



# JUVENILE JUSTICE STATISTICS

## NATIONAL REPORT SERIES FACT SHEET

Caren Harp, OJJDP Administrator • David B. Muhlhausen, NIJ Director

December 2020

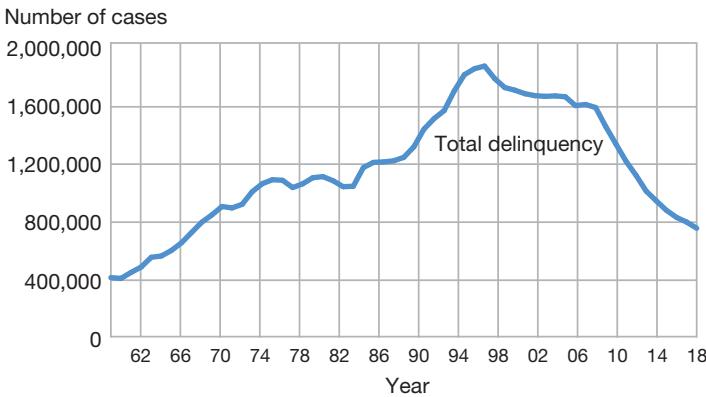
### Delinquency Cases in Juvenile Court, 2018

Sarah Hockenberry

#### Counts and trends

In 2018, juvenile courts in the United States handled 744,500 delinquency cases that involved juveniles charged with criminal law violations, 5% less than the number of cases handled in 2017. From 2005 through 2018, the number of delinquency cases declined 55%, with decreases in all four offense categories: property offense cases (down 63%), public order offense cases (down 57%), person offense cases (down 46%), and drug law violation cases (down 45%). In 2018, person offense cases accounted for the largest proportion (31%) of the delinquency caseload, followed by property offense cases (30%), public order offense cases (25%), and drug offense cases (14%).

#### The decline in juvenile court caseloads since the mid-1990s is the most substantial decline since 1960



Between 2005 and 2018, the number of cases handled by juvenile courts decreased for all offenses

Most serious offense	Number of cases	Percent change		
		2005–2018	5-year 2014–2018	1-year 2017–2018
<b>Total delinquency</b>	744,500	-55%	-20%	-5%
<b>Person offenses</b>	232,400	-46	-7	0
Criminal homicide	1,100	-3	35	2
Rape	8,000	-27	4	2
Robbery	19,200	-26	0	-6
Aggravated assault	26,100	-45	8	2
Simple assault	146,800	-47	-11	0
Other violent sex offenses	7,800	-43	-11	8
<b>Property offenses</b>	225,900	-63	-30	-12
Burglary	42,600	-57	-24	-16
Larceny-theft	96,200	-65	-40	-12
Motor vehicle theft	15,200	-53	30	-8
Arson	2,200	-70	-36	-9
Vandalism	35,600	-65	-23	-11
Trespassing	20,200	-62	-25	-13
Stolen property offenses	7,500	-64	-24	-11
<b>Drug law violations</b>	101,000	-45	-19	-3
<b>Public order offenses</b>	185,100	-57	-22	-4
Obstruction of justice	90,500	-53	-23	-8
Disorderly conduct	48,000	-63	-25	-3
Weapons offenses	16,400	-61	-18	-6
Liquor law violations	3,900	-74	-33	-12
Nonviolent sex offenses	11,100	-11	7	0

■ Although the number of juvenile court cases for most offenses decreased in the 5 years between 2014 and 2018, the number involving criminal homicide and motor vehicle theft increased considerably (35% and 30%, respectively).

**Notes:** Totals include offenses not detailed. Percent change calculations are based on unrounded numbers.

## Gender

Nearly three-quarters of the overall delinquency caseload involved males. In 2018, juvenile courts handled 541,700 cases involving males, compared with 202,800 cases involving females. Between 2005 and 2018, the relative decline in delinquency cases overall was the same for males and females (down 55% each); however, the decline in property cases was greater for females while the decline in drug cases was greater for males.

Most serious offense	Percent change 2005–2018	
	Male	Female
Total delinquency	-55%	-55%
Person	-46	-45
Property	-61	-66
Drugs	-48	-31
Public order	-57	-58

The female proportion of the delinquency caseload changed little between 2005 and 2018.

