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# OJJDP Update on Statistics

Robert W. Sweet, Jr., Administrator

February 1992

## Offenders in Juvenile Court, 1988

by Melissa Sickmund, Ph.D.

Courts with juvenile jurisdiction disposed an estimated 1,156,000 delinquency cases in 1988—about the same as the previous year. The courts handled just over half of these cases informally. About half of the informally processed cases either were dismissed (for legal insufficiency or lack of evidence) or were otherwise terminated after the youth were warned and counseled. In the majority of formally processed cases, the youth were adjudicated delinquent. Of adjudicated delinquents, 57 percent were placed on court-ordered probation, and 30 percent were placed out of their homes in a residential facility. In 12,000 cases the juvenile court waived its jurisdiction in the case and ordered that the case be transferred to criminal court and the youth be tried as an adult.

These findings are from *Juvenile Court Statistics 1988*. The report presents national estimates of petitioned and nonpetitioned delinquency cases and petitioned status offense cases disposed in 1988 by courts with juvenile jurisdiction. Although these courts handle a variety of cases, including abuse and neglect, adoption, and traffic cases, the report focuses on the disposition of juveniles charged with a criminal law violation or status offense. National estimates are based on analyses of data from courts with jurisdiction over 62 percent of the Nation's youth population at risk of referral to juvenile court.<sup>1</sup> In addition to national estimates, the report presents many subnational statistics with detail not found in the national estimate chapters, as well as an appendix that

presents caseload statistics for nearly all States and their larger jurisdictions.

Findings from *Juvenile Court Statistics 1988* include:

- In 6 percent of all delinquency cases, the youth was charged with a violent offense—murder, forcible rape, robbery, or aggravated assault. In the majority of delinquency cases (59 percent), youth were charged with a property offense. Drug cases accounted for 7 percent of delinquency cases.
- Youth in 237,000 delinquency cases (21 percent) were detained by the court

1. For information on the estimation procedure, see appendix A of *Juvenile Court Statistics 1988*.

### From the Administrator

This *Update* provides a detailed statistical picture of the young offenders who came in contact with the juvenile courts and of the juvenile court disposition of their cases during a single year—1988. It summarizes the findings of *Juvenile Court Statistics 1988*, an analysis of more than 600,000 records in the National Juvenile Court Data Archive, maintained for OJJDP by the National Center for Juvenile Justice.

These statistics about the handling of offenders by the juvenile courts provide juvenile justice professionals with a frame of reference—a tool to use to improve the system's response to juvenile crime. While these statistics alone do not explain the various patterns and trends, they do draw our attention to them. This *Update*, like the larger report on which it is based, is intended as a general reference document for juvenile justice professionals in law enforcement,

courts, and corrections. These people contend with the problem of juvenile crime, and providing information is one way we can help them get the job done.

Robert W. Sweet, Jr.  
Administrator

Table 1

### Delinquency Cases by Offense, 1988

Offense	Number of Cases	Percent
<b>Total delinquency</b>	<b>1,156,000</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Index violent*</b>	<b>68,400</b>	<b>5.9</b>
Murder*	1,700	0.1
Forcible rape	4,000	0.3
Robbery	21,300	1.8
Aggravated assault	41,400	3.6
<b>Index property</b>	<b>503,000</b>	<b>43.5</b>
Burglary	130,000	11.3
Larceny-theft	311,900	26.9
Motor vehicle theft	54,700	4.7
Arson	6,700	0.6
<b>Nonindex delinquency</b>	<b>584,000</b>	<b>50.6</b>
Simple assault	102,300	8.9
Stolen property	30,000	2.6
Trespassing	48,100	4.2
Vandalism	82,300	7.1
Weapons offenses	22,000	1.9
Other sex offenses	17,000	1.5
Drug law violations	80,200	6.9
Obstruction of justice	78,500	6.8
Liquor law violations	14,000	1.2
Disorderly conduct	46,300	4.0
Other delinquent acts	63,800	5.5

Note: Offense categories compatible with the FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Program are presented here to show the detail supported by the data. To simplify presentation in the remainder of this report, cases are aggregated and presented in the general categories of *person, property, drug, and public order* offenses. Detail may not add to total because of rounding.

\* Offense category includes a handful of negligent homicide and vehicular manslaughter cases and is thus somewhat broader than the FBI Index violent category of *murder and nonnegligent manslaughter*.

between referral and disposition. This was a 4-percent increase from 1987 in the number of delinquency cases detained.

- As was the case in 1987, in 1988 the largest proportion of cases detained was among youth charged with a drug offense (33 percent), and the smallest proportion of cases detained was among youth charged with a property offense (17 percent).

- A greater proportion of nonwhite youth were detained than white youth. For example, 21 percent of white youth charged with a drug offense were detained, compared to 51 percent of nonwhite youth.

- An estimated 82,000 status offense cases were formally handled by juvenile courts in 1988—about the same as the previous year. Status liquor law violation cases accounted for 31 percent of the formally handled status offense cases; truancy cases accounted for 27 percent; ungovernability cases accounted for 17 percent; and runaway cases accounted for 16 percent. Other status offenses accounted for 10 percent.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the *Update*, the unit of count is a case disposed during the calendar year. A case is defined as an instance of a youth's new referral to the juvenile court for one or more offenses. A youth can be involved in more than one case during the calendar year. Cases involving multiple offenses are categorized according to the most serious offense. Similarly, cases involving multiple dispositions are categorized according to the most severe disposition.

