

2-2000

# 1999 National Report Series. Challenging the Myths

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## Recommended Citation

US Department of Justice, "1999 National Report Series. Challenging the Myths" (2000). *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. 3.  
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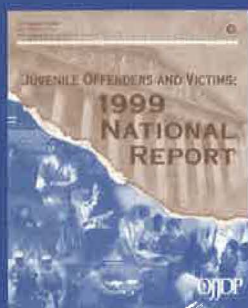
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# 1999 NATIONAL REPORT SERIES

## *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*

Shay Bilchik, Administrator



*As the Nation moves into the 21st century, the reduction of juvenile crime, violence, and victimization constitutes one of the most crucial challenges of the new millennium. To meet that challenge, reliable information is essential. Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report offers a comprehensive overview of these pervasive problems and the response of the juvenile justice system. The National Report brings together statistics from a variety of sources on a wide array of topics, presenting the information in clear, nontechnical text enhanced by more than 350 easy-to-read tables, graphs, and maps.*

*This Bulletin series is designed to give readers quick, focused access to some of the most critical findings from the wealth of data in the National Report. Each Bulletin in the series highlights selected themes at the forefront of juvenile justice policymaking and extracts relevant National Report sections (including selected graphs and tables).*

### Administrator's Message

Earlier this decade, certain researchers promoted a theory of the emergence of a generation of young, violent "superpredators" in the next century. Based on demographic projections of a growing juvenile population over the next 20 years and a sharp increase in juvenile arrest rates for violent crimes

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## Challenging the Myths

beginning in the mid-1980's, the theory gained plausibility from a series of highly publicized violent youth crimes. With the mantle of scientific credibility and extensive media coverage, these dire predictions caught the attention of legislators and the public at large and soon were accepted as conventional wisdom.

Fortunately, however, these concerns have been greatly alleviated as juvenile crime indicators have persistently dropped over the past several years. The FBI's recently released 1998 crime statistics showing a 1-year, 8-percent drop in juvenile violent crime arrests offer further reassurance that the day of the superpredator is not at hand.

This Bulletin, extracted from *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report*, takes a close look at the juvenile crime numbers and demonstrates that the predicted emergence of a new kind of violent youth is not supported by the most recent data. Statistical evidence presented in the *Report* indicates that levels of predatory crimes such as rape, robbery, and murder committed by juveniles have dropped significantly over the past several years, with robbery at its lowest level in a generation.

The decrease in juvenile crime will be fleeting, however, if we fail to temper the good news with caution. We need to continue focusing our efforts on combating juvenile crime with programs that have proven to be effective in reducing juvenile delinquency and violence. We also need to be vigilant in countering myths with facts and letting the most up-to-date data guide policy. As Attorney General Janet Reno has stated, this is the best way to ensure that demographics do not become destiny.

Shay Bilchik  
Administrator

# Can future juvenile crime trends be predicted?

## In the early 1990's, there were predictions of a coming wave of "superpredators"

Juvenile violent crime trends of the late 1980's and the early 1990's led some to conclude that the nature of juvenile violence had changed and that a new breed of juveniles—the superpredator—was now a threat to U.S. society. These were juveniles for whom violence was a way of life—new delinquents unlike youth of past generations. Many accepted this concept. Nearly every State changed its laws to make it easier to handle more youth as adult criminals. The fear of a new breed of juvenile delinquent even led many to wonder if the juvenile justice system itself was obsolete. In the mid-1990's, this fear was heightened by the realization that the juvenile population would increase into the next decade. More juveniles meant more superpredators.

## What evidence do crime statistics offer for superpredators?

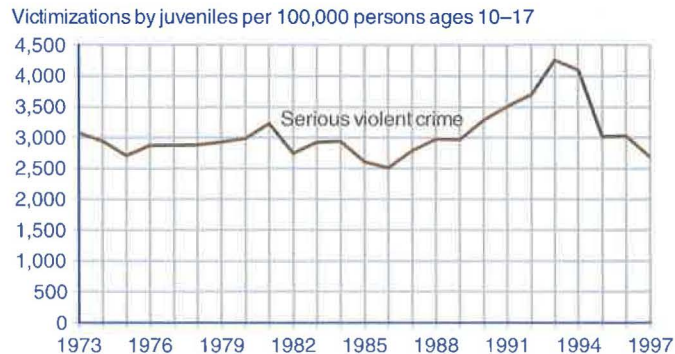
The most common crimes juveniles commit are property offenses. If there were a change in the nature of juvenile offending in the last decade, it should generate changes in juvenile property crime arrests. The juvenile arrest rate for Property Crime Index offenses, however, changed little in the 1980's and 1990's.