Most serious offense	Female proportion	
	2005	2018
Total delinquency	28%	27%
Person	30	30
Property	28	25
Drugs	20	25
Public order	28	28

## Race

Forty-four percent of delinquency cases handled in 2018 involved white youth, 35% black youth, 18% Hispanic youth, 2% American Indian youth (including Alaska Natives), and 1% Asian youth (including Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders). In 2018, white youth accounted for 53% of the U.S. juvenile population, black youth 15%, Hispanic youth 24%, American Indian youth 2%, and Asian youth 6%.

Race	Race profile of cases, 2018				
	Most serious offense				
	Total delinquency	Person	Property	Drugs	Public order
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
White	44	41	43	55	43
Black	35	38	38	19	36
Hispanic	18	18	16	23	19
American Indian	2	2	2	2	1
Asian	1	1	1	1	1

Note: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding.

The racial disproportionality in delinquency cases varied across offense categories. White youth accounted for a larger proportion of drug offense cases (55%) than any of the other general offense categories. In contrast, black youth were involved in only 19% of drug offense cases, accounting for larger proportions of person and property offense cases (38% each) than public order or drug offense cases. Hispanic youth were involved

in 23% of drug offense cases, accounting for their largest share across offense categories. Asian and American Indian youth accounted for a small proportion of cases across all offense categories.

Variations in case processing by race can be examined by looking at the rate at which cases involving different groups of youth proceed from one decision point to the next as they move through the court system. The referral rate (per 1,000 youth at risk of juvenile court involvement) for delinquency cases involving black youth (55.5) was about three times the rates for white (19.3) and Hispanic (18.0) youth. Cases were more likely to be petitioned for formal processing for black youth (64%) than white (52%) or Hispanic (55%) youth. Once petitioned, cases involving black youth were less likely to be adjudicated (49%) than cases involving white (52%) and Hispanic (57%) youth, and slightly more likely to be waived to criminal court (1.1%) than white and Hispanic youth (0.7% each). Once adjudicated, cases involving black or Hispanic youth were more likely to result in residential placement (32% each) than cases involving white youth (23%). Conversely, adjudicated cases involving white and Hispanic youth were more likely to result in probation (65% and 64%, respectively) than cases involving black youth (61%).

## Age

In 2018, juveniles younger than age 16 at the time of referral to court accounted for 53% of all delinquency cases handled. This age group accounted for 60% of person offense cases, 54% of property offense cases, 51% of public order offense cases, and 38% of drug law violation cases. Person offense cases had the largest proportion (12%) of very young juveniles (younger than age 13 at referral), followed by property and public order offense cases (9% each). For drug offense cases, a smaller proportion (5%) involved juveniles younger than age 13.

## Detention

A juvenile may be placed in secure detention at various times during case processing. Detention is primarily used for temporary holding while youth await adjudication, disposition, or placement elsewhere. Many states detain youth if there is reason to believe they are a threat to the community,

## Delinquency Estimates

The estimates are based on data from more than 2,500 courts with jurisdiction over 87% of the nation's juvenile population (youth age 10 through the upper age of original juvenile court jurisdiction in each state) in 2018. The unit of count is a case disposed. Each case represents the most serious offense of one youth that a court with juvenile jurisdiction processed on a new referral, regardless of the number of offenses contained in that referral. A youth may be involved in more than one case during the calendar year. Although the National Juvenile Court Data Archive houses historical data, the estimates in this fact sheet are anchored to 2005 to accommodate consistent reporting of racial/ethnic data and to focus on recent trends.

will be at risk if returned to the community, or may fail to appear at an upcoming hearing. Intake staff may also detain juveniles for diagnostic evaluation purposes. All states require that a detention hearing be held within a few days of placement in detention (usually within 24 hours). At the detention hearing, the judge reviews the initial detention decision, considers what is in the best interests of the community and/or the youth, and decides whether to continue the youth's detention. Most states also use detention for sanctioning purposes—juveniles may be committed to a detention facility as part of a disposition order or as a sanction for a probation violation. Actual detention practices vary substantially across jurisdictions. These court data count the number of cases that involve detention of the juvenile at some point between referral to court and case disposition. A youth may be detained and released more than once between referral to court and case disposition. In most delinquency cases, the juvenile is not detained (74% in 2018).