### Delinquency case counts and trends

A delinquent offense is an act committed by a juvenile for which an adult could be prosecuted in criminal court. Juvenile courts disposed an estimated 1,156,000 delinquency cases in 1987

2. Detail may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

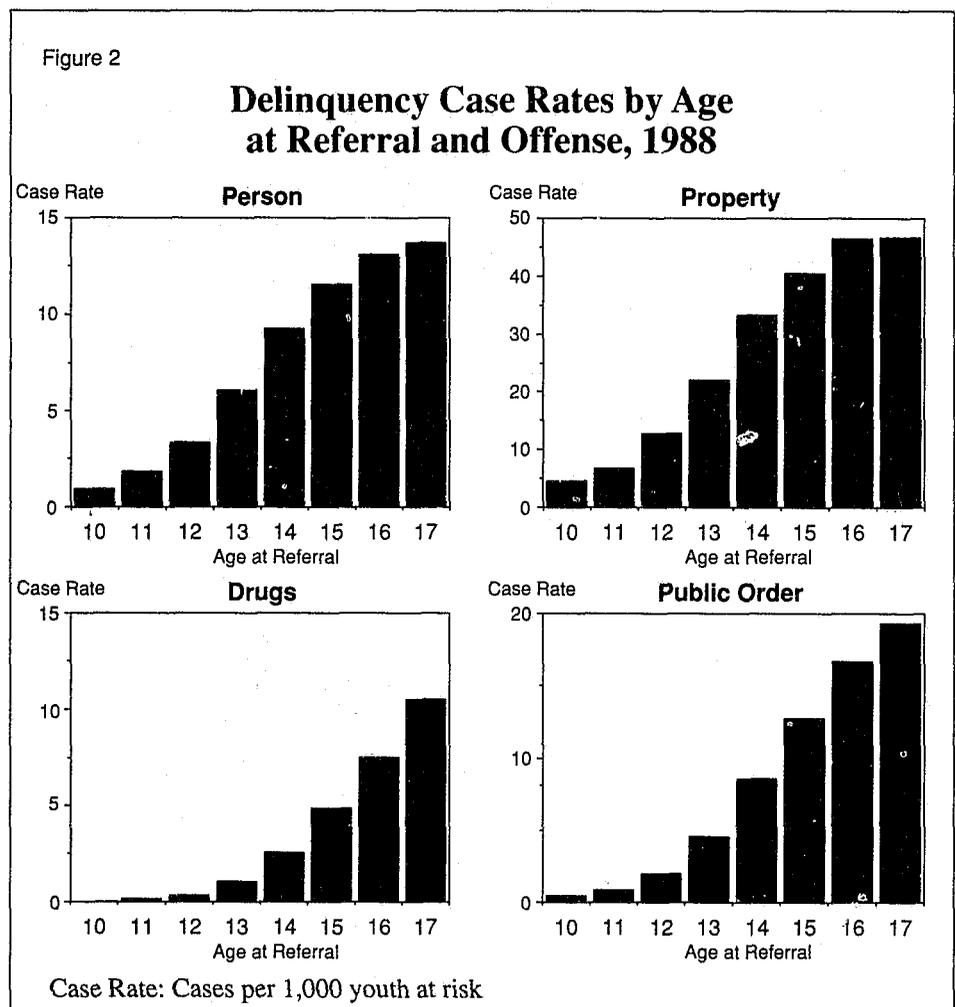
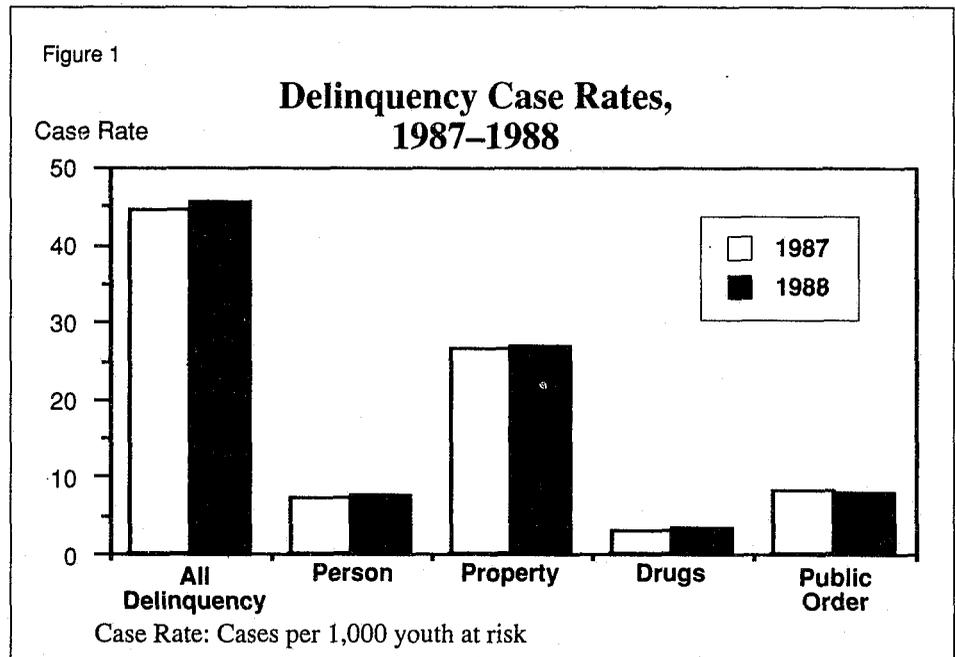
(table 1). The number of delinquency cases processed did not change substantially from 1987 to 1988.<sup>3</sup> The violent offenses of murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault accounted for 6 percent of all delinquency cases in 1988, the same proportion as in 1987. The property offenses of burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson made up 44 percent of delinquency cases, the same proportion as in the previous year. Larceny-theft, with more than 300,000 cases, was the single offense category with the highest volume of cases. It made up 27 percent of the delinquency caseload. Drug cases constituted 7 percent of the delinquency caseload in 1988.

The 1,156,000 delinquency cases disposed by juvenile courts in 1988 resulted in a case rate of 45.3 cases for every 1,000 youth at risk in the population (figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Compared to 1987 case rates, the overall delinquency case rate did not change substantially, nor did the case rates for individual offense categories.

More than half of the delinquency cases processed by juvenile courts in 1988 involved youth age 15 or younger. These younger youth were involved in 61 percent of property offense cases, 59 percent of person offense cases, 48 percent of public order cases, and 36 percent of drug law violation cases. The delinquency case rate increased continuously with age (figure 2). For example, the delinquency case rate for 14-year-olds was 53 cases per 1,000 14-year-old youth at risk. The rate for 15-year-olds was 30 percent higher than the 14-year-old rate; the rate for 16-year-olds was 56

3. The national estimates for 1987 presented in this *Update* reflect revisions made subsequent to the publication of *Juvenile Court Statistics 1987* and its companion *Update "Offenders in Juvenile Court, 1987."*

4. Youth at risk are defined as youth age 10 or older who are under original juvenile court jurisdiction. The upper age of juvenile court jurisdiction is defined by statute in each State. In most States this age was 17 in 1988, but the upper age of jurisdiction ranges from 15 to 18. The case rates in this *Update* control for State variation in upper age of juvenile court jurisdiction.



percent higher; and the rate for 17-year-olds was 69 percent higher, or 90 cases per 1,000 17-year-old youth at risk. Case rates for drug law violations showed the sharpest age increase. The drug case rate for 17-year-olds was more than 300 percent the rate for 14-year-olds.