There is evidence that juvenile violence did increase for a few years in the early 1990's. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) found that after years of stability the rate of juvenile serious violence did increase in the early 1990's—breaking out of its historic range to a level

well above that of past generations. The NCVS data also show, however, that by 1995, the rate had returned to its traditional level. Rather than providing evidence for development of a juvenile superpredator, the NCVS data indicate that, despite a temporary increase, the rate of serious juvenile offending as of the mid-1990's was comparable to that of a generation ago.

The large increase in juvenile violent crime arrest rates reported by law enforcement agencies between 1988 and 1994 is the data most commonly cited as evidence for a new breed of violent superpredator. The increase in the juvenile violent crime arrest rate was much greater than the increase in serious juvenile offending documented by the NCVS. NCVS data indicate that serious

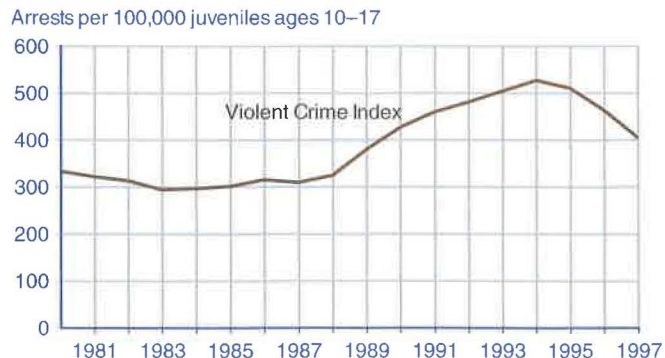
**According to victims, the rate at which juveniles committed serious violent crimes changed little between 1973 and 1989, peaked in 1993, then declined by 1997 to the lowest level since 1986**



Note: Serious violent crime includes incidents involving rape and other sexual assaults, robbery, and aggravated assault. Data are collected through personal interviews with persons ages 12 and older; thus, murder is not included for obvious reasons. Data collected prior to 1992 were adjusted to be consistent with newer data collection procedures.

Source: Authors' analyses of the Bureau of Justice Statistics' 1973–1997 National Crime Victimization Survey data [Web site data files].

**After years of relative stability, the juvenile violent crime arrest rate began to increase in the late 1980's; after 1994, however, the rate declined, and by 1997, it had returned to a level near that of 1989**



Source: Authors' analysis of arrest data from unpublished FBI reports for 1980 through 1994 and the FBI's *Crime in the United States* reports for 1995, 1996, and 1997 and population data from the Bureau of the Census for 1980 through 1989 from *Current Population Reports*, P25–1095, and for 1990 through 1997 from *Estimates of the population of States by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin: 1990–1997* [machine-readable data files].

juvenile offending returned to traditional levels by 1995, but the juvenile violent crime arrest rate did not follow this pattern. Even after a large decline that began in 1994, the juvenile violent crime arrest rate in 1997 was still far above levels of the early and middle 1980's.