The likelihood of detention varies by general offense category. In 2018, person offense cases were the most likely to involve detention (32%), followed by public order offense cases (28%). In comparison, juveniles were less likely to be detained in property offense cases (24%) and drug offense cases (17%). Similar to the overall delinquency caseload trend, between 2005 and 2018, the number of delinquency cases in which the juvenile was detained decreased 52%.

## Intake decision

The juvenile court intake function is typically the responsibility of the juvenile probation department or the prosecutor's office. At intake, authorities decide whether to dismiss the case, handle it informally (without filing a petition), or file a petition to formally request an adjudicatory hearing or waiver hearing. In 2018, 18% of all delinquency cases (130,400 cases) were dismissed at intake, generally for lack of legal sufficiency. An additional 26% (192,000 cases) were handled informally, with the juvenile agreeing to some sort of voluntary sanction (e.g., restitution). In more than half of all delinquency cases (57% or 422,100 cases), authorities filed a petition and handled the case formally. The proportion of delinquency cases petitioned for formal handling changed little between 2005 and 2018.

## Waiver to criminal court

In most states, juvenile court judges may waive juvenile court jurisdiction in certain cases and transfer jurisdiction to criminal court so the juvenile can be tried as an adult. The court decision in these matters follows a review of the case and a determination that probable cause exists to believe the juvenile committed the criminal act. The judge's decision generally centers on the issue of whether the juvenile is amenable to treatment in the juvenile justice system. The prosecutor may argue that the juvenile has been

adjudicated several times previously and that interventions the juvenile court ordered have not prevented the youth from committing subsequent criminal acts. The prosecutor may also argue that the crime is so serious that the juvenile court cannot intervene for the time period necessary to rehabilitate the youth. (For more information, see *Delinquency Cases Waived to Criminal Court, 2018*, at <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/library/publications/list, in press.>)

In 2018, juvenile court judges waived jurisdiction over an estimated 3,600 delinquency cases, sending them to criminal court. This represents 1% of all formally handled delinquency cases. The number of cases waived was relatively flat from 2005 to 2008, then declined 49% through 2015 before increasing 11% by 2018.

For each year between 2005 and 2018, person offenses accounted for the largest proportion of waived cases. In 2018, more than half (56%) of all waived cases involved person offenses.

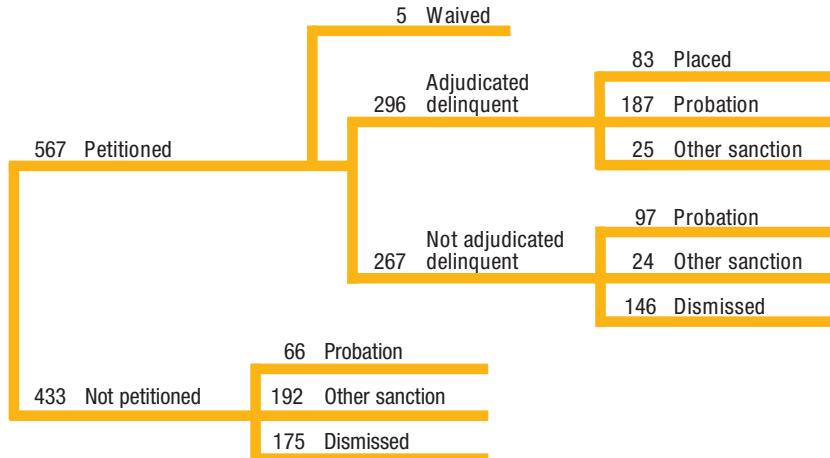
Most serious offense	Offense profile of cases waived to criminal court			
	Number		Percentage	
	2005	2018	2005	2018
Total delinquency	6,500	3,600	100%	100%
Person	3,000	2,000	46	56
Property	2,000	900	31	26
Drugs	900	400	14	10
Public order	600	300	9	8

Note: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding.