Males were involved in 81 percent of all delinquency cases in 1988. Drug cases were the most disproportionately male (85 percent). Person offense and property cases had the greatest proportion of females (20 percent each). Because the youth population at risk comprised nearly equal numbers of males and

females, the larger proportion of male cases resulted in delinquency case rates that were substantially higher for males than for females. In fact, the male rate (72.2) was more than four times the female rate (17.2).

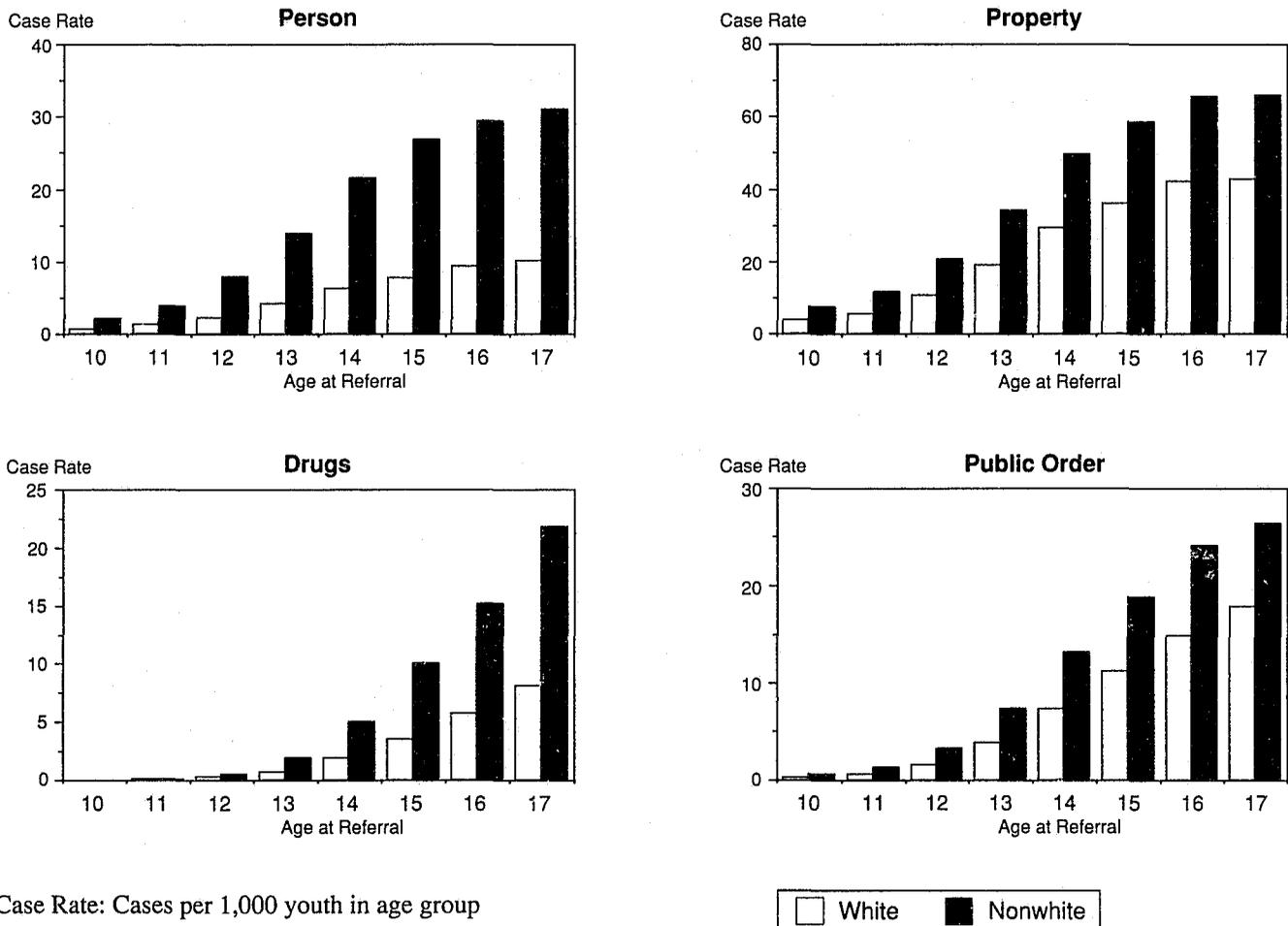
Many more cases handled by juvenile courts involved white youth (68 percent) than nonwhite youth (32 percent). Person offense cases had the largest proportion of nonwhite youth (44 percent), followed by drug cases (38 percent). Public order cases had the smallest proportion of nonwhite youth (28 percent).

While 71 percent of delinquency cases involved whites, white youth made up 81 percent of the general youth population at risk in the country in 1988.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the delinquency case rates for white youth were significantly lower than the corresponding rates for nonwhites (figure 3). In 1988 the nonwhite delinquency case rate (73.7) was nearly double the white rate (38.4). The most substantial racial differences

5. In both the court and population data, nearly all youth of Hispanic ethnicity are included in the white racial category.

Figure 3

### Delinquency Case Rates by Race, Age at Referral, and Offense, 1988



in case rates were found for person and drug offense cases. The nonwhite person offense case rate was more than double the white rate, and for drug offenses the nonwhite case rate was 1½ times the white rate. The racial differences in delinquency case rates decreased somewhat with age. The delinquency case rate for nonwhite youth age 12 was 120 percent greater than the rate for white youth of the same age, while among 17-year-olds the nonwhite rate was 85 percent greater than the white rate.

