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# Youth's Characteristics and Backgrounds

## FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY OF YOUTH IN RESIDENTIAL PLACEMENT

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*The Survey of Youth in Residential Placement (SYRP) is the third component in the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's constellation of surveys providing updated statistics on youth in custody in the juvenile justice system. It joins the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement and the Juvenile Residential Facility Census, which are biennial mail surveys of residential facility administrators conducted in alternating years. SYRP is a unique addition, gathering information directly from youth through anonymous interviews. This bulletin series reports on the first national SYRP, covering its development and design and providing detailed information on the youth's characteristics, backgrounds, and expectations; the conditions of their confinement; their needs and the services they received; and their experiences of victimization in placement.*

This bulletin presents key findings from the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement that describe the characteristics of youth in placement. Specifically, this bulletin focuses on the youth's demographic characteristics, current and prior offenses, current disposition, family and educational backgrounds, and expectations for the future.

SYRP's findings are based on interviews with a nationally representative sample of 7,073 youth in custody during 2003, using audio computer-assisted self-interview (ACASI) methodology. Researchers analyzed answers from all youth in custody and assessed differences among sub-groups based on their age, sex, and placement program (i.e., detention, corrections,

community based, camp, or residential treatment). When other studies offered corresponding data about youth in the general population, researchers compared those findings to the SYRP results for youth in custody. For more information, see "Surveying Youth in Residential Placement: Methodology."

Many of the topics covered in this bulletin will be familiar to juvenile justice researchers and practitioners. However, SYRP results extend current information and provide new perspectives. The following discussion highlights several issues where the findings underscore, clarify, and enlarge current understanding of the characteristics and backgrounds of youth in custody.

### A Message From OJJDP

To better understand the reasons that youth in confinement have offended, we need to examine their backgrounds and characteristics and review the offenses that led to their custody placement.

OJJDP's Survey of Youth in Residential Placement (SYRP) asks youth to identify the offenses they have committed and the personal and environmental factors that may have contributed to their delinquency. SYRP complements related OJJDP research such as the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement. However, as the only national survey that gathers information directly from youth in custody, SYRP provides data that are not available from other sources.

This bulletin draws on SYRP's findings to examine the characteristics and backgrounds of youth in custody. It describes their demographic characteristics and reports on their current and prior offenses, disposition, family and educational backgrounds, and expectations for the future.

SYRP's findings echo those from local studies and indicate national patterns. Moreover, its findings provide insights into how we might best combat recidivism while promoting positive outcomes.

As we strive to learn more about youth who commit offenses so that we may provide them with more effective intervention and treatment programs, OJJDP hopes that the findings presented in this bulletin will inform our strategies and programs.

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## Demographic Characteristics

SYRP targets youth in custody between ages 10 and 20. Based on the SYRP interviews in spring 2003, an estimated 101,040 youth in this age range are in residential placement in the United States because they were arrested for, charged with, or adjudicated for an offense. This reflects a custody rate of 224 youth per 100,000 in the general youth population—about 0.22 percent of 10- to 20-year-olds nationwide.<sup>1</sup>

### Surveying Youth in Residential Placement: Methodology

The Survey of Youth in Residential Placement (SYRP) is the only national survey that gathers data directly from youth in custody, using anonymous interviews. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention designed the survey in 2000 and 2001. SYRP surveys offender youth between ages 10 and 20. It draws a nationally representative sample from state and local facilities that are identified by the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement and Juvenile Residential Facility Census surveys.

SYRP interviewed youth from a representative selection of 205 eligible, responsive facilities listed on the census as of September 2002. The survey team interviewed 7,073 youth between the beginning of March and mid-June 2003. Surveys were electronic and used an audio computer-assisted self-interview system to ask questions and record answers.

When using this system, youth wear headphones and hear a prerecorded interviewer's voice read the words on the screen. Youth indicate their response choice by touching it on the screen. The computer program automatically navigates to the next appropriate question based on the youth's earlier answers, storing all the data anonymously and securely.