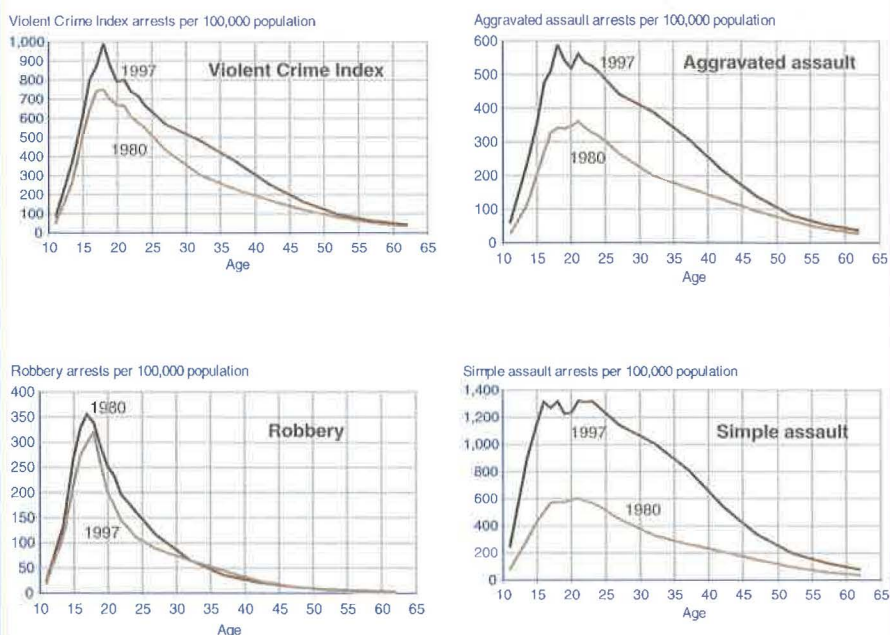
### **Violent crime arrest rates increased for all age groups**

To understand disparities between NCVS data and arrest data, it is necessary to analyze arrest rate trends for all age groups, not just juveniles. Age-based patterns for Violent Crime Index arrest rates are similar in 1980 and 1997. In both years, the rates reach their peak in the late teens and early twenties and decline consistently and substantially through the older age groups. For all age groups, however, the 1997 rate is higher than the 1980 rate.

The data show that, in the 1990's, the Nation experienced an overall increase in violent crime arrest rates among all age groups, not just juveniles. It is hard to use the superpredator argument to explain this broad-based increase in violent crime arrests. The age group with the greatest increase in violent crime arrest rates is persons in their thirties and forties. No one has argued that there is a new breed of middle-aged superpredator, but the data provide more support for that conclusion than for the concept of a juvenile superpredator.

To explore further the disparities between NCVS data and arrest data, it is necessary to analyze age-specific arrest rate trends for the individual offenses that comprise the Violent Crime Index. Most arrests for violent crimes are for robberies and aggravated as-

**The increase in violent crime arrests between 1980 and 1997 was common across all age groups and linked to large increases in arrests for aggravated assaults**



Note: The Violent Crime Index includes murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. Robbery and aggravated assault account for the majority of Violent Crime Index arrests.

Source: Authors' analysis of arrest data from an unpublished FBI report for 1980 and the FBI's *Crime in the United States 1997* and population data from the Bureau of the Census for 1980 from *Current Population Reports*, P25-1095 and for 1997 from *Estimates of the population of States by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin: 1997* [machine-readable data file].

saults. The arrest rates for these two offenses have different trends.

In contrast to robberies, aggravated assault arrest rates increased substantially between 1980 and 1997 for all age groups. Aggravated assault arrests clearly are the driving force for the overall increase in violent crime arrest rates.

The 1997 robbery arrest rates are lower than the 1980 rates in nearly all age groups. Therefore, robberies are not responsible for the overall increase in violent crime arrest rates during 1980-1997.

Some have speculated that the increase in aggravated assault rates was due to law enforcement reclassification of simple assaults as aggravated assaults. This does not appear to be the case, because simple assault rates also increased substantially during 1980-1997 for all age groups.

As with the increase in the overall violent crime arrest rate, the increase for aggravated assault was found in all age groups and was, in fact, highest among persons in their thirties and forties. Again, the juvenile superpredator theory is not the most straightforward explanation for the pattern of increase.