### Source of referral

Delinquency and status offense cases may be referred to juvenile court by law enforcement or social service agencies, parents, schools, probation officers, and victims. More than 8 out of 10 delinquency cases were referred by law enforcement. The proportion of cases referred by law enforcement varied by offense category. Drug cases were most likely to be referred by law enforcement (92 percent), followed by property cases (90 percent), and person offense cases (81 percent). A smaller proportion (62 percent) of cases involving offenses against the public order were referred by law enforcement, in part because this offense category includes probation violations and contempt of court cases, which are typically referred by court personnel.

### Detention decision

Youth may be placed in a detention facility by the court at some point between referral to court and case disposition. There are a variety of reasons a court may decide to place a youth in detention. Detention is often deemed necessary to protect the community from the youth, to protect the youth, or both. Detention may also be ordered to ensure the youth's appearance at an upcoming hearing as well as to evaluate the youth for treatment purposes.

Youth were held in a detention facility at some point between referral to court and case disposition in 21 percent of all delinquency cases processed in 1988 (figure 4). Thus, 237,000 delinquency

Figure 4

### Use of Detention in Delinquency Cases by Offense, 1988

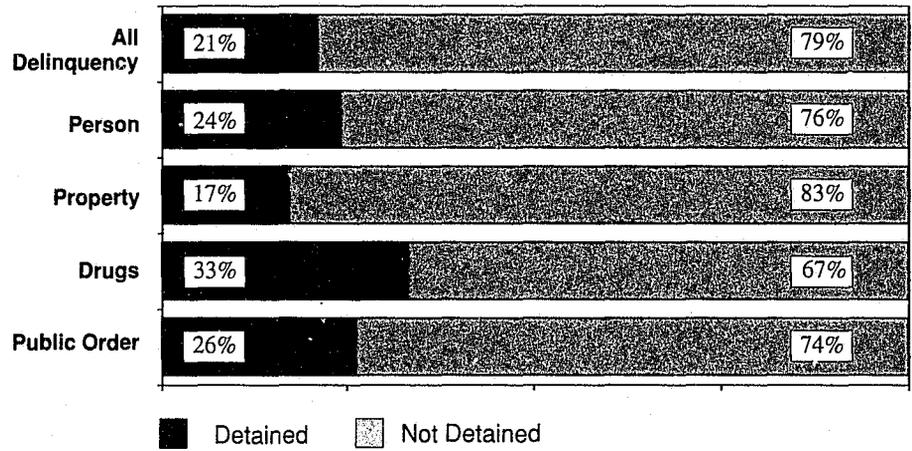


Figure 5

### Use of Detention in Delinquency Cases by Race, 1988

Percent of Cases Detained

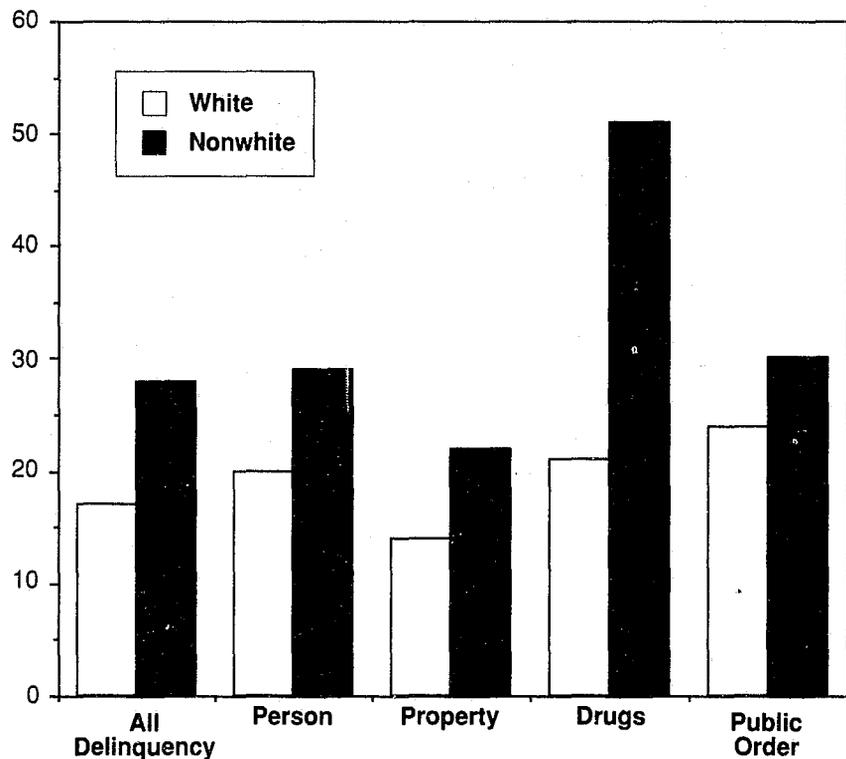
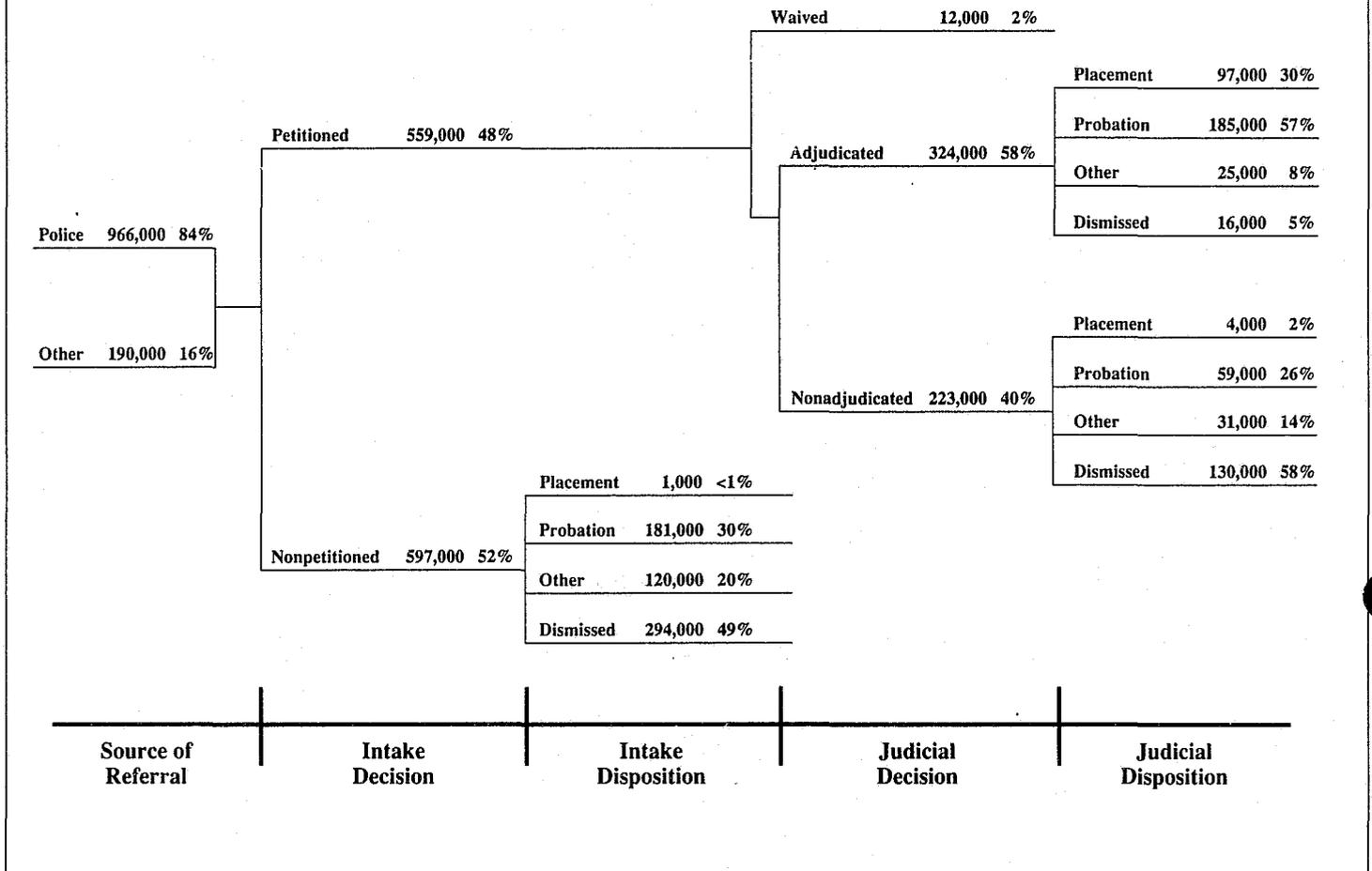