Statisticians assigned weights to reflect the sampling probabilities of the facility and the youth respondents and to adjust for nonresponse. In this way, the survey of 7,073 provided accurate estimates of the size and characteristics of the national youth offender population in custody (estimated as more than 100,000 youth).

### Sex

Eighty-five percent of all youth in residential placement are male. The custody rate for females is less than one-fifth the rate for males (70 females versus 370 males per 100,000).<sup>2</sup>

### Age

The majority (51 percent) of youth in placement are 16 or 17 years old. More than 15 percent are between ages 18 and 20. Preteens (ages 10–12) comprise 1 percent of the placement population.<sup>3</sup>

### Race/ethnicity

About one-third (35 percent) of youth in residential placement are White non-Hispanic and no other race. Nearly another one-third (32 percent) are Black or

African American and no other race, and close to one-fourth (24 percent) are Hispanic. Very few youth identify themselves as any other single race category—3 percent classify as American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander. An estimated 6 percent identify as multiracial.

Considering custody rates, SYRP results indicate that multiracial youth have a substantially greater custody rate as compared with other race/ethnicity categories—an estimated 751 of 100,000 multiracial youth are incarcerated, compared with 123 White youth per 100,000 and 463 Black/African American youth per 100,000 (table 1).<sup>4</sup>

For more information about the demographic characteristics of youth in custody, including race and ethnicity, see table 1.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Youth in Custody**

Demographic Characteristic	Estimated Number of Youth	Percent	Custody Rate per 100,000 Youth in the General Population
<b>All youth in custody</b>	<b>101,040</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>224</b>
<b>Sex</b>			
Male	85,720	85	370
Female	15,320	15	70
<b>Age</b>			
10 to 12*	1,240	1	10
13	3,460	3	80
14	9,720	10	233
15	19,320	19	469
16	26,210	26	646
17	25,130	25	612
18	10,710	11	262
19	3,250	3	86
20	2,000	2	53
<b>Race/ethnicity†</b>			
White only, non-Hispanic	34,160	35	123
Black or African American only, non-Hispanic	31,180	32	463
Hispanic (any race)	23,880	24	317
Other single race, non-Hispanic	3,110	3	145
Mixed race, non-Hispanic	6,380	6	751

Notes: Estimated totals are rounded to the nearest multiple of 10. The custody rates in the last column are computed as ratios of the estimated number of youth in custody to the number of youth in the general population in the demographic group. The general population information is derived from census estimates for April 2003 (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2004).

\* Estimates for this category are less reliable because they are based on fewer than 100 participating youth.

† Excludes youth who did not respond to the race/ethnicity categories and those who chose only the "some other race" answer in response ( $n = 170$  of the survey participants, or 2.3 percent of the estimated youth in placement).

## Current Offenses

SYRP asks youth about all the offenses that led to their current stay in the residential facility (table 2). Nearly one-third of the youth (31 percent) report just one offense. Another one-third (33 percent)

indicate two or three offenses, and the remaining one-third (34 percent) indicate four or more offenses.<sup>5</sup>

Table 2 shows the percentages of youth who say that the offenses led to their current custody. The greatest percentages of

youth report property offenses (45 percent), person offenses (43 percent), and status offenses (42 percent). The table also shows how probation and parole violators compared with other youth offenders—they are more likely to report status offenses and less likely to report person offenses.

### SYRP Research Questions Addressing the Characteristics, Backgrounds, and Expectations of Youth in Residential Placement

#### General Research Question

#### Specific Research Questions

##### Who are the youth in placement?

- ◆ How many youth are in placement?
- ◆ What is their distribution by age, sex, race/ethnicity?

##### What are their offenses?

- ◆ What offenses led to the youth's current placement? Were they on probation at the time?
- ◆ What percentages are adjudicated and committed?
- ◆ How long have they been in their current facility?
- ◆ What were the circumstances of the offenses that led to their current placement (weapons use, accomplices and gang involvement, victims, substance use)?
- ◆ What percentage had prior contact with the juvenile justice system (convictions, custody, probation)?
- ