



Juvenile Offenders and Victims

National  
Report Series

Fact Sheet

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# Delinquency Cases in Juvenile Court, 2011

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## Counts and trends

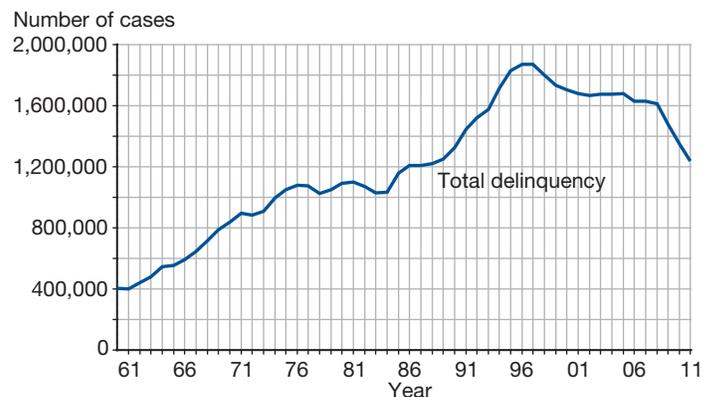
In 2011, juvenile courts in the United States handled more than 1.2 million delinquency cases that involved juveniles charged with criminal law violations. From 1985 through 1997, the number of delinquency cases climbed steadily (62%) and then fell 34% from 1997 through 2011. Juvenile courts handled 7% more cases in 2011 than in 1985.

This overall pattern of increase followed by decline is the result of the trends of various offense categories combined. Public order offense cases increased steadily from 1985 through 2005 (129%) and then declined 28% by 2011. Person offense cases increased through 1997 (131%), leveled off through the mid-2000s, and then fell 27% between 2005 and 2011. Drug law violation cases more than doubled between 1985 and 1997 and then gradually declined (20%) through 2011. Although these patterns differed, each increased through the 2000s, followed by a decline. In contrast, property offenses showed quite a different trend. Between 1985 and 1995, the number of property offense cases increased 31%. Since 1995, the number of property offense cases declined steadily (down 51% from 1995 through 2011). Thus, property offenses were the one general offense category that declined overall from 1985 through 2011 (down 36%).

## Gender

Females represent a relatively small proportion of the overall delinquency caseload. Juvenile courts handled 345,100 cases involving females in 2011, compared with 891,100 cases involving males.

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



## Delinquency data estimates

The 1985–2011 estimates are based on data from more than 2,400 courts with jurisdiction over 85% of the nation's juvenile population (youth age 10 through the upper age of original juvenile court jurisdiction in each state). 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.



## Delinquency cases disposed by most serious offense, 2011

Most serious offense	Number of cases	Percent change		
		10 year 2002–2011	5 year 2007–2011	1 year 2010–2011
<b>Total delinquency</b>	1,236,200	-26%	-24%	-8%
<b>Person offenses</b>	317,500	-22	-23	-7
Criminal homicide	900	-40	-39	-14
Forcible rape	5,700	-12	-12	1
Robbery	23,200	10	-27	-12
Aggravated assault	31,600	-27	-31	-11
Simple assault	221,300	-23	-21	-7
Other violent sex offenses	10,800	-20	-16	-3
Other person offenses	23,900	-24	-30	-7
<b>Property offenses</b>	447,500	-32	-26	-10
Burglary	79,800	-28	-23	-8
Larceny-theft	219,700	-29	-17	-10
Motor vehicle theft	12,700	-66	-52	-16
Arson	5,400	-39	-32	-2
Vandalism	70,400	-29	-36	-11
Trespassing	39,300	-27	-29	-10
Stolen property offenses	12,000	-46	-36	-13
Other property offenses	8,200	-59	-43	-11
<b>Drug law violations</b>	152,600	-17	-16	-5
<b>Public order offenses</b>	318,600	-24	-27	-9
Obstruction of justice	149,700	-24	-22	-8
Disorderly conduct	90,200	-23	-31	-9
Weapons offenses	26,400	-19	-35	-9
Liquor law violations	14,400	-5	-29	-11
Nonviolent sex offenses	11,700	-26	-6	-3
Other public order offenses	26,300	-34	-37	-11

Notes: Data may not add to totals because of rounding. Percent change calculations are based on unrounded numbers.