Figure 6

## Juvenile Court Processing of Delinquency Cases, 1988



cases involved detention. The use of detention varied by offense. Drug offenses had the largest proportion of cases detained (33 percent), and property offense had the smallest proportion of cases detained (17 percent). However, because of the large volume of property cases handled by the court, nearly half (48 percent) of all delinquency cases in which youth were detained were property cases. Between 1987 and 1988, the number of detentions increased 4 percent. The greatest increase was among drug cases, in which the number of cases involving detention rose 22 percent.

The proportion of delinquency cases detained also varied by race; 17 percent of whites were detained, compared to 28 percent of nonwhites (figure 5). Nonwhites were more likely to be detained across all offense categories. This racial difference in the proportion of cases detained was greatest for drug law violation cases. Among nonwhites, 51 percent of drug cases involved detention, compared to 21 percent among whites.

Between 1987 and 1988, the overall number of nonwhite youth detained in delinquency cases increased 13 percent, while the number of white detentions decreased 2 percent. Much of this

difference can be attributed to drug cases. Among nonwhite youth, there was a 38-percent increase in the number of youth detained in drug cases, but among white youth, the number of youth detained in drug cases rose only 4 percent.

### Intake decisions

When a delinquency or status offense case is referred to juvenile court, one of the first decisions made is whether the case will be handled informally or formally. Informal cases are handled by an intake department without an adjudicatory or waiver hearing. Many of these cases are dismissed, but others

may result in referral to another agency, informal probation, payment of fines or restitution, or occasionally, voluntary placement outside the home. If intake decides to handle the case formally, a petition is filed, and the case is placed on the court calendar for an adjudicatory or waiver hearing.

Intake officers decided that the case should be handled informally in slightly more than half of all delinquency cases processed by juvenile courts in 1988 (figure 6). Property and public order cases were more likely to be handled informally than person or drug offense cases. Almost half of all informally handled cases were dismissed (49 percent), and in 30 percent the youth was placed on voluntary probation.

### Judicial decisions

**Waiver.** At a waiver hearing, the juvenile court judge is asked to decide whether the juvenile court waives its jurisdiction over the case, ordering the youth to be tried as an adult in criminal court. The waiver decision is based, in part, on the seriousness of the offense and on whether the youth is amenable to rehabilitation through juvenile court disposition.

Waiver is a relatively rare occurrence in the juvenile court. Only 2 percent of all formally handled delinquency cases (12,000 cases) were waived to criminal court in 1988. This was a 14 percent increase over the number of cases waived in 1987. A youth charged with a person offense was the most likely to be waived; 4 percent of petitioned person offense cases were waived, compared to 3 percent for drug cases, 2 percent for property cases, and 1 percent of public order cases. Although person offense cases were most likely to be waived, they accounted for less than one-third of all waived cases. Property offense cases, because of their high volume, made up the majority of waived cases (53 percent). Between 1987 and 1988, the number of person and property cases waived to criminal court rose 10 percent, while the number of drug cases waived increased 44 percent.

**Adjudication and disposition.** For the majority of petitioned cases an adjudicatory hearing rather than a waiver hearing is held. At an adjudicatory hearing, the judge is asked to determine if the youth should be adjudicated (judged) delinquent. If the youth is adjudicated delinquent, the judge then makes a disposition decision, which could include commitment to a residential facility, probation, referral to another agency or treatment program, fines, restitution, or community service. If the youth is not adjudicated delinquent, the case may be dismissed or the youth may agree to some voluntary disposition, an outcome similar to dispositions in informally processed cases. Often the court's dispositional order will include multiple sanctions—for example, probation plus restitution and community service.

In 58 percent of all formally processed delinquency cases, the youth was adjudicated delinquent. Probation, the most common disposition, was ordered for 57 percent of these adjudicated delinquents. An additional 30 percent were placed out of their homes. In 8 percent of adjudicated cases, the youth received some other sanction. The remaining 5 percent were dismissed.

