Conditions of Confinement: Juvenile Detention and Corrections Facilities

Research Report

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

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.
Foreword

It is my pleasure to present to you the report *Conditions of Confinement: Juvenile Detention and Corrections Facilities*. This study, commissioned by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in response to the 1988 amendments to the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, is the most comprehensive nationwide research ever conducted on the juvenile detention and corrections field. It is remarkable that this research became a study both for and by the field. It involved the leadership of an exceptional research team at Abt Associates, Inc., a pool of experienced and dedicated consultants, and hundreds of administrators and staff who shared with us information about their facilities' operations and programs. It is this combination of leadership, talent, and commitment that has made this study a truly significant contribution to our understanding of juvenile confinement conditions.

The results of this research present many challenges to policymakers and practitioners nationwide. The need for consensus and action is clearly written in these pages. How do we provide conditions of confinement that ensure that basic needs are met and that a meaningful quality of life is provided? With pervasive crowding, staff turnover, and violence both inside and outside of institutions, the field must determine how to successfully accomplish its broader mission:

...to create legitimate, alternative pathways to adulthood through equal access to services that are least intrusive, culturally sensitive, and consistent with the highest professional standards.

—The 1992 Juvenile Detention and Correctional Forum Mission Statement

To meet the challenge posed by this report and its recommendations will require the cooperation of private organizations, courts and other governmental agencies, legislators, legal advocates, and professionals in the field. We need to begin a national movement founded on a basic human concern about justice for juveniles and the conditions of their confinement. As you read this document, think carefully and creatively about what you can do individually and through your employers and professional associations to respond to the challenges facing the field of juvenile detention and corrections. It is time that we begin to do the right thing by working together to achieve lasting improvements in the conditions of confinement for juveniles in this country.

John J. Wilson  
*Acting Administrator*  
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
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This pioneering study would have been impossible without support and cooperation from leading juvenile justice organizations and practitioners at all levels. To obtain that support and cooperation, Abt Associates, Inc., and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention involved juvenile justice leaders in all phases of the study. Their involvement improved response rates, sharpened the quality of the research, and focused the field’s attention on conditions of confinement as a national policy issue.

Several organizations deserve specific recognition for endorsing the project, for encouraging their members to fully cooperate, and for inviting us to appear at meetings to tell their members about the study or its findings. These include the National Juvenile Detention Association, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, the National Association of Juvenile Correctional Administrators, the American Correctional Association, and the American Bar Association.

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Unfortunately, our pledge of confidentiality prevents us from publicly thanking the hundreds of staff and administrators in juvenile agencies and facilities who completed the mail survey, hosted site visits, or helped us test and refine our data collection instruments.
Table of Contents

Foreword ........................................................................................................ iii
Acknowledgments ......................................................................................... v
Table of Contents ......................................................................................... vii
List of Figures ............................................................................................... ix
List of Tables ................................................................................................ xi

Executive Summary ....................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study ........................................................... 1

Chapter 2: Study Methodology ................................................................. 4
  A. Assessment Criteria .............................................................................. 4
  B. Description of Conditions of Confinement ........................................ 9
  C. Samples and Data Collection ............................................................. 13

Chapter 3: Description of Juvenile Facilities and the Confined Juvenile Population .......................................................................................... 21
  A. Description of the Current Confined Juvenile Population ................. 21
  B. Trends in Juvenile Facilities and the Confined Juvenile Population .... 34

Chapter 4: Meeting Basic Needs ............................................................... 43
  A. Living Space ...................................................................................... 43
     Recommendations Regarding Living Space ...................................... 67
  B. Health Services ................................................................................ 68
     Recommendations Regarding Health Services ................................ 82
  C. Food, Clothing, and Hygiene ............................................................. 83
  D. Living Accommodations .................................................................. 86

Chapter 5: Order and Safety ................................................................. 93
  A. Security ............................................................................................. 93
     Recommendations Regarding Security .......................................... 112
  B. Controlling Suicidal Behavior ........................................................... 113
     Recommendations Regarding Controlling Suicidal Behavior .......... 122
  C. Inspections and Emergency Preparedness ......................................... 123
     Recommendations Regarding Inspection and Emergency Preparedness 128
List of Figures

| Figure 3-1 | Number of Admissions to Juvenile Facilities by Facility Type, 1978-1990 | 35 |
| Figure 3-2 | Number of Confined Juveniles Based on One-Day Count by Facility Type, 1979-1991 | 36 |
| Figure 3-3 | Total Number of Juvenile Facilities, 1979-1991 | 37 |
| Figure 4A-1 | Percent of Confined Juveniles Who Sleep in Undersized Rooms | 51 |
| Figure 4A-2 | Percent of Confined Juveniles in Single and Double Rooms by Average Square Feet per Juvenile in Training Schools | 53 |
| Figure 4A-3 | Percent of Confined Juveniles in Multiple Occupancy and Dormitory Rooms by Average Square Feet per Juvenile in Training Schools | 54 |
| Figure 4A-4 | Percent of Confined Juveniles in Single and Double Rooms by Average Square Feet per Juvenile in Detention Centers | 55 |
| Figure 4A-5 | Percent of Confined Juveniles in Multiple Occupancy and Dormitory Rooms by Average Square Feet per Juvenile in Detention Centers | 56 |
| Figure 4A-6 | Percent of Crowded Facilities in Which Half or More of Juveniles Sleep in Undersized Rooms | 57 |
| Figure 4A-7 | Percent of Confined Juveniles in Facilities Whose Average Daily Population Exceeds Reported Design Capacity by Facility Type, 1987-1991 | 61 |
| Figure 4B-1 | Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Perform Health Screening for Emergency Medical Problems and Drugs or Alcohol by Facility Type | 73 |
| Figure 4B-2 | Percent of Juveniles Receiving Health Screening by Staff Responsible and Facility Type | 75 |
| Figure 5A-1 | Percent of Confined Juveniles in Facilities That Conform to Minimum Supervision Staffing Ratio, 1987-1991, by Facility Type | 100 |
| Figure 5A-2 | Average Juvenile and Staff Injury Rates, Last 30 Days, by Facility Type | 110 |
| Figure 5B-1 | Rates of Suicidal Behavior and Acts of Suicidal Behavior per 100 Juveniles, Last 30 Days, by Facility Type | 120 |
| Figure 6A-1 | Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Perform Academic, Vocational, and Personal Needs Assessments, by Facility Type | 139 |
List of Tables

