



UNIVERSITY OF
FLORIDA

FCS2154

EXTENSION

Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

Violence Among Children: Recent Trends¹

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Overview

The issue of violent actions among children has gained a tremendous amount of notoriety in recent years. The massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, focused more attention on what seemed to be a rash of school shootings in rural areas such as Paducah, KY; Jonesboro, AK; and Conyers, GA.

As a result parents, teachers, policy makers, as well as experts in law enforcement and juvenile justice have recently re-focused their efforts on preventing violent behavior among children. Clearly this issue is considered a serious and growing public health concern.

What is Meant by *Violent Behavior*?

Violent behaviors in children are typically those that are identified as causing intentional and serious harm to another. Examples include fighting and battery (physically hurting someone); assault with weapons; rape and sexual assault; and homicide.

On the other hand, children also engage in variety of *aggressive behaviors* (hitting, kicking, shoving, etc.) that aren't typically viewed as being severe enough to be perceived as violence. These "lesser"

aggressive behaviors are typically seen in younger children. For example, a 4-year-old child's hitting a peer is far less likely to be viewed as violent behavior than it would be if a 16-year-old child hit a peer.

Pragmatically, aggressive behavior in an older child is more likely to lead to serious injury and so aggressive behavior in adolescence is more likely to be viewed as violence.

So, it is important to remember that when we speak of violence and aggression, we are really talking about a wide variety of behavior that ranges from the more common forms of aggression such as temper tantrums in and hitting in younger children, to more serious forms such as destruction of property, fire-setting, cruelty to animals, homicidal threats and use of weapons.

The Scope of the Problem, Nationwide

The prevalence of violent behavior among children reached historic highs from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s. During this 10-year-period, between 1988 and 1997:

- the murder rate for teenagers under age 18 increased 165%.

1. This document is FCS2154, one in a series of the Family, Youth, and Community Sciences department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication: July, 2000. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/>

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- the number of arrests of minors increased by 35%; with
- aggravated assaults increasing by 51%; and
- other assaults increasing by 84%.

The Scope of the Problem, State-wide

In Florida, these figures are even more alarming, with youth referrals for aggravated assault and battery cases increasing by 227% during this time period (*Bilchick 1999, CDC 1997, Snyder 1998*).

Fortunately, there has been a steady—at times even a spectacular—downward trend in these violence statistics since the mid 1990s (*see Figure 1 and Figure 2 for summaries of violent crime indexes*).

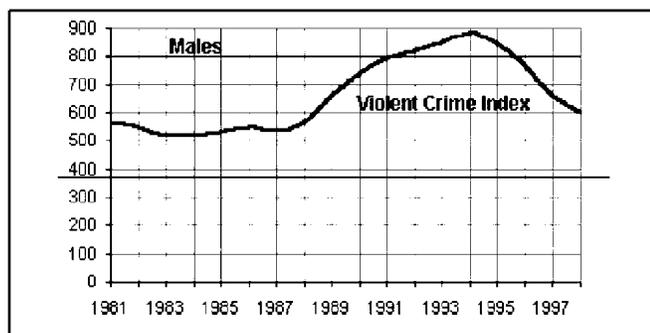


Figure 1. Arrests per 100,000 Males Ages 10-17. OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book 1999.

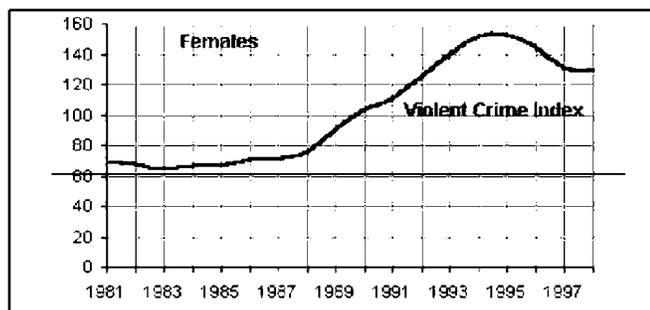


Figure 2. Arrests per 100,000 Females Ages 10-17. OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book 1999.

The Perception of the Problem

Nevertheless, juvenile crime continues to be a major problem. Over 2.6 million juveniles were arrested in 1998, accounting for nearly one in five arrests (*OJJDP 1999*). Furthermore, professionals and the public alike are expressing great concern over increases in the scope and violence of many individual crimes.

Mass murder has become all too common to U.S. student-age youth. At this writing, the most horrendous example is the school shootings in Columbine, Co, in 1999. Two adolescent males, ages 18 and 17, used firearms to massacre a dozen fellow students and one teacher. For a finale, the youthful murderers committed suicide at the scene.

Since then, there has been plenty of evidence to suggest that emotionally disturbed, vulnerable youth are either attempting or committing “copycat” versions of this high-profile massacre in response to the intensive media coverage--and as a way to gain notoriety--if not fame--in a world that otherwise ignores them.

Violent Behavior, Crime, Profiles and Conclusions

All in all, violent crime is largely the domain of the young. Most violent crimes are committed by male adolescents and young men, although these groups combined consist of only a small proportion of the population. Data from large community studies indicate that a small core group of chronic, serious offenders (about 15% of all children arrested) are responsible for the great majority of serious, violent offenses such as homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

These chronic violent offenders are “generalists” rather than “specialists” in terms of their overall offending patterns. That is, most of the chronic violent offenders were also heavily involved in property offending, drug sales, public disorder offenses, and alcohol and marijuana use. They also exhibited a variety of other behavioral problems, including dropping out of school, gun use, gang membership, promiscuous sexual activity, and teenage parenthood (*Evans & Myers, in press*).

Despite the fact that young men continue to represent the largest group of perpetrators of violent crime in this country, an examination of Figure 2 demonstrates that the rates of violent crime among young women has increased dramatically over the last 20 years and has failed to drop off as considerably as has the rates for males.

All in all, these statistics continue to support the notion that violence among children remains a serious problem in this country. Despite recent successes in curbing the rates of juvenile violent crime, our children are being raised in a culture of violence, aggression and fear that will have serious implications for the health of our society in the generations to come.

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