### Petitioned status offense case counts and trends

A status offense is an act that is an offense only when committed by a person of juvenile status. Status offenses include such behavior as running away from home, truancy, and underage drinking—offenses for which an adult could not be prosecuted in criminal court. Juvenile courts petitioned and formally disposed an estimated 82,000 status offense cases in 1988.<sup>6</sup> This was not a substantial change from the number of formal status offense cases handled by the courts in 1987. In 1988 nearly one-third (31 percent) of the formal status offense cases involved underage liquor law violations. Truancy cases accounted for just over a quarter (27 percent) of the formal status offense cases, ungovernability cases accounted for 17 percent, runaway cases for 16

percent, and other types of status offenses (such as curfew violations) accounted for the remaining 10 percent.<sup>7</sup>

The petitioned status offense cases handled by juvenile courts in 1988 resulted in a case rate of 3.2 cases for every 1,000 youth at risk in the population (figure 7). Compared to 1987 case rates, the overall status offense case rate did not change substantially, nor did the case rates for individual status offense categories.

Youth age 15 or younger were responsible for more than half (56 percent) the formal status offense cases. Truancy cases had the largest proportion of these younger youth. Unlike delinquency case rates, status offense case rates did not increase continuously with age in all offense categories (figure 8). Rates for runaway, truancy, and ungovernability cases peaked at age 15 and declined for older youth. In comparison, underage liquor law violation case rates increased continuously with age—more than 400 percent between ages 15 and 17.

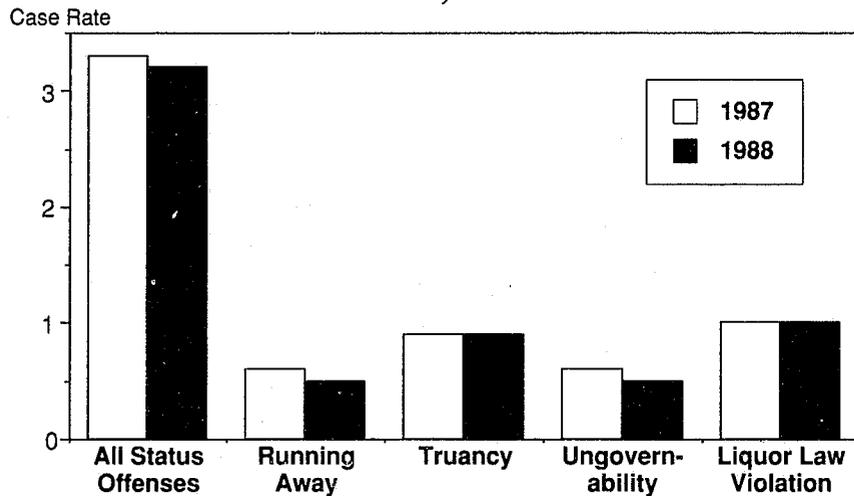
Males did not predominate in all status offense categories as they did in delinquency offense categories. About 6 out of 10 petitioned status offense cases involved males. In truancy and ungovernability cases, males and females were about equally involved. Males accounted for the majority of liquor law violation cases (76 percent), but were the minority in runaway cases where females accounted for 62 percent. Thus, truancy and ungovernability case

6. In many communities, social service agencies, family crisis units, and county attorneys—rather than the juvenile courts—have assumed responsibility for screening and diverting alleged status offenders. National estimates of informally handled status offense cases were not developed from juvenile court data because of the great differences in intake and screening procedures. The national estimates presented here and in *Juvenile Court Statistics 1988* focus only on formally handled (petitioned) status offense cases. Readers interested in the nature of informally handled status offense cases are directed to the subnational statistics presented in chapter 3 of *Juvenile Court Statistics 1988*.

7. Detail may not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

Figure 7

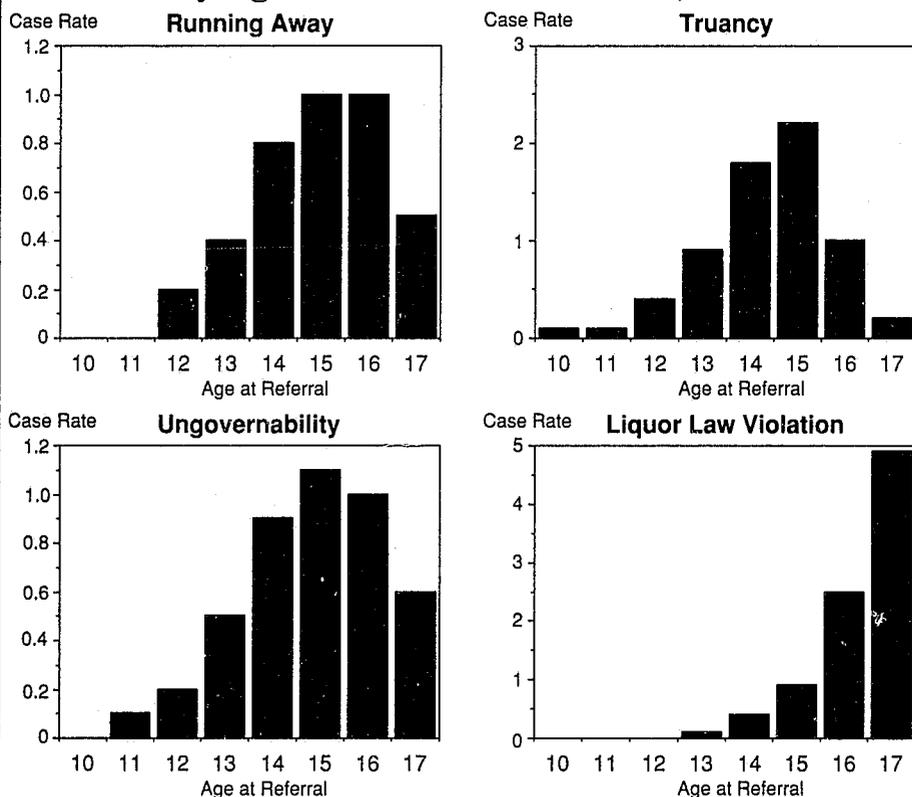
### Petitioned Status Offense Case Rates, 1987-1988



Case Rate: Cases per 1,000 youth at risk

Figure 8

### Petitioned Status Offense Case Rates by Age at Referral and Offense, 1988



Case Rate: Cases per 1,000 youth at risk

rates were comparable for males and females, liquor law violation case rates were substantially higher for males, and runaway case rates were higher for females (figure 9).

