included more than 15,000 respondents.

Self-report surveys that measure delinquency have limitations (McCord et al., 2001, pp. 30-31). First, the surveys of student samples (the MTF and YRBS) miss three important groups of students: (a) those who are absent from school when the surveys are taken, (b) those who have dropped out of school, and (c) homeless juveniles who are not attending school. Second, the behaviors covered in self-report surveys often are not directly comparable with arrest and court crime categories. And finally, the validity of self-report data may not be consistent among persons of different races and genders.
In sum, juvenile arrests for violent crimes increased much more sharply than either violent victimizations or self-reported serious violent offenses in the period from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s. These comparisons suggest that arrest data tend to exaggerate changes in violent juvenile offenses during this period. As Snyder and Sickmund (1995) note, arrest data reflect law enforcement agencies' policy responses to juvenile delinquency, whereas victimization and self-report measures reflect actual behaviors.

The Tyranny of Small Numbers Principle

The phrase tyranny of small numbers refers to the fact that when a small increase occurs in a small number, a large percentage increase results. For example, if a person has one automobile and buys another one, this represents a 100% increase in the number of automobiles the person owns. Because only one-third of 1% of juveniles are arrested for violent offenses (Snyder, 2000), the base rate for juvenile violence is very low. Thus any change in either direction, when reported as a ratio or percentage, takes the form of a relatively large number. Snyder and his colleagues (1996) illustrate the tyranny of small numbers principle as it applies to rates of juvenile violence:

Of the 100 violent crimes committed in 1985 in a small town, assume that juveniles were responsible for 10, and adults for 90. If the number of juvenile crimes increased 70% in 1994, juveniles would be committing 17 (or 7 more) violent crimes. A 50% increase in adult violent crimes would mean that adults were committing 135 (or 45 more) violent crimes. If each crime resulted in an arrest, the percentage increase in juvenile arrests would be more than the adult increase (70% versus 50%). However, 87% of the increase in violent crime (45 of the 52 additional violent crimes) would have been committed by adults. Juvenile arrests represent a relatively small fraction of the total; consequently, larger percentage increases in juvenile arrests do not necessarily translate into a large contribution to overall crime growth. (p. 20)

Snyder and his colleagues show how the tyranny of small numbers principle applies in a comparison of juvenile and adult contributions to murders during the 1985-1994 period. They demonstrate that if juveniles had committed no more murders in 1994 than in 1985, murders in the United States would have increased 15% instead of 23%. Therefore, juveniles were responsible for about one-third of the increase in murders during the period 1985-1994. The tyranny of small numbers led the media and others to exaggerate the contribution of juveniles both to the total volume of violent crime in the United States and to the increase over the previous decade.

The tyranny of small numbers principle also applies to misinterpretation of the juvenile contribution to total increases in reported violent crimes. Using FBI-reported crime and clearance statistics, Snyder et al. (1996, p. 20) estimated that juveniles committed 137,000 more violent offenses in 1994.
than in 1985, and adults committed an additional 398,000. Therefore, juveniles were responsible for about one-fourth (26%) of the growth in violent crime between 1985 and 1994, and adults were responsible for nearly three-fourths (74%) of the increase in violent crime clearances during this period.

Other Ways of Producing Misleading Juvenile Delinquency Statistics

A common way in which some observers distort crime trend data is by focusing on a very short time period and ignoring long-term trends. As the discussion above shows, many dramatized the increase in juvenile homicide offenders between 1984 and 1994 as a tripling of the number. The effect of focusing only on the short period of the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s is an exaggeration of the magnitude of the increase. When viewed in a longer-term perspective, the increase in the juvenile homicide rate is not nearly as dramatic.

Zimring (1998a, pp. 31-47) made such a comparison for 13- to 17-year-olds from 1980 through 1995. He found that two of the four Violent Crime Index offenses were essentially trendless over that 16-year period. Robbery and rape rates fluctuated, without any discernible long-range trend. Arrests for robbery dropped by 21%, and rape arrests remained at a relatively low level. Aggravated assault increased 56% above the 1980 level, and a 34% gain was recorded for homicide. Thus the major change in violent juvenile arrests over this period was for aggravated assaults.

However, most of the increase in aggravated assault arrests from 1980 through 1995 occurred at the nonserious end of the seriousness scale (Zimring, 1998a, p. 41). As Zimring (1998a) notes, the counting and classification of assaults are essentially matters of police discretion: “For the period since 1980, there is significant circumstantial evidence from many sources that changing police thresholds for when assault should be recorded and when the report should be for aggravated assault are the reason for most of the growth in arrest rates” (p. 39). Police standards for recording juvenile assaults shifted toward “upgrading” simple assaults to aggravated assaults in the 16-year period (p. 41). Zimring’s conclusion is supported by Moone’s (1994) analysis of juvenile victimization rates. Most of the increase in juvenile assault victimization rates during 1987-1992 was accounted for by an increase in minor assaults.

Another misleading way of depicting juvenile violence trends is to use the very lowest points in juvenile violence as the base year. As Zimring (1998a) observes, “Picking a low period in a cyclically fluctuating time series will generate the greatest difference between baseline rates and the current rates of violence, but it also risks confusing the up-and-down movements in a cyclical pattern with trends that represent changes in the average volume of violence to be expected over time” (p. 34). Several analysts have done this, picking 1984 or 1985 as their base year because it was a low point of juvenile violence rates (Blumstein, 1995a, 1995b; Fox, 1996b).

Distinguishing Features of Juvenile Violence

Juvenile violence has several distinguishing features. First, very few juveniles are arrested for violent offenses. In 1999, the juvenile arrest rate for violent crime was 339 arrests per 100,000 juveniles (Snyder, 2000). Juvenile Violent Crime Index arrests in 1999 represented only 16% of all violent crime arrests in the United States, and only 9% of all arrests for murder. Even at the height of the so-called juvenile crime wave (1993), only about 6% of all juvenile arrests were for violent crimes, and about two-tenths of 1% were for homicide (McCord, Widom, & Crowell, 2001, p. 33). The overwhelming majority of juvenile arrests are for minor property offenses. In addition, the relatively small proportion of all violent offenses that violent juvenile arrests represent are, by and large, nonserious acts that result in little injury.

Very few juvenile violent offenders officially record subsequent violent offenses. In an Arizona study of the court careers of 151,000 juvenile offenders, Snyder (1998) found that only 17% were brought to court for second violent offenses. However, a sizable proportion of juveniles are involved in at least one violent act. In the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), 18% of 12- to 16-year-olds self-reported that they had ever committed an assault (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999, pp. 58-59), and some 30% of twelfth graders report having committed at least one of the violent offenses in the MTF survey (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, p. 27).

Second, juvenile violence is largely limited to the latter part of the adolescent period. Violence spreads in the latter part of adolescence, especially in three social contexts where adolescents interact: in peer groups, at school, and in youth gangs (Howell & Hawkins, 1998). In the National Youth Survey, serious violence prevalence rates for aggravated assault,
robbery, and rape peaked at age 17 for black males and white males and at age 15 for white females and age 16 for black females (Elliott, 1994a, p. 6). However, this does not mean that the incidence (or offense rate) of serious violent crimes is higher among adolescent delinquents than among adult criminals. There is a difference between prevalence (the proportion of persons offending) and incidence (the number of offenses per person) of offending. Some observers often use the two measures interchangeably (and erroneously) in addressing issues of age and crime. The important distinction is that “the peak in the crime rate in the teenage years reflects a peak in prevalence [but] incidence does not vary consistently with age” (Farrington, 1986a, p. 219). This observation is related to the next two points.

Third, juvenile violence produces low death rates and less serious injuries than adult crime (Zimring, 1998a). In 1998, murdered adults were more likely to have been killed with firearms (68%) than were murdered juveniles (48%) (Snyder, 1999, p. 3). Among violently victimized persons, adult victims are twice as likely as juvenile victims to be injured seriously (Snyder & Sickmund, 1995, p. 21). More than four-fifths of the persons with violence-related injuries treated in hospital emergency departments are adults (Rand & Strom, 1997). Finally, rates of youth gang violence are higher when adults are involved (Howell, Egley, & Gleason, 2000; Parsons & Meeker, 1999; Wiebe, Meeker, & Vila, 1999).