| Table 2-1       | Total Number of Facilities and Confined Juveniles
|                 | Included in This Study ........................................ 14
| Table 2-2       | Facility Response Rate to Mail Survey, by Facility Type .......... 16
| Table 2-3       | Comparison of Final Site Visit Sample With Sampling Frame by Size,
|                 | Region, and Ownership ........................................ 19
| Table 2-4       | Site Visit Response Rates ..................................... 19
| Table 3-1       | Juvenile Admissions, Average Daily Population, and Reported Average
|                 | Length of Stay, 1990 .............................................. 22
| Table 3-2       | Percent of Discharges in 1990, by Average Length of Stay in Facility .. 23
| Table 3-3       | Median Size and Range of Population Size of Juvenile Facilities .... 24
| Table 3-4       | Percent of Confined Juveniles by Size of Facility ............... 25
| Table 3-5       | Percent of Confined Juveniles by Governing Agency ............... 25
| Table 3-6       | Percent of Confined Juveniles by Security Level ................ 26
| Table 3-7       | Percent of Confined Juveniles by Physical Setting ............... 27
| Table 3-8       | Percent of Confined Juveniles by Dispositional Status .......... 27
| Table 3-9       | Percent of Confined Juveniles by Offense Type .................. 29
| Table 3-10      | Percent of Confined Juveniles by Age ................................ 30
| Table 3-11      | Percent of Confined Juveniles by Range in Age of Facility Population .. 31
| Table 3-12      | Percent of Confined Juveniles by Gender Composition of Facility .... 31
| Table 3-13      | Percent of Confined Juveniles by Race/Ethnicity ................ 32
| Table 3-14      | Percent of Juveniles in Each Facility Type by Region ............ 32
| Table 3-15      | Average Population in Facilities by Facility Type and Region .......... 33
| Table 3-16      | Percent of Confined Juveniles by Security Level and Region .......... 33
| Table 3-17      | Percent of Juveniles Confined in Public Facilities Operating Under
|                 | Court Orders or Consent Decrees, by Facility Type, 1991 ............. 34
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3–19</td>
<td>Average Duration of Confinement in Days for Juveniles Discharged, by Facility Type, 1986 and 1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–22</td>
<td>Percent of Confined Juveniles, by Offense Type, 1987–1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A–1</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Conform to Assessment Criteria on Living Space, 1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A–2</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles Sleeping in Rooms With Different Occupancy Levels, by Facility Type, 1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A–3</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles Who Sleep in Undersized Rooms, by Occupancy Level and Facility Type, 1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A–4</td>
<td>Number of Juveniles Who Would Need to be Removed to Eliminate Undersized Sleeping Rooms, by Facility Type, 1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A–5</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles by Average Amount of Time in Sleeping Rooms per Day, by Facility Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A–6</td>
<td>Estimated Percent of Confined Juveniles by Size of Living Units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A–7</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles: Distribution of Population as Percent of Reported Design Capacity, by Facility Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A–8</td>
<td>Reductions Needed To Bring Population to 100% and 90% of Reported Design Capacity, by Facility Type, 1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A–9</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities Using Different Primary Responses To Control Crowding, 1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A–10</td>
<td>Administrators’ Ratings of Specific Responses To Reduce Crowding, 1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4A–11</td>
<td>Administrators’ Assessments of Effectiveness of Responses in Controlling Crowding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4B–1</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Meet Health Assessment Criteria in Each of Three Areas and in All Areas by Facility Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4B–2</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles Receiving Initial Health Screening, by Timing and Facility Type, 1991</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4B-3  Observations Recorded on Health Screening Form, by Percent of Juveniles and Facility Type ........................................ 74

Table 4B-4  Questions Recorded on Health Screening Form, by Percent of Juveniles and Facility Type ........................................ 74

Table 4B-5  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Do Not Perform Health Appraisals Within 1 Week, by Reason for Not Requiring Appraisal and Facility Type ........................................ 76

Table 4B-6  Percent of Confined Juveniles in Facilities Receiving Health Appraisals, by Recommended Elements and Facility Type, 1991 ........................................ 77

Table 4B-7  Percent of Juveniles With Access to Medical Staff by Type and Frequency of Staff Availability and Facility Type, 1991 ........................................ 79

Table 4B-8  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities, by Ratio of Medical Staff to Juveniles and Facility Type ........................................ 80

Table 4B-9  Rate of Juveniles' Need for Emergency Health Care per 100 Juveniles Confined, Last 12 Months, by Facility Type ........................................ 81

Table 4C-1  Percent of Juveniles Confined in Facilities That Conform to Assessment Criteria on Food, Clothing, and Hygiene, by Facility Type ........................................ 85

Table 4D-1  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Conform to Assessment Criteria on Living Accommodations, by Facility Type ........................................ 87

Table 4D-2  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities Allowing Furnishings and Personal Items in Isolation Rooms, by Facility Type ........................................ 88

Table 4D-3  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Provide Furnishings in Sleeping Rooms, by Facility Type ........................................ 90

Table 4D-4  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Allow Personal Belongings in Sleeping Rooms by Facility Type ........................................ 91

Table 4D-5  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities Where Sleeping Rooms Have Access to Natural Light, by Facility Type ........................................ 92

Table 5A-1  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Conform to Security Assessment Criteria, by Facility Type ........................................ 97

Table 5A-2  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Use Recommended and Other Factors to Classify Juveniles, by Facility Type ........................................ 98

Table 5A-3  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Use Classification for Custody Level and Programming, by Facility Type ........................................ 99
Table 5A-4  Supervision Staff Turnover Rates in Juvenile Facilities, by Facility Type ........................................... 101

Table 5A-5  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities With Selected Security Features, by Facility Type ........................................... 103

Table 5A-6  Percent of Juveniles Confined in Facilities With Walls and Surveillance Cameras, by Facility Type, 1987 and 1991 .................................................. 104

Table 5A-7  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Lock Doors to Sleeping Rooms and Living Units, by Facility Type ................................. 105

Table 5A-8  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities With Perimeter Checks, by Facility Type ........................................... 106

Table 5A-9  Percent of Juveniles in Public Facilities Performing Perimeter Checks, by Facility Type, 1987 and 1991 .................................................. 106

Table 5A-10  Attempted and Successful Escape Rates per 100 Juveniles and Totals Over Last 30 Days, by Facility Type ........................................... 107

Table 5A-11  Attempted and Successful Escape Rates Over Last 30 Days, by Presence of Wall or Fence and by Facility Type ........................................... 108