## Arrest rate trends reflect changes in public attitudes and law enforcement policy

Any explanation of the changes in violent crime arrests between 1980 and 1997 must accommodate certain facts. It must explain why:

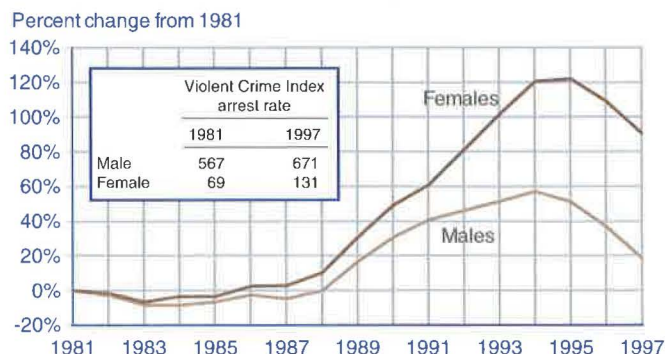
- Juvenile violent crime arrest rates were higher in 1997 than in 1980 even though victims' reports of juvenile violent crime did not increase during this period.
- Aggravated and simple assault arrest rates increased, but robbery arrest rates did not.
- Assault arrest rates increased in all age groups.

Other arrest data point to some possible explanations.

After years of consistency, juvenile arrests for curfew law violations doubled from 1993 to 1996. It is unlikely that more youth were violating curfew in 1996 than in 1993. Some communities, however, decided that keeping youth off the streets would reduce juvenile violence. As a result, law enforcement began arresting more juveniles for curfew violations. The increase in juvenile arrests for curfew violations reflects a change in public attitude and a resulting law enforcement response, not a change in juvenile behavior.

Another example of this process can be found in arrests for drug law violations. Juvenile drug abuse arrest rates nearly doubled between 1992 and 1996. Self-report studies do not indicate a large change in drug use among youth during this period. Since most of the increase in drug abuse arrests was attributable to arrests for marijuana possession,

Between 1987 and 1994, the female juvenile violent crime arrest rate more than doubled, while the male rate increased by two-thirds



- Even though the juvenile violent crime arrest rates declined from 1994 to 1997 for both genders, the male rate in 1997 was still 24% above the 1987 rate and the female rate was 85% higher.
- Even with the large increase in female rates, the 1997 Violent Crime Index arrest rate for juvenile males was more than five times the female arrest rate.

Source: Authors' analyses of arrest data from unpublished FBI reports for 1980 through 1994 and the FBI's *Crime in the United States* reports for 1995, 1996, and 1997 and population data from the Bureau of the Census for 1980 through 1989 from *Current Population Reports*, P25-1095, and for 1990 through 1997 from *Estimates of the population of States by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin: 1990-1997* [machine-readable data files].

it seems clear that communities became more concerned about marijuana use among youth and that law enforcement, responding to this concern, arrested more juveniles for this offense.

There was a societal change during this period that arguably could have caused increases in assault arrest rates (particularly for middle-aged persons) without affecting robbery arrest rates. During this period, legislative and policy changes required a formal law enforcement response to domestic violence incidents. This change would have resulted in more aggravated and simple assault arrests, but no additional robbery arrests. It would have had its greatest impact on the arrests for middle-aged persons. It also would have caused arrests to increase without a change in victim-reported crime levels.

Therefore, one could explain the increase in violent crime arrest rates

between 1980 and 1997 by an increase in law enforcement response to the crime of domestic violence. Society has become more sensitive to problems caused by domestic violence and has chosen to no longer ignore a crime that has been a part of American culture for generations. Juveniles are not immune to domestic violence arrests. Family problems, even some that in past years may have been classified as status offenses (e.g., incorrigibility), can now result in an assault arrest. This logic also explains why violent crime arrests over the past decade have increased proportionately more for juvenile females than males.

In summary, arrest increases are not always related to an increase in crime. They can reflect positive policy changes. Regardless, it is clear that national crime and arrest statistics provide no evidence for a new breed of juvenile superpredator.

## Growth in murders by juveniles is linked to weapon use

The large growth in juvenile arrests for murder between 1987 and 1993 was not due to changes in police response. There was an actual increase in homicides by juveniles. This increase, however, can be explained by factors other than the advent of juvenile superpredators.

Nearly all of the increase in the juvenile arrest rate for murder that occurred between 1987 and 1993 was erased by 1997. In fact, the murder rate in the U.S. in 1997 was lower than it had been since the 1960's. This trend raises another question about the superpredator theory. If the increase in juvenile homicides between 1987 and 1993 is explained by the development of a new breed of juvenile superpredator, then what explains the substantial decline after 1994? Nothing in the superpredator notion would predict such a decline.

Relevant to an understanding of juvenile murder arrest trends is the link between murder rates and weapon use. The relationship of the murder age-arrest curves for 1980 and 1997 is very different from the relationship for assaults and more similar to that for weapons law violations. (See murder graph and weapons graph.) For assaults, rates were higher in 1997 than in 1980 for all age groups. For murders, the rates were lower in 1997 than in 1980 for all persons above age 25, but there were substantial increases in murder rates among juveniles and young adults. The age-specific arrest rate trend profile for weapons violations is comparable to that for murder, showing large increases for juveniles and young adults.

Further evidence concerning the link between juvenile murder arrest trends and weapons use can be found in the FBI's Supplementary Homicide Report data, which show that the overall trend in homicides by juveniles—the increase from the mid-1980's through 1993 and the subsequent decline through 1997—is entirely attributable to homicides committed with firearms. This finding also argues against the existence of juvenile superpredators. Superpredators probably would not be selective about how they kill. They would use any weapon available—guns, knives, clubs, fists, motor vehicles, explosive devices. If superpredators were responsible for the

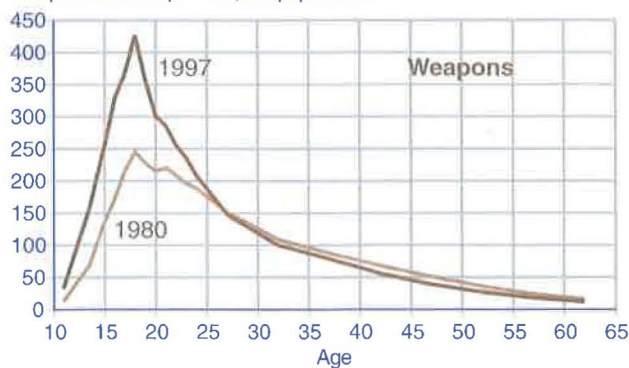
increase in juvenile murder arrests, then there would be increases in murders in all weapons categories. But this is not the case: the increase was firearm-related, as was the subsequent decline. Trends in juvenile homicide arrests are linked to gun use (as reflected in trends in weapons-related arrests).

In summary, this analysis of juvenile homicide arrests also leads to the conclusion that juvenile superpredators are more myth than reality. In the early 1990's this myth caused a panic that changed the juvenile justice system and its response to the Nation's youth.

Murder arrests per 100,000 population



Weapons arrests per 100,000 population



Source: Authors' analysis of arrest data from an unpublished FBI report for 1980 and from *Crime in the United States 1997* and population data from the Bureau of the Census for 1980 from *Current Population Reports*, P25-1095 and for 1997 from *Estimates of the population of States by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin: 1997* [machine-readable data file].

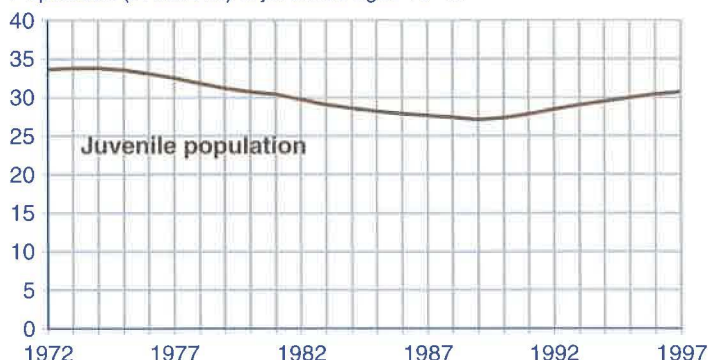
## Changes in juvenile violent crime arrests are not closely tied to changes in the juvenile population

History shows that it is a fool's errand to try to predict future crime trends. The first edition of this publication series, using 1992 data, speculated about future juvenile violence. Assuming that the arrest rate would continue to grow as it had in the previous 5 years or that the rate would hold constant, increased juvenile violence was anticipated. Some researchers even predicted a coming bloodbath. Since these predictions, murders by juveniles have declined remarkably, and the juvenile violent crime arrest rate in 1997 was at its lowest level in the 1990's.