In a nutshell, adult crime has far more serious consequences than juvenile crime.

Fourth, adults are far more likely than juveniles to use guns in attacks and to use more lethal ones. Media portrayals of juvenile “superpredators” (see Chapter 2) have created the impression that juveniles are most likely to be armed—heavily armed—and to use guns in attacks. The increase in juvenile and young adult homicides from the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s prompted the U.S. Department of the Treasury to launch the Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative (YCGII), which gathered valuable information on the ages of illegal gun carriers. Under the YCGII, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms in the Department of the Treasury supported 27 cities in developing systems that would allow them to trace all recovered crime guns. Surprisingly, nearly 9 out of 10 (89%) of the illegal guns recovered by police in the 27 cities in 1997-1998 were in the hands of adults (ages 18 and older); only 11% were recovered from juveniles (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, 1999). Nearly three times more recovered guns (32%) were in the hands of young adults, ages 18-24, than were in the hands of juveniles. Moreover, in a recent St. Louis study concerning guns recovered from juveniles, Ruddell and Mays (in press) found that most of the firearms carried by juveniles had a low capacity for lethality. Most of the seized firearms in the hands of juveniles were pellet guns, .22 caliber firearms, and “Saturday night specials.” Very few were large-caliber assault weapons, sawed-off rifles, or shotguns, all weapons more widely used by adult offenders.

Fifth, adolescent violence is characterized by group involvement (Reiss, 1988; Warr, 2002; Zimring, 1981). In an analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth data (Gold & Reimer, 1975), Warr (1996) found that most adolescent offenders committed their offenses with two to three others, and that four others typically were involved in group fights. National victimization data show that more than one-half of serious violent juvenile offenses involve groups of offenders, compared with one-third of adult offenses (Snyder & Sickmund, 1995, p. 47).

Still, group arrests of juveniles serve to inflate juvenile arrest statistics (Snyder, 1999, p. 2; Snyder & Sickmund, 1999, pp. 113-114). In a Philadelphia study that made an adjustment for co-offending, McCord and Conway (2000) found that the number of offenses committed by juveniles was reduced by about 40% when co-offending was taken into account. Thus the clearance statistic is a better indicator than arrest of the proportion of crime committed by juveniles (see Box 1.1). The clearance statistic would typically show that a smaller number of juveniles in a presumed group-related crime were actually charged with the crime.

Sixth, there is no common pattern for juvenile violent arrests when viewed in the long term because rates of such arrests change substantially in the short run (Zimring, 1998a, p. 33). Zimring (1998a) analyzed more than 16 year-to-year changes (from 1980 to 1996) and found that juvenile homicide arrest rates increased or decreased by more than 20% four times, and by more than 15% a total of seven times. Aggravated assault arrest rates fluctuated similarly, with 1-year increases of 34%, 19%, and 17% in the 16 year-to-year changes. As noted earlier in this chapter, the four most serious violent offenses (homicide, robbery, rape, and aggravated assault) showed four different statistical stories among juveniles from 1980 to 1996.

Seventh, it is important to recognize that juvenile and young adult arrest rates were driven up during the 1980s and 1990s by four U.S. “wars”: the “war on crime” (Bittner, 1970; Caplan, 1976; Milakovich & Weis, 1975; Tonry, 1994a), the “war on drugs” (Austin, Marino, Carroll, McCall, & Richards, 2000; Gardiner & McKinney, 1991; Tonry, 1994b), the
show that only two of the four major violent juvenile crimes increased during this period: aggravated assault and murder. Aggravated assault arrests increased the most; however, most of this increase was at the nonserious end of the assault scale.

For several reasons, arrest data are not as reliable as either victimization data or self-report survey data as a measure of actual crimes for juvenile offenders. First, juveniles are more likely than adults to be arrested in groups, and they may be more easily apprehended because of their group offending and lack of criminal stealth (Reiss, 1988). Second, juveniles are more likely than adults to be arrested for certain crimes that are reported to police. Finally, it appears that many minor juvenile offenses were upgraded to more serious charges during the 1988-1992 period (Zimring, 1998a) because of the lower degree of tolerance of juvenile delinquency that ensued following the publicized increases in serious and violent delinquency. The lower tolerance is attributable, in particular, to the “wars” on crime, drugs, juveniles, and gangs.