Table 5A-12  Attempted and Successful Escape Rates Over Last 30 Days, by Conformance to the Count Criteria (Conformance means three or more counts per day) .................................................. 109

Table 5B-1  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Are in Conformance With Suicide Prevention Standards, by Type of Facility and for All Facilities ........................................... 115

Table 5B-2  Average Number of Hours of Staff Training Provided During the First Year and Each Following Year of Employment for Facilities With Suicide Prevention Training, by Facility Type .................................................. 116

Table 5B-3  Percent of Facilities With Suicide Prevention Training, by Number of Hours of Training During the First Year and Each Following Year of Employment and by Facility Type and for All Facilities .................................................. 117

Table 5B-4  Estimated Percent of Juveniles in Facilities With Specific Elements in Suicide Prevention Plans ........................................... 118

Table 5B-5  Individual and Incident Suicide Rates, by Facility Type and by Conformance to Suicide Screening Criterion ........................................... 121

Table 5B-6  Individual and Incident Suicide Rates, by Facility Type and by Conformance to Staff Training in Suicide Prevention Criterion ........................................... 121

Table 5C-1  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Conform to Inspections and Emergency Preparedness Assessment Criteria ........................................... 124
Table 5C-2  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Hold Three Particular Inspections Annually, by Facility Type .................................................. 125
Table 5C-3  Site Visitor Ratings of Maintenance, Cleanliness, and Odor .................................................. 126
Table 6A-1  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Conform to Assessment Criteria on Providing Basic Education, by Facility Type .................................................. 132
Table 6A-2  Percent of Juveniles in Educational Programs, by Facility Type .................................................. 133
Table 6A-3  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Provide Educational Programs, by Facility Type .................................................. 134
Table 6A-4  Percent of Juveniles in Detention Centers That Provide Basic and Additional Educational Programs, by Length of Stay and Facility Type .................................................. 135
Table 6A-5  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities by Length of School Year, by Facility Type .................................................. 136
Table 6A-6  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities by Equipment Provided in Classroom .................................................. 137
Table 6A-7  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Offer Vocational Educational Programs, by Facility Type .................................................. 138
Table 6A-8  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities by Ratios of Educational Staff to Juveniles in Educational Programs, by Facility Type .................................................. 140
Table 6A-9  Educational Staff Turnover Rates in Juvenile Facilities, by Facility Type .................................................. 141
Table 6A-10 Percent of Juveniles in Facilities by Administrators’ Rating of the Need for Improvements to Education .................................................. 142
Table 6B-1  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Conform to Assessment Criterion on Recreation, by Facility Type .................................................. 144
Table 6B-2  Percent of Juveniles Confined in Facilities With Outdoor Recreation Areas .................................................. 145
Table 6B-3  Percent of Juveniles Confined in Facilities With Indoor Recreation Areas .................................................. 146
Table 6C-1  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Conform to Mental Health Services Assessment Criteria, by Facility Type .................................................. 149
Table 6C-2  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities, by Availability of Mental Health Staff and by Facility Type .................................................. 150
Table 6C-3  Percent of Juveniles in Facilities, by Ratio of Juveniles to Treatment Staff and by Facility Type .................................................. 151
Table 6C-4  Treatment Staff Turnover Rates in Juvenile Facilities, by Facility Type .................................................. 152
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6C-5</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities, by Available Treatment Programs and by Facility Type</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6C-6</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities, by Preparation of Individual Program Plans and by Facility Type</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6C-7</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities With Regularly Scheduled Evaluations, by Interval of Evaluation and by Facility Type</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6C-8</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities, by policy on Family Involvement in Treatment and by Facility Type</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7A-1</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Conform to Assessment Criteria on Access</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7A-2</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles Allowed Incoming and/or Outgoing Phone Calls, by Facility Type</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7A-3</td>
<td>Number of Outgoing Calls Allowed Juveniles, by Facility Type</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7A-4</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities, by Policy on Monitoring Phone Calls</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7A-5</td>
<td>Reasons for Opening Mail, by Facility Type</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7A-6</td>
<td>Types of Visitors Permitted in Facilities Allowing Visits, by Facility Type</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7A-7</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles Who Had Received Visits From Each Type of Visitor During Their Stay</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7A-8</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities With Transportation Services</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7A-9</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities Where Some Form of Assistance in Representation is Available, by Facility Type</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7A-10</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities With Volunteer Programs</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7B-1</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Conform to Assessment Criteria on Limiting Staff Discretion</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7B-2</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities With No Disciplinary Hearings, Hearings Without Appeals, and Different Time Limits for Appeals</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7B-3</td>
<td>Estimated Percent of Juveniles, by Elements of Grievance Process and Forms of Assistance in Filing Grievance</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7B-4</td>
<td>Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Permit Line Staff to Authorize Searches, by Type of Search and by Facility Type</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7B-5</td>
<td>Rates of Searches by Conformance to Search Authorization Criteria and by Facility Type</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7B-6  Summary of Rates per 100 Juveniles per Month for Room Searches, Frisks, and Strip Searches in Detention Centers and Training Schools .......................... 179

Table 7B-7  Average Rates of Shorter and Longer Term Isolation for Confined Juveniles, Last 30 Days by Facility Type ................................................................. 181

Table 7B-8  Percent of Juveniles Held in Facilities That Limit Maximum Isolation Period by Written Policy, by Facility Type .............................................................. 182

Table 7B-9  Rates of Shorter and Longer Term Isolation, Last 30 Days, in Detention Centers and Training Schools, by Conformance to Criteria Limiting Maximum Isolation to 5 Days .................................................. 183

Table 7B-10 Percent of Juveniles in Facilities Using Isolation That Deny Isolated Juveniles Access to Programs, by Facility Type ....................................................... 183

Table 7B-11 Percent of Juveniles in Facilities That Have Used Mechanical Restraints in the Last Year, by Facility Type ................................................................. 185

Table 7B-12 Average Restraint Use Rates per 100 Juveniles per Month, by Facility Type ................................................................. 185

Table 7B-13 Percent of Juveniles by Maximum Permitted Duration of Restraint Use and by Facility Type ................................................................. 186

Table 7B-14 Juveniles Injured by Staff, Last 30 Days, by Facility Type ................................................................. 188

Table 8-1  Regression of Total Search Rate on Facility Characteristics ................................................................. 197

Table 8-2  Regression of Rate of Isolation Under 24 Hours on Facility Characteristics ................................................................. 200

Table 8-3  Regression of Rate of Isolation Over 24 Hours on Facility Characteristics ................................................................. 203

Table 8-4  Regression of Suicidal Behavior Rate on Facility Characteristics ................................................................. 206

Table 8-5  Regression of Rate of Juvenile-on-Juvenile Injuries on Facility Characteristic ................................................................. 209

Table 8-6  Regression of Staff-on-Juvenile Injuries on Facility Characteristics ................................................................. 212

Table 8-7  Regression of Juvenile-on-Staff Injuries on Facility Characteristics ................................................................. 215

Table 8-8  Regression of Attempted Escape Rate on Facility Characteristics ................................................................. 218

Table 8-9  Regression of Successful Escape Rate on Facility Characteristics ................................................................. 221
Executive Summary

In 1988 Congress directed the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to assess conditions of confinement for juveniles, to determine the extent to which those conditions conform to recognized national professional standards, and to report findings to Congress, along with recommendations for improvement.

The congressional mandate must be viewed against the backdrop of changes in juvenile justice. Serious juvenile crime—particularly violent offenses reported to authorities—grew rapidly in recent years. Arrests for violent juvenile offenses and drug offenses rose sharply, even as overall juvenile drug use declined. Policymakers increased the severity of punishments for violent or habitual juvenile offenders. Many States made it easier to sentence serious juvenile offenders as adults.

Admissions to juvenile facilities rose after 1984 and reached an all-time high of nearly 690,000 in 1990. The largest increase was in detention, where admissions rose from just over 400,000 in 1984 to about 570,000 in 1990. The daily population of confined juveniles, based on Children in Custody (CIC) census 1-day counts, increased from about 50,800 in 1979 to about 65,000 in 1991. The populations of all types of facilities increased (except for ranches, where populations declined).

The characteristics of confined juveniles also changed sharply in recent years. Between 1987 and 1991 the proportion of minorities among confined juveniles rose from 53 percent to 63 percent, with the biggest increases among blacks (37 percent to 44 percent) and Hispanics (13 percent to 17 percent). The percentage confined for crimes against persons rose from 22 percent to 28 percent, and those confined for property offenses declined from 40 percent to 34 percent. The percentage confined for drug-related offenses rose between 1987 and 1989, and then declined somewhat in 1991, resulting in an overall increase of 4 percentage points (6 percent to 10 percent).

When Congress mandated the study, it was apparent that crowding was becoming a serious problem in juvenile facilities. By 1987, 36 percent of confined juveniles were held in facilities whose populations exceeded their design capacity. Key problems in adult corrections—crowding, litigation on conditions of confinement, major capacity expansion, and huge increases in costs—were beginning to be evident in juvenile facilities as well. Thus, it was important to learn more about conditions in juvenile confinement facilities, to pinpoint serious problems, and to explore possible remedies.

Study description

The study was funded in the fall of 1990. The study covered all 984 public (operated by State and local governments) and private juvenile detention centers, reception centers, training schools, and ranches, camps, and farms in the United States. These facilities held about 65,000 juveniles on the date of the 1991 CIC census, or about 69 percent of the juveniles confined on that date in the United States.

Three types of facilities that confine juveniles were excluded: (a) youth halfway houses, shelters, and group homes; (b) police lockups, adult jails, and prisons that hold juveniles tried and
convicted as adults, and (c) psychiatric and drug treatment programs. We have no data on conditions of confinement in these facilities.

Prominent juvenile justice practitioners served as advisers, consultants, and site visitors. Key juvenile justice organizations endorsed the study and urged cooperation from the field.

Data collection and preparation

Data for the study came from three sources:

- The 1991 CIC census.
- A special mail survey sent to all 984 facilities.
- 2-day site visits to 95 facilities.

Survey data. The 1991 CIC census had a 99-percent response rate for public facilities and an 86-percent response rate for private facilities. The project's mail survey had a 76-percent response rate. Data from the two were merged to produce a single record for each facility, which was used to assess conditions of confinement. CIC census data from 1979 to 1991 were used to describe trends in the use of juvenile confinement.

Site visit data. Altogether, researchers visited a nationally representative, randomly selected sample of 95 public and private juvenile facilities: 30 detention centers, 30 training schools, 30 ranches, camps, and farms, and 5 reception centers. Fifteen prominent practitioners were selected and trained to collect data during site visits. Project staff accompanied site visitors to the 20 largest facilities to expedite data collection. During site visits we validated selected responses to the mail survey, recorded observational data, and asked staff and juveniles about conditions of confinement. Site visits began in September 1991 and ended in January 1992.

The site visit sample was stratified by type of facility. Within the four strata, samples were drawn so that larger facilities had a greater chance of being selected for a site visit. Eighty percent of the facilities initially selected agreed to host a site visit. Those that declined were replaced by comparable facilities (same type, same region, similar size). The final sample closely resembled the total distribution of facilities by region and by method of operation (public versus private).

In addition to interviewing facility administrators and staff members, we also interviewed 5 randomly selected juveniles at each site, or a total of 475 juveniles at the facilities we visited.

Because the study focused on conditions faced by confined juveniles, conformance rates generally were described in terms of the percentage of juveniles confined in facilities that conform to each assessment criterion, rather than the percentage of facilities that conform.

The results are reported by facility type for the Nation as a whole. In order to protect respondents' confidentiality, data cannot be presented by State or by individual facilities. While this limits our ability to pinpoint specific States or facilities that may need particular improvements, a guarantee of confidentiality was deemed essential in order to get both high response rates and candid answers to sensitive questions.
Strategy for assessing conditions

We used three approaches, where possible, to assess conditions of confinement.

- First, we measured conformance to 46 assessment criteria that reflected existing national professional standards in 12 areas that represented advisers’ perceptions of confined juveniles’ most important needs.

- Second, we analyzed data (obtained from the mail survey, the Children in Custody census, and site visits) on other selected aspects of conditions of confinement for which no national standards existed.

- Third, we analyzed data on selected incidents in facilities, including rates of injuries to juveniles and staff, rates of escape and attempted escape, rates of suicidal behavior, and selected security and control practices, such as rates of searches and isolation.

To decide whether serious problems existed, we reviewed data on all three levels, where available. In some cases, conformance rates for a particular assessment criterion were low, but other data on conditions suggested that nonconformance had minimal effects. For example, one assessment criterion required that the interval between an evening meal and the following breakfast be no more than 14 hours. A large proportion of juveniles were confined in facilities that did not conform. However, when we examined facilities’ actual practices in more detail, we found most nonconforming facilities missed the deadline by 15 or 20 minutes, and that on all other measures food service appeared generally satisfactory.