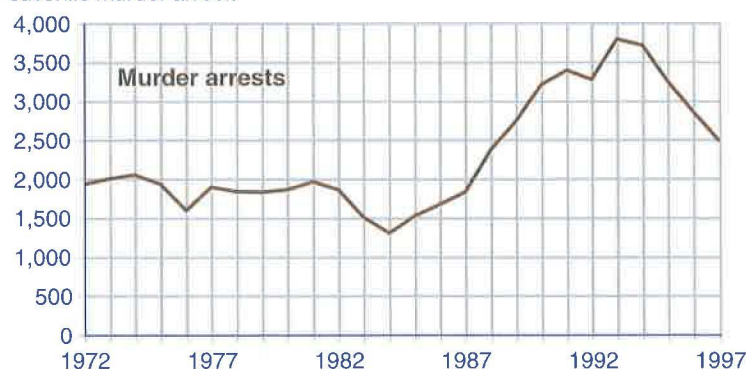
It would be simple to predict the future if juvenile violent crime trends were primarily related to changes in the size of the juvenile population. But as recent arrest trends clearly show, the number of juvenile arrests for violent crimes is unrelated to the size of the juvenile population. From 1987 to 1994, while the juvenile population grew slightly, juvenile arrests for violent crime soared. Then, as the juvenile population increased slightly from 1994 through 1997, juvenile arrests dropped precipitously. In fact, the magnitude of the decline in violent crime arrests in the 3-year period between 1994 and 1997 was greater than the projected growth in the juvenile population over the next 20 years.

No one has been able to predict juvenile violence trends accurately. It is clear, however, that the Nation is not doomed to high levels of juvenile violence simply because the juvenile population will increase. As Attorney General Janet Reno has often said, demography is not destiny. Most of the violent juvenile offenders in the year 2010 have not yet even entered grade school. Current and future social and policy changes will have more effect on juvenile violent crime and arrest trends than will population changes.

Population (in millions) of juveniles ages 10–17



Juvenile murder arrests



Juvenile Violent Crime Index arrests



Source: Authors' analysis of arrest data from unpublished FBI reports for 1980 through 1994 and the FBI's *Crime in the United States* reports for 1995, 1996, and 1997; population data from the Bureau of the Census for 1980 through 1989 from *Current Population Reports*, P25–1095, and for 1990 through 1997 from *Estimates of the population of States by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin: 1990–1997* [machine-readable data files].

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## Sources

Information for this Bulletin was taken/adapted from chapters 3 and 5 of *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report*. For a full listing of sources for these chapters, see pages 84 and 140 of the *National Report*.

## Resources

Answers to frequently asked questions about juvenile justice statistics as well as periodic updates of data presented in *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report* are available on the Internet in the OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book, which can be accessed through the OJJDP home page at [www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org](http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org) through the JJ Facts & Figures prompt.

Also available from OJJDP is the *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report* CD-ROM. With the CD-ROM, users can view the full report in a portable document format (PDF). The CD-ROM also provides a comprehensive "educator's kit"

that includes the following: statistical information from full-page, presentation-ready graphs (also available for display in Microsoft Powerpoint); data for the graphs (also available in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets); more than 40 source documents in PDF; and links to government Web sites to obtain more information.

For information on OJJDP initiatives related to the reduction of juvenile crime, violence, and victimization, contact the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse (JJC) at [www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org](http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org) or call 800-638-8736.

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*The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.*

## Acknowledgments

*Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report*, from which this Bulletin is drawn, was prepared by the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ). The authors are Howard N. Snyder and Melissa Sickmund. The *National Report* benefited from the assistance of many individuals in addition to the authors, including staff at NCJJ, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse.

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*Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report* is available online from the OJJDP Web site ([www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org](http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org)) under the JJ Facts & Figures section and the Publications section or can be ordered from OJJDP's Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse (hard copy NCJ 178257, CD-ROM NCJ 178991). Send an e-mail to [puborder@ncjrs.org](mailto:puborder@ncjrs.org); call 800-638-8736 (select option 2); or write to the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, P.O. Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20849-6000.

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