If we employ more reliable measures of delinquency, we see a much different picture of violent juvenile crime trends. Self-report data suggest that in the early 1990s, compared with the late 1980s, a slightly larger proportion (only 8-10%) of juveniles were committing serious violent acts, but not at a higher rate. Victimization data show that violent juvenile victimizations resulting in serious injury actually declined from the late 1980s to early 1990s. (Of course, homicide cannot be measured in victim surveys.)

Thus the main feature of juvenile violence trends during the 1980-1996 period is the increase in gun use in homicides. Recall that non-gun homicides did not evidence a similar increase. Much of the increase in adolescent and young adult homicides appears to be attributable to an increase in gang-related homicides (Howell, 1999). The contribution of gang-related violence and homicides to the total volume of juvenile and young adult violence is perhaps the most overlooked factor in analysis of crime trends. The size and number of youth gangs, overall gang violence, and gang-related homicides all grew enormously from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s (see Chapter 5).

Unfortunately, *Uniform Crime Reports* data do not provide an accurate accounting of gang-related homicides (Maxson, Curry, & Howell, 2002). The few city studies that have been conducted have found that up to 6 out of 10 of all homicides committed by juveniles and young adults are gang related (see Chapter 5). The numbers of youth gang homicides rose sharply in the late 1980s (Howell,
1999), then tapered off in the early 1990s (Maxson et al., 2002), consistent with the national juvenile and young adult homicide trends. Although the absence of reliable national gang homicide data in the late 1980s and early 1990s precludes our making a firm determination, it appears certain that changes in gang homicide trends were a major factor influencing overall trends in homicides committed by juveniles and young adults.

Nothing I have said in this chapter should be taken as an attempt to minimize the severity of juvenile violence. Rather, my aim is to put such violence into proper perspective—historically and in relation to adult crime. Juveniles are part and parcel of the very high rates of violence in the United States. Ours is an extremely violent country, and juvenile violence rates are particularly high—higher than in other industrialized countries (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, p. 28).

Both the total numbers and rates of violent crime juvenile arrests have dropped for 6 consecutive years since 1994, bringing these rates to their lowest levels in 20 years. In addition, violent victimization rates of juveniles ages 12-17 were at about at the same low level in 1996 as in 1980 (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999, p. 26). Homicides by juveniles have plummeted since 1993 (Butts & Travis, 2002).

Violence rates dropped among all age groups from 1994 to 2000, similar to the populationwide increase in the 1980s and early 1990s. No one knows why violence rates rise and fall at the same time in all sectors of society. Suggested explanations include the following (Blumstein & Wallman, 2000; Steffensmeier & Harer, 1999):

- Improved economic conditions
- Changes in crime opportunities
- Tougher laws and enforcement that have deterred and incapacitated offenders
- Longer sentences for violent crime involving guns
- Growing intolerance for violent behavior
- Expanded problem-oriented and community policing
- Police crackdowns on gun carrying and illegal gun purchases
- Expanded crime and violence prevention programs
- Gang suppression strategies
- Reductions in drug abuse and stabilization of illegal drug markets

Unfortunately, it is impossible to measure either the independent or the collective effects of such factors. Put simply, criminology cannot explain the peaks and valleys in crime rates.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What are the three different data sources that observers use to gauge changes in the levels of serious and violent delinquency? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each of these sources?

2. What is the tyranny of small numbers principle? Why is it important to understand this principle when one is attempting to assess juvenile delinquency trends?

3. Aside from the inappropriate use of data sources, what are some other ways of producing misleading juvenile crime trend statistics?

4. What are the distinguishing features of juvenile violence? Why are these important?

5. What is the main change in juvenile violence that occurred in the period of the late 1980s through the early 1990s?

6. How have domestic “wars” contributed to changing crime rates?