In other instances, conformance was moderate or high, but data on conditions or outcomes suggested problems. For example, almost all juveniles were in facilities that conformed to an assessment criterion requiring that facilities pass annual fire inspections. But during site visits we saw a disturbingly high proportion of facilities that had obvious fire safety violations, such as not marking fire exits or posting fire escape routes.
The 46 assessment criteria were organized into 12 topic areas that were, in turn, grouped into 4 broad categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Assessing Conditions of Confinement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Assessment Criteria</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Basic Needs**
- 1. Living space: 3
- 2. Health care: 6
- 3. Food, clothing, and hygiene: 4
- 4. Living accommodations: 4

**Order and Safety**
- 5. Security: 3
- 6. Controlling suicidal behavior: 4
- 7. Inspections and emergency preparedness: 4

**Programming**
- 8. Education: 4
- 9. Recreation: 1
- 10. Treatment services: 2

**Juveniles’ Rights**
- 11. Access to community: 5
- 12. Limits on staff discretion: 6

**Total**: 46

In developing measures for the assessment criteria, requirements of nationally recognized standards for juvenile facilities were reviewed. For example, advisers decided that confined juveniles need adequate living space. Several benchmarks of nationally recognized standards were identified. In terms of sleeping space, standards required 70 square feet per juvenile in single rooms and 50 square feet per juvenile in rooms with three or more occupants. Standards also recommended that no more than 25 juveniles be housed in one living unit and that facilities’ populations not exceed their design capacity.

We relied mainly on three sets of standards:

- American Correctional Association standards (as amended in 1991), which are used as the basis for accrediting juvenile facilities.

- The National Commission on Correctional Health Care, an affiliate of the American Medical Association, also uses its standards (1984) to accredit health care services in juvenile facilities.

Summary of Findings

The study's findings suggest three major themes:

First, there are several areas in which problems in juvenile facilities are substantial and widespread—most notably living space, health care, security, and control of suicidal behavior. There also are areas where deficiencies, though less serious or widespread, are still important enough to warrant attention.

Second, the findings do not support the premise that high levels of conformance to nationally recognized standards result in improved conditions of confinement. For many important areas of facility operation, practitioners drafting standards did not specify outcomes that should be achieved. Instead, a large proportion of existing standards emphasize procedural regularity, which is, admittedly, an important objective. But we believe that in the future the standards-drafting agencies should emphasize performance-based standards that identify the outcomes facilities should achieve. Performance standards can quickly identify problems and can provide a benchmark against which improvements can be measured. Performance standards are particularly needed in such areas as education, treatment services, and health care—and ultimately, all aspects of facility operation.

Third, we found that deficiencies were distributed widely across facilities. Most had several deficiencies, and the types of deficiencies at these facilities varied considerably. We found few facilities with no deficiencies as well as a few with deficiencies in most areas. If the objective is to substantially improve conditions that confined juveniles experience, then efforts to improve or close a few “bad” facilities, while laudable, will have little overall impact. Rather, substantial improvements will require that a large number of less seriously deficient facilities improve several areas of their operations.

Nineteen recommendations, discussed on pages 8–14, are offered to improve conditions of confinement.

Overview of conditions. Table 2 displays conformance to assessment criteria from two viewpoints. First, it shows the percentage of confined juveniles held in facilities that conform to all assessment criteria in each of the 12 topic areas (referred to as "juvenile-based" conformance). Second, it shows the percentage of facilities that conform to all assessment criteria (or "facility-based" conformance). The relationship between these two measures tells us whether large or small facilities are more likely to conform. For example, if two-thirds of the juveniles are held in facilities that conform, but only one-third of the facilities conform, that means that bigger facilities are more likely to conform than smaller facilities. Conversely, if two-thirds of the facilities conform, but only one-third of the juveniles are in facilities that conform, then smaller facilities are more likely to conform than bigger ones.

Table 2 should be interpreted cautiously. It is an inherently conservative indicator because a facility must conform to all criteria. Moreover, we emphasize that conformance must be viewed in light of more information about actual conditions and outcomes in facilities. That information, described below, often is not related to standards conformance.

Table 2 shows that summary conformance rates are seldom high. Only 5 of the 12 topic areas have juvenile-based overall conformance rates of 50 percent or higher, and only 6 have facility-based
conformance rates of 50 percent or higher. It also shows that on some topics smaller facilities are more likely to conform, while on others, bigger facilities are more likely to conform. For example, on living space, health care, security, controlling suicidal behavior, and limits on staff discretion, smaller facilities are more likely to conform than larger facilities. On inspections and emergency preparedness and treatment services, larger facilities are more likely to conform than smaller facilities.

### Table 2: Summary Conformance Rates by Topic Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic areas in which conditions were assessed</th>
<th>Percentage of confined juveniles in facilities that conform</th>
<th>Percentage of facilities that conform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Basic Needs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living space (3 criteria)</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care (6 criteria)</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food, clothing, and hygiene (4 criteria)</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living accommodations (4 criteria)</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Order and security</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security (3 criteria)</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlling suicidal behavior (4 criteria)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspections and emergency preparedness (4 criteria)</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Programming</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (4 criteria)</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation (1 criteria)</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment Services (2 criteria)</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Juvenile rights</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to community (5 criteria)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limits on staff discretion (7 criteria)</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This is the percentage of juveniles held in facilities that conform to all assessment criteria in each topic area.

# This is the percentage of facilities that conform to all the assessment criteria in each topic area.

* This excludes the assessment criteria on search authorization, which required facility administrators to authorize all searches. Only 14 percent of confined juveniles are in facilities that conform to this criterion. With this criterion included, only 6 percent of confined juveniles are in facilities that conform to all criteria.

Source: CIC Census and Mail Survey, 1991

Table 3 displays data on key incident measures we examined—incidents (juveniles-on-juveniles, juveniles-on-staff, and staff-on-juveniles), escapes (completed, unsuccessful attempts), acts of suicidal behavior (attempted suicides, suicide gestures, self-mutilations), incidents requiring emergency health care, and use of isolation. All these are reported as incident rates per 100 confined juveniles. For
injuries, escapes, suicidal behavior, and longer-term isolation, the rates are based on reported incidents during the 30 days before the mail survey. For shorter-term isolation, the rate is based on incidents reported during the 7 days before the mail survey. For emergency health care, rates are based on reported incidents during the 12 months before the mail survey. Table 3 also shows the estimated annual number of incidents, based on these rates.