White youth were involved in 80 percent of the formal status offense cases in 1988; this is comparable to their representation in the U.S. youth population. White youth made up 71 percent of both truancy and ungovernability cases, 78 percent of runaway cases, and 94 percent of liquor law violation cases. The liquor law violation case rate was substantially higher for whites than for nonwhites, but the case rates for nonwhites for other offense categories were equal to or higher than the corresponding rates for whites.

#### Source of referral

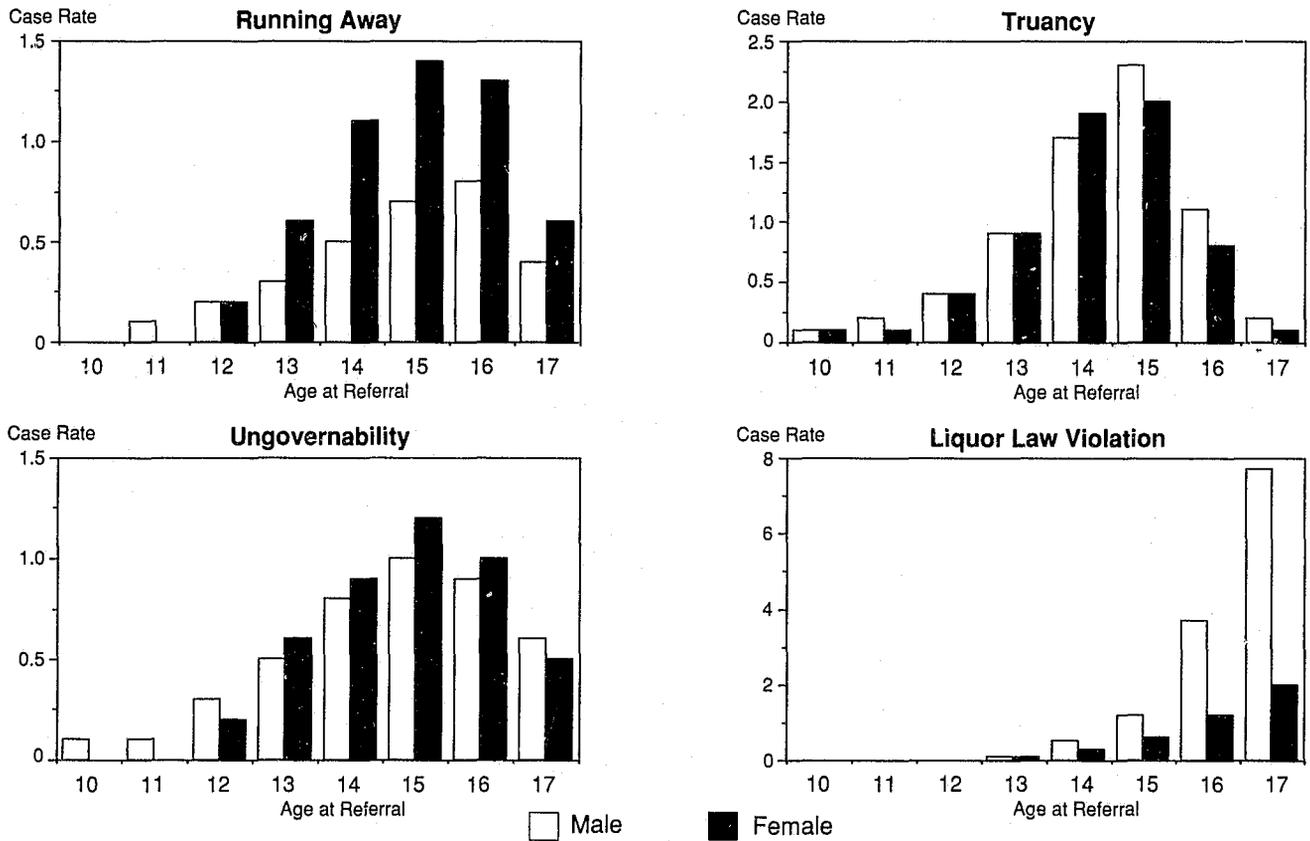
While nearly 6 out of 10 formal status offense cases handled in 1988 were referred to juvenile court by sources other than law enforcement, there was wide variation across offenses. Liquor law violation cases were most likely to be referred by law enforcement (91 percent). In comparison, 32 percent of runaway cases, 19 percent of truancy cases, and 9 percent of ungovernability cases were referred by law enforcement.

#### Detention decision

Youth were detained between their referral to court and case disposition in 10 percent of all petitioned status offense cases (figure 10). This represents a 27 percent drop from the number of status offense cases detained in 1987. Youth were detained in only 3 percent of truancy cases—the smallest proportion of cases detained. Youth were detained in 25 percent of runaway cases—the largest proportion of cases detained. Runaways made up the largest proportion (37 percent) of the 9,000 youth detained and formally processed for a status offense.

Figure 9

### Petitioned Status Offense Case Rates by Sex, Age at Referral, and Offense, 1988



### Judicial decisions

In 61 percent of petitioned status offense cases, the youth was adjudicated a status offender (figure 11). As with delinquency cases, probation was the most common disposition ordered for these adjudicated status offenders (60 percent). In 18 percent of the adjudicated status offense cases, the youth was placed out of the home. In an additional 15 percent of these cases, the youth received some other sanction such as restitution, community service, or treatment. The remaining 7 percent were dismissed.