However, between 2002 and 2011, the number of cases decreased more for males (-27%) than for females (-22%). As a result of these trends, the female proportion of the delinquency caseload increased slightly from 27% in 2002 to 28% in 2011.

Most serious offense	Female proportion	
	2002	2011
Total delinquency	27%	28%
Person	29	31
Property	27	29
Drugs	18	19
Public order	28	28

Females accounted for a slightly larger proportion of cases in 2011 than in 2002 for person, property, and drug offenses. From 2002 through 2011, female caseloads decreased less than male caseloads for person, property, and drug offenses.

Most serious offense	Percent change 2002–2011	
	Female	Male
Total delinquency	-22%	-27%
Person	-15	-24
Property	-26	-34
Drugs	-14	-17
Public order	-25	-24

## Race

In 2011, white youth accounted for 76% of the U.S. juvenile population, black youth 16%, American Indian youth (including Alaska

Native) 2%, and Asian youth (including Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander) 5%. Sixty-four percent of delinquency cases handled in 2011 involved white youth, 33% black youth, 2% American Indian youth, and 1% Asian youth.

## Race profile of cases, 2011

Most serious offense	Total	Race			
		White	Black	American Indian	Asian
Total delinquency	100%	64%	33%	2%	1%
Person	100	58	40	1	1
Property	100	65	32	2	2
Drugs	100	77	20	2	1
Public order	100	63	34	1	1

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

The racial disparity in delinquency cases varied across offense categories. White youth accounted for a larger proportion of drug offense cases (77%) than for any of the other general offense categories. In contrast, white youth were involved in only 58% of person offense cases. Black youth accounted for a larger proportion of person offense cases (40%) than for any other general offense category. Asian and American Indian youth accounted for a small proportion of cases across all offense categories.

A comparison of the rate at which cases involving different groups of youth proceed from one decision point to the next as they go through the court system shows the unique contributions that each decision point makes to the overall disparity in the system. The rate at which black youth were referred to juvenile court for a delinquency offense was more than twice the rate for white youth. The rate at which referred cases were petitioned for formal processing was 20% greater for black youth than for white youth. The rate at which petitioned cases were adjudicated was 9% less for black youth than for white youth. The rate at which petitioned cases were waived to criminal court was 20% greater for black youth than for white youth. The rate at which youth in adjudicated cases were ordered to residential placement was 20% greater for black youth than for white youth, but the rate at which they were ordered to probation was 9% less for black youth than for white youth.

## Age

In 2011, 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, 50% of public order offense cases, and 41% 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 offense cases (8%) and public order offense cases (7%). For drug offense cases, a smaller proportion (3%) 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, 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 interest 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 (79% in 2011).

The likelihood of detention varies by general offense category. In 2011, person offense cases were the most likely to involve detention (26%), followed by public order offense cases (24%). In comparison, juveniles were less likely to be detained in property offense cases (17%) and drug offense cases (15%).

Similar to the overall delinquency caseload trend, between 1997 and 2011, the number of delinquency cases in which the juvenile was detained decreased 30%. The 1985–2011 growth in detained cases was the same as the growth in the overall delinquency caseload (7% for each during the period).

## 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 2011, 234,500 cases (19% of all delinquency cases) were dismissed at intake, generally for lack of legal sufficiency. An additional 27% (337,600) were handled informally, with the juvenile agreeing to some sort of voluntary sanction (e.g., restitution). In more than half of all delinquency cases (54% or 664,100), authorities filed a petition and handled the case formally. The proportion of delinquency cases petitioned for formal handling rose from 46% in 1985 to 57% in the late 1990s and then declined slightly to 54% in 2011.

## 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, 2011*, available online from [ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/publications/statbb.asp](http://ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/publications/statbb.asp).)

In 2011, juvenile court judges waived jurisdiction over an estimated 5,400 delinquency cases, sending them to criminal court. This represents less than 1% of all formally handled delinquency cases. The number of cases waived was relatively flat from 1985 to 1988, rose sharply from 1988 to 1994 (122%), and then fell to the levels of the mid-1980s and remained there through 2009 before declining 25% through 2011.

For many years, property offense cases accounted for the largest proportion of waived cases. However, since the mid-1990s, person offenses have outnumbered property offenses among waived cases. In 2011, almost half of all waived cases involved person offenses.