Table 3: Incident Rates per 100 Juveniles and Annualized Estimates of Incidents in Juvenile Facilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of incident</th>
<th>Rate per 100 juveniles (last 30 days)</th>
<th>Estimated incidents per year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Injuries</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile-on-juvenile</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>24,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile-on-staff</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>6,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff-on-juvenile</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Escapes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>9,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsuccessful attempts</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>9,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Acts of suicidal behavior</strong></td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>17,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incidents requiring emergency health care</strong></td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>18,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Isolation incidents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term (1 to 24 hours)</td>
<td>57.0*</td>
<td>435,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longer-term (more than 24 hours)</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>88,900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This does not include very-short-term isolation (up to 1 hour) used to control behavior or instill discipline. Such a practice is common in juvenile facilities and largely not documented, so it is impossible to measure its occurrence with any accuracy.

Source: CIC Census and Mail Survey, 1991

There was substantial variation in these rates among facilities. A substantial number of juveniles were held in facilities where rates were zero or were very low. A smaller minority were held in facilities where rates were very high.

Areas with substantial deficiencies

There are four areas—living space, security, control of suicidal behavior, and health care—in which facilities display substantial and widespread deficiencies.
**Living space.** A substantial proportion of confined juveniles have inadequate living space. Crowding is a pervasive problem in juvenile facilities. It is evident facilitywide, in living units,\(^1\) and in sleeping rooms.

In 1987, 36 percent of confined juveniles were in facilities whose populations exceeded their reported design capacity. By 1991 that increased to 47 percent. In 1991 one-third of confined juveniles were in living units with 26 or more juveniles, and one-third slept in rooms that were smaller than required by nationally recognized standards. Only about one-fourth of the confined juveniles were in facilities that conformed to all three living space criteria. Hence, almost three-fourths were in facilities that were crowded in some respect. Crowding is more common in larger and less common in smaller facilities.

To eliminate crowded sleeping rooms, slightly over 11,000 juveniles would have to be removed from the confinement facilities or an equal number of new beds would have to be provided in adequately sized sleeping rooms. If that were done, it would still leave about 2,650 juveniles in facilities whose population exceeded design capacity.

Facilities have responded to crowding by restricting intake criteria (particularly in detention), by granting early releases (particularly in training schools), and by refusing to take new admissions when populations reach or exceed capacity (particularly in ranches). As a result, although more facilities have become crowded since 1987, average population levels in crowded facilities have remained at about 120 percent of reported design capacity.

We found that rates of injuries to staff by juveniles were higher in crowded facilities. As the percentage of juveniles who sleep in dormitories with 11 or more residents increased, rates of injuries inflicted by juveniles on juveniles increased. Rates for short-term isolation and searches also were higher in crowded facilities.

*We recommend that large dormitories be eliminated from juvenile facilities. No new facilities should be built that contain large dormitories. In existing facilities, large dormitories should be replaced as soon as possible.*

Facilities can sometimes adjust intake or durations of confinement to cushion the effects of crowding, but they cannot alter the decisions of police, prosecutors, juvenile judges, and probation and parole officers or the systemic processes that cause crowding.

*We recommend that jurisdictions develop policies that regulate the use and duration of juvenile confinement and that guide future development of confinement and nonconfinement placement options. To do this, States and localities should implement a planning process that identifies decisions that affect use of detention and confinement, that identifies characteristics of juveniles processed through the system, and that documents capacities of confinement and nonconfinement placement options.*

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\(^1\) A living unit is a self-contained area of a facility where a subgroup of confined juveniles sleep, participate in leisure activities, and attend to hygiene. Generally, juveniles eat, exercise (large muscle activity), and participate in programming outside their living units.
Security. Security practices are intended to prevent escapes and to provide a safe environment for both juveniles and staff. There are high levels of nonconformance with our security assessment criteria and substantial problems with escapes and injuries in juvenile facilities.

Although 81 percent of confined juveniles are in facilities with three or more facilitywide counts per day, only 62 percent are in facilities that classify juveniles on the basis of risk and use classification results to make housing assignments. Larger facilities are more likely to conform to the counts and classification criteria. Just 36 percent of confined juveniles are in facilities whose supervision staffing ratios conform to assessment criteria. Smaller facilities are more likely to conform to the supervision staff ratio criteria. Overall, just 20 percent of confined juveniles are in facilities that conform to all three criteria.

In the 30 days before the mail survey, nearly 2,000 juveniles (slightly over 3 percent of the juvenile population) and 650 staff (slightly over 1.7 percent of all staff) were injured by juveniles in these facilities. Injury rates varied greatly. About 10 percent of confined juveniles were in facilities where 8 percent or more of the juveniles were injured by other juveniles in the 30 days before the mail survey, and 1 percent were in facilities where at least one of every four juveniles were injured during that time. A small number of facilities were similarly dangerous for staff. About 10 percent of juveniles were in facilities where 5 percent or more of staff were injured in the 30 days before the mail survey, and 1 percent were in facilities where 17 percent or more of staff were injured during that time.

Juvenile and staff injury rates were higher in crowded facilities, and juvenile-on-juvenile injury rates increased as the percentage of juveniles housed in large dormitories increased. Injury rates for both staff and juveniles were higher in facilities where living units were locked 24 hours a day. In facilities with locked living units we visited, an emphasis on security dominated interactions between staff and juveniles. Of note is that the percentage of juveniles convicted of violent crimes was not related to injury rates.

Classification is supposed to protect juveniles by assessing their propensity to violence and by separating potential predators and victims. However, we found no relationship between conformance to the classification assessment criteria and rates of injury. The reasons are not clear. It is possible that existing classification procedures do not reliably distinguish violence-prone youth or whether crowding diminishes facilities’ ability to adequately separate predators and victims or increases the probability that confined youth will encounter violence-prone peers. More study of juvenile classification practices is needed to determine how to improve classification.

During site visits facility administrators and staff frequently said there would be fewer injuries if staffing ratios improved. The study did not support that position. We found no relationship between supervision staffing ratios and rates of injury. However, we found that higher supervision staff turnover rates were associated with increased juvenile-on-staff injury rates. In facilities with high turnover rates, overall levels of staff experience and training are likely to be lower than in facilities with low turnover rates. While we lack data to establish a direct link, during site visits administrators and practitioners frequently stated that inexperienced and less-well-trained staff were more likely to be injured by juveniles.