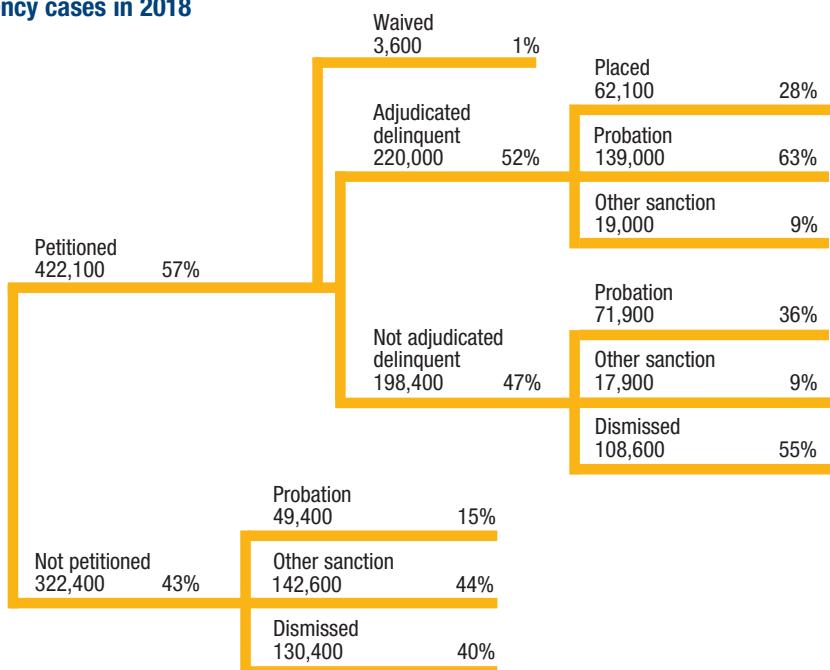
## Adjudication and disposition

Adjudicatory hearings establish responsibility for an alleged delinquent act. When a juvenile is adjudicated (judged delinquent), it is analogous to conviction in criminal court. In 2018, juveniles were adjudicated delinquent in 52% (220,000) of petitioned cases. The court holds disposition hearings to decide which sanctions it should impose on a juvenile who has been adjudicated delinquent and whether it should place the juvenile under court supervision. Many cases result in multifaceted dispositions, and most involve some type of supervision. A probation order often includes additional requirements, such as drug counseling, restitution to the victim, or community service. In 2018, formal probation was the most severe disposition ordered in 63% of cases in which the juvenile was adjudicated delinquent, and in 28% of cases, residential placement was the most severe disposition. A smaller proportion of cases received some other sanction as their most severe disposition. The proportion of adjudicated cases ordered to residential placement has remained steady in recent years, 28% in both 2005 and 2018, as has the proportion ordered to probation, 63% in 2005 and 2018. The proportion receiving other sanctions has also remained level, 9% in both 2005 and 2018.

## Case flow for a typical 1,000 delinquency cases in 2018



## Case flow for 744,500 delinquency cases in 2018



**Notes:** Cases are categorized by their most severe or restrictive sanction. Detail may not add to totals because of rounding. Annual case-processing flow diagrams for 2005 through 2018 are available at [ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/court/faqs.asp](http://ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/court/faqs.asp).

## For more information

This fact sheet is based on the report *Juvenile Court Statistics 2018*, which is available at [ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/njcda/pdf/jcs2018.pdf](http://ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/njcda/pdf/jcs2018.pdf). To learn more about juvenile court cases, visit OJJDP's online Statistical Briefing Book ([ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb](http://ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb)) and click on "Juveniles in Court." OJJDP also supports *Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics*, a web-based application that lets users analyze the data from the *Juvenile Court Statistics* report. This application is available from the "Data Analysis Tools" section of the Statistical Briefing Book.

## Acknowledgments

Sarah Hockenberry, Research Associate with the National Center for Juvenile Justice, prepared this document as a product of the National Juvenile Court Data Archive, which is supported by OJJDP grant 2018-JX-FX-0002.

To ensure the efficiency and coordination of all Office of Justice Programs research activities, the juvenile justice research, evaluation, and statistical data collection projects funded by OJJDP are managed by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ).

Points of view or opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of NIJ, OJJDP, or the U.S. Department of Justice.

*The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the National Institute of Justice are components of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance; the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the Office for Victims of Crime; and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking.*