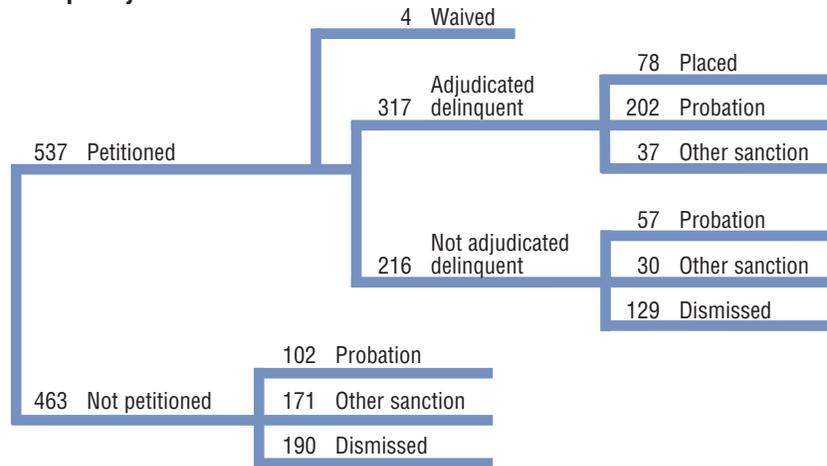
### Offense profile of cases waived to criminal court

Most serious offense	Number		Percentage	
	2002	2011	2002	2011
Total delinquency	8,200	5,400	100%	100%
Person	3,200	2,500	39	47
Property	3,100	1,600	38	31
Drugs	1,100	700	14	13
Public order	800	500	9	8

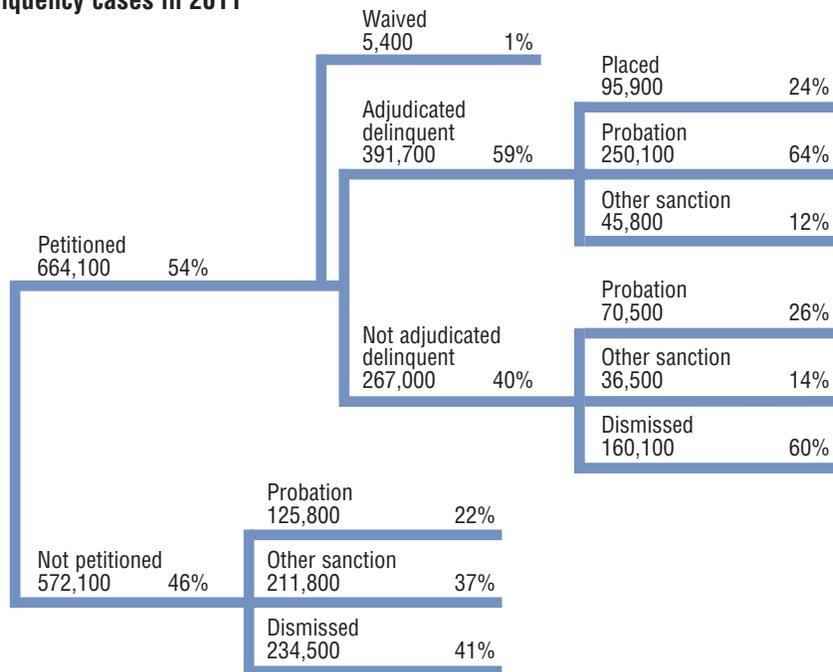
## Adjudication and disposition

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 2011, juveniles were adjudicated delinquent in 59% (391,700) of petitioned cases. The court holds disposition hearings to decide what 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 multi-faceted 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 2011, formal probation was the most severe disposition ordered in 64% of cases in which the juvenile was adjudicated delinquent, and 24% of cases were ordered to residential placement as 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 probation has fluctuated within a relatively narrow range over the years (56%–64% during the 1985–2011 time period), as have the proportion of cases resulting in residential placement (24%–32%) and the proportion receiving other sanctions (10%–15%) during that time.

## Case flow for a typical 1,000 delinquency cases in 2011



## Case flow for 1,236,200 delinquency cases in 2011



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 1985 through 2011 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 2011*, which is available through OJJDP's Web site ([ojjdp.gov](http://ojjdp.gov)). 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 analyzes the data files used for the *Juvenile Court Statistics* report. This application is available from the "Data Analysis Tools" section of the Statistical Briefing Book.

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