In the 30 days before the mail survey, slightly over 800 juveniles (about 1.2 percent of the confined population) escaped from confinement facilities, and slightly more than 800 attempted to
escape but failed.

We found no relationship between conformance to the classification criteria and escape rates. A growing number of facilities rely on perimeter fences as an obstacle to escape. Since 1987 the percentage of facilities with perimeter fences increased from 38 percent to 47 percent. However, we found no conclusive relationship between perimeter fences and escape rates.

We recommend that juvenile justice agencies conduct detailed comparative studies of facilities with low and high escape and injury rates to identify policies and practices that can materially improve safety and security. These studies should pay special attention to procedures used to classify juveniles and the ways in which classification is used.

Controlling suicidal behavior. Suicidal behavior is a serious problem in juvenile confinement facilities. Ten confined juveniles killed themselves in 1990. In the 30 days before the mail survey, 970 juveniles committed 1,487 acts of suicidal behavior (that is, attempted suicide, made suicidal gestures, or engaged in self-mutilation). Thus, about 1.6 percent of confined juveniles engaged in suicidal behavior, and there were 2.4 suicidal behavior incidents for every 100 confined juveniles in the 30 days before the mail survey. On an annualized basis, more than 11,000 juveniles engage in more than 17,000 incidents of suicidal behavior in juvenile facilities.

Just half of the confined juveniles are in facilities that monitor suicidal juveniles at least once every 4 minutes (the length of time after which permanent brain damage can occur in an attempted hanging—the most common method of suicide attempt in juvenile facilities). About three-fourths are in facilities that screen juveniles for indicators of suicide risk at the time of admission, and about three-fourths are in facilities that train staff in suicide prevention. Almost 90 percent are in facilities that have written suicide prevention plans. However, only about one in five confined juveniles are in facilities that conform to all four assessment criteria.

Our analysis showed that facilities that conduct suicide screening at admission and that train staff in suicide prevention have lower rates of suicidal behavior. Other suicide prevention measures—monitoring suicidal juveniles at least once every 4 minutes and written suicide prevention plans—were not associated with suicidal behavior rates. (However, these factors may be vitally important in preventing an attempted suicide from becoming a completed suicide.) Detention centers that conformed to the supervision staffing ratio criteria had lower suicidal behavior rates. We found that as supervision staff turnover rates increased, suicidal behavior rates increased, which underscores the importance of staff training in suicide prevention.

Suicidal behavior rates increased as the percentage of juveniles in single rooms increased. We found, however, that facilities frequently fail to cover housing for suicidal juveniles in their written suicide prevention plans.

We recommend that all juveniles be screened for risk of suicidal behavior immediately upon their admission to confinement facilities.

We recommend that suicidal juveniles be constantly monitored by staff. This means that suicidal youth should not be isolated or placed in a room by themselves. When suicidal juveniles are housed in single rooms, staff should be with them continuously. A mental health professional should assess suicidal youth as quickly as possible and, if they deem it
necessary, the youth should be transferred to a medical or mental health facility that is staffed and equipped to deal with suicidal youth.

We also recommend that agencies study the causes of high supervision staff turnover rates, develop strategies to reduce high turnover rates, and soften the effects of turnover by increased training.

Health care. The most serious problem with health care is that health screenings (at admission) and health appraisals (within 7 days of admission) often are not completed in a timely fashion. Speedy completion of health screenings is needed to ensure that juveniles who are injured, who have acute health problems, or who are intoxicated when presented for admission get immediate medical treatment. Timely health appraisals are required to identify the juveniles’ health care needs that require treatment during confinement and to control the spread of communicable diseases.

Over 90 percent of confined juveniles get health screenings at some point, but only 43 percent get them within 1 hour of admission, as required by nationally recognized standards. Smaller facilities are more likely to conform to this health screening criterion. Health screening took more than 3 hours to be completed for almost one-fifth of the population of confined juveniles. Similarly, although 95 percent get health appraisals at some point, only 80 percent get them within a week. Larger facilities are more likely to conform to the health appraisal criteria.

One-third of the juveniles in detention centers have health screenings done by staff who have not been trained by medical personnel to perform health screening. Because the purpose of health screening is to identify juveniles with injuries or conditions that require immediate medical care, using untrained staff to perform the screening is cause for concern.

We recommend that juvenile justice agencies act to ensure that initial health screenings are carried out promptly at admission and to ensure that health appraisals are completed or received within a week after admission. We also recommend that juvenile justice agencies take steps to develop and ensure the use of an adequate training program for nonmedical staff who conduct health screenings.

In addition, there is no data base on individual health needs of confined juveniles, on the health care services provided to them, or on changes in their health status while confined. Without such information, the adequacy of health care in confinement facilities cannot be assessed. Of particular concern is the fact that only 68 percent of confined juveniles are in facilities where tuberculin tests are performed, and only 53 percent are in facilities that test for sexually transmitted diseases.

We recommend that existing public health surveillance systems be expanded to include and separately track confined juveniles. We also recommend a general review of the health needs of confined juveniles and of the health services they receive, based on a review of medical records of a national sample of confined juveniles.
Areas with less substantial deficiencies

Education and treatment services. There are two areas—education and treatment services—in which conformance to assessment criteria is generally high but in which we have no foundation for assessing the adequacy of services provided. Although there is extensive anecdotal and experiential evidence on the educational deficiencies and the emotional and mental health problems of juvenile offenders, we have no systematic empirical data on confined youths’ educational or treatment needs and problems. Thus, we cannot determine whether facilities provide appropriate programs or whether juveniles make progress during confinement. Major new initiatives are needed to collect such data periodically.

We recommend that Federal agencies support funding of a study to document educational needs and problems of a national sample of confined juveniles and to evaluate the capacity of educational programs in confinement facilities to serve those needs and to address those problems.

We recommend that Federal agencies support funding of a study to document the treatment needs of a national sample of confined juveniles and of the treatment services they receive.

Inspections and emergency preparedness. Most juveniles are confined in facilities that have passed recent State or local fire, life safety, and sanitation inspections. Despite that, during site visits we observed a large number of facilities at which fire exits were not marked or fire escape routes were not posted in living units, and a few at which fire exits were blocked with furniture or other objects.

We recommend that State and local fire codes for juvenile facilities be toughened and enforced more vigorously. In particular, we recommend that facilities be inspected more frequently and that available enforcement authority be exercised more vigorously to correct violations. We also recommend that laws or regulations governing fire and life safety in juvenile facilities be as rigorous as those that apply to schools, hospitals, or other public buildings.