Figure 10

### Use of Detention in Petitioned Status Offense Cases by Offense, 1988

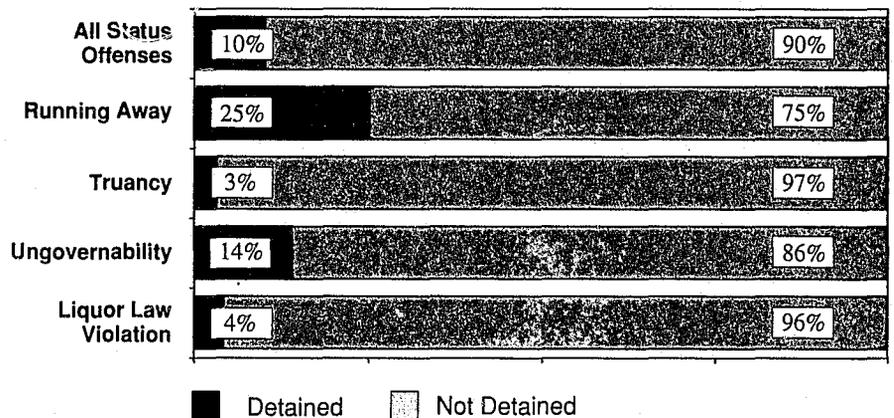
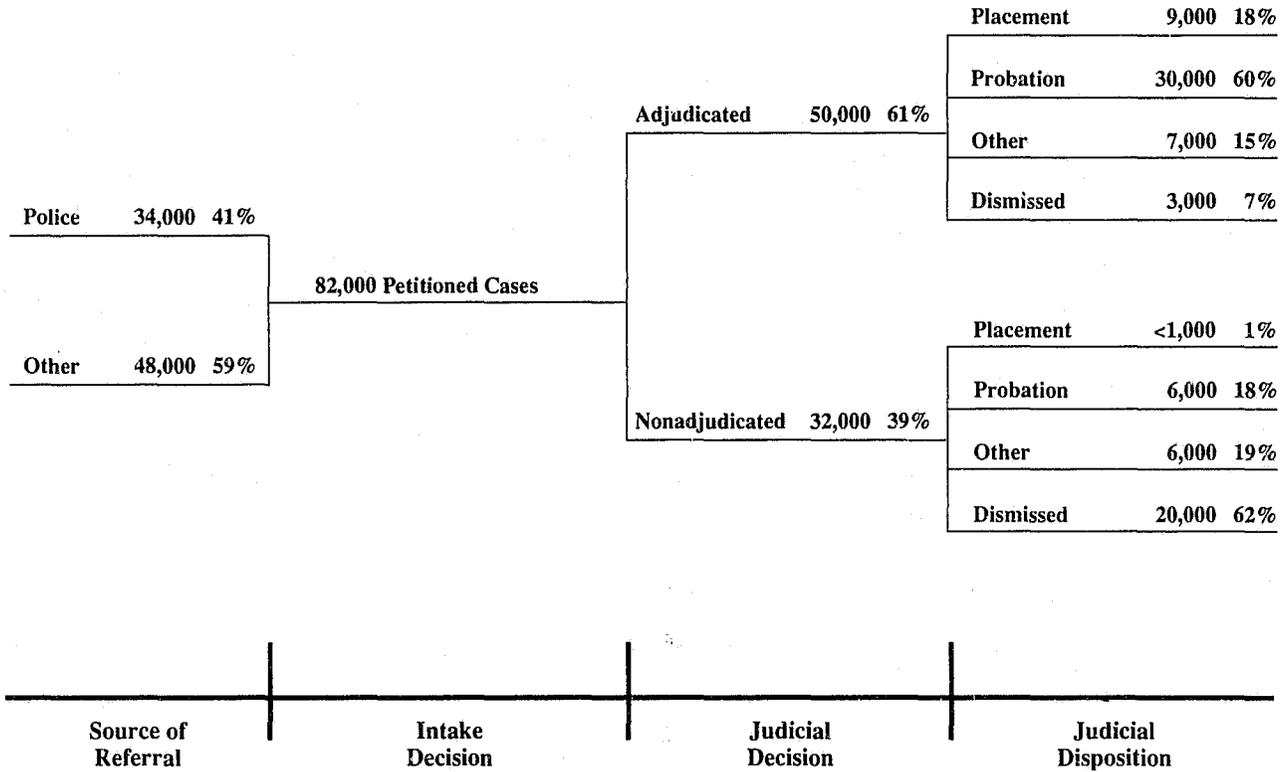


Figure 11

### Juvenile Court Processing of Petitioned Status Offense Cases, 1988



### About the National Juvenile Court Data Archive

This *OJJDP Update* presents information from the latest *Juvenile Court Statistics* report. This reporting series, begun in 1929, is the primary source of information on the activities of the Nation's juvenile courts. The data for this report are collected, analyzed, and stored as part of the National Juvenile Court Data Archive operated by the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ). Since 1975, OJJDP has provided all funding for the establishment and maintenance of the Archive.

Annually the Archive collects demographic, legal, and dispositional data on more than 600,000 delinquency and status offense cases, thus offering the most detailed information available on youth who come in contact with the juvenile justice system. In addition to producing the *Juvenile Court Statistics* reports and other topical *Updates* (see related readings), the Archive provides special data analyses and administers the Visiting Scholars Program, designed to support special studies of the Archive's data for research and policy purposes.

## Acknowledgments

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Both this *Update* and *Juvenile Court Statistics 1988* were supported by funds provided to the National Juvenile Court Data Archive by OJJDP under grant number 85-JN-CX-0012. Joseph Moone is the OJJDP Program Manager for the Archive. The Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse was responsible for final report production and graphic design. For more information about the Archive, contact the National Center for Juvenile Justice, 701 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15219, or call 412-227-6950.

Both OJJDP and NCJJ gratefully acknowledge the efforts of the many State and local agencies that contribute their data to the Archive. Their coopera-

tion with Archive requests for data and documentation makes this work possible.

## Related readings

To obtain a copy of *Juvenile Court Statistics 1988*, any of the following OJJDP *Updates* that focus on juvenile court processing, or a copy of the *Guide to the Data Sets in the National Juvenile Court Data Archive*, call or write the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850 (800-638-8736, or in Maryland and the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area 301-251-5500).

*The Juvenile Court Response to Violent Crime*, January 1989, NCJ 115338.

*Juvenile Courts Vary Greatly in How They Handle Drug and Alcohol Cases*, August 1989, NCJ 119319.

*Growth in Minority Detentions Attributed to Drug Law Violators*, March 1990, NCJ 122011.

*Runaways in Juvenile Courts*, November 1990, NCJ 124881.

*Juvenile Court Property Cases*, November 1990, NCJ 125625.

*Offenders in Juvenile Court, 1987*, July 1991, NCJ 126160.

*Juvenile Court Drug and Alcohol Cases, 1985-1988*, NCJ 132074.

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