Access to the community. We estimate that, on average, confined juveniles are held in facilities that are 58 miles from where they live (that distance varies by facility type, so that training schools are, on average, farther from juveniles’ homes than are detention centers). Distance and location (e.g., wilderness-based programs) affect juveniles’ access to the community. Most confined juveniles have adequate opportunity to visit with families or attorneys, to contact volunteers, and to communicate by mail. However, telephone calls are an exception: almost all juveniles can place a limited number of telephone calls per week, but 45 percent of confined juveniles are in facilities that do not permit them to receive telephone calls.

We recommend that juvenile facilities permit juveniles to receive as well as make telephone calls.

Limits on staff discretion. There is generally high conformance to most criteria that limit staff discretion. However, search authorization is an exception: most confined juveniles are in facilities where line staff can authorize room searches and frisks. A substantial minority is in facilities where line staff can authorize strip searches. There was substantial variation in rates of searching,
isolation, and restraint use among facilities. Relatively little of that variation could be explained by our analyses.

*We recommend more extensive comparison of conditions in facilities with high and low rates of use of search, isolation, and restraints in order to identify and test the rationales and effects of these variations in practice.*

**Areas with minimal deficiencies**

There are three areas in which conditions of confinement appear to be adequate: food, clothing, and hygiene; recreation; and living accommodations. With respect to the latter, conditions are somewhat more problematic. Detention centers generally have the least normalized and most institutionalized environments (sleeping rooms are starkly furnished, most residents wear uniforms, etc.). Nearly one-third of detained juveniles sleep in rooms that do not have natural light.

*We offer no specific recommendations based on data collected and analyzed to date.*

**Other recommendations**

**Performance-based standards.** A substantial proportion of existing nationally recognized standards focus on developing written policies and procedures or attaining specified staffing ratios, rather than on defining outcomes that facilities should achieve. Performance-based standards are more difficult to formulate because they require standards-drafters to agree on the outcomes that should be achieved. In many instances we found that conformance to procedural standards had no discernible effect on conditions within facilities.

*We recommend that organizations that develop nationally recognized standards for juvenile facilities promulgate measurable performance standards that can serve both as goals for facilities to attain and as benchmarks against which their progress can be measured. Such standards are particularly important in areas of security, health care, education, mental health services, and treatment programming.*

**Coordinating reforms among organizations.** Our recommendations for improving conditions of confinement will require leaders of several national organizations to confer on the goals to be served by juvenile confinement and to discuss strategies to improve conditions of confinement. This collaboration likely will be needed for several years.

*We recommend that a joint committee be created whose membership represents all national professional organizations with an interest in juvenile confinement. Over the next 4 years members of this joint committee should work to implement recommendations in this report and to coordinate activities within their respective organizations toward the common objective of improving conditions of juvenile confinement. Appropriate Federal agencies should encourage and support the work of this joint committee.*

**Further research.** There is substantial variation among facilities on three problem indicators—rates of escape (and attempted escape), injury, and suicidal behavior—as well as substantial variation among facilities on two control mechanisms—searches and isolation. Only a small amount of that variation can be explained by juvenile or facility characteristics in our analytical
models.

_We recommend further study of why facilities vary so dramatically in the ways they exercise control and the extent to which they provide a safe and secure environment._

_We recommend that OJJDP support controlled research to study the effects of crowding on juvenile and staff behavior and on outcomes in detention and corrections facilities._

_We recommend that the biennial Children in Custody census be modified to routinely collect data on staff turnover rates, use of isolation and searching, and the incidence of injuries, escapes, and suicidal behavior._

_We recommend that OJJDP support comparable studies of conditions of confinement for three groups of juveniles not covered in this study: (a) those placed in halfway houses, group homes, and shelters; (b) those tried and sentenced as adults; and (c) those placed in secure hospital treatment programs._

**Limitations of the study**

In spite of good response rates, efforts to develop objective measurement criteria, and careful analysis of the data, there are several limits that must be recognized.

First, the findings must be interpreted cautiously. Conformance to existing nationally recognized standards does not tell the entire story about conditions of confinement. In some instances, high rates of conformance may not mean that all is well. In others, low rates of conformance may not mean that juveniles are in danger or that their constitutional rights are being violated. Conformance must be viewed in the context of other factors related to overall conditions in facilities.

Second, on many matters pertaining to conditions of confinement, juvenile justice practitioners (and the organizations that represent them) have not reached consensus on goals. As a result, a large proportion of existing nationally recognized professional standards specify procedures to be followed, but not outcomes to be achieved. If practitioners do not agree on outcomes, they are likely to interpret the data quite differently. For example, one group may view data on search authorization as indicating sound security practice, while another may view it as indicating an excessive delegation of authority to line staff.

Third, this study relied mainly on self-reported data collected in the mail survey and the CIC census. An effort was made to validate some information items during the site visits. However, only a few could be validated in a small number of facilities. In all studies of this sort the reliability of self-reported data varies according to the respondents’ understanding of the question, the availability of data to answer it, and the respondents’ willingness to answer candidly. In this study all three are possible sources of error. The direction and magnitude of such errors are generally not known.

Fourth, given fixed resources and deadlines, the breadth of the study limited its depth. Because we decided to measure conditions in 12 different topic areas in a mail survey to all public and private detention centers, reception centers, training schools and ranches, camps, and farms, we had to limit scrutiny to a handful of indicators in each topic area. Hence, some measures that arguably are important indicators of conditions had to be excluded.
Fifth, the study was based on data about facilities, not data about individual juveniles in facilities. This made it more difficult, at times, to determine how nonconformance affects juveniles within facilities or to identify links between variables. Without data on individual juveniles, we cannot determine, for example, if juveniles who are more frequently injured by other juveniles are more apt to engage in suicidal behavior. We also do not have data on individual juveniles’ demographic characteristics, needs, or problems, or programs used while confined and performance in those programs. Hence, we cannot determine if programming in facilities addresses juveniles’ needs or whether juveniles improve in measurable ways (e.g., reading scores go up) while confined.

Finally, because this was the first systematic assessment of conditions of juvenile confinement, this is a preliminary, not a definitive, report on the subject. On several points, we found important data gaps that prevent assessment of problems or development of informed recommendations. Some of those gaps can be filled relatively inexpensively by altering routine data collection, like the biennial Children in Custody census. Others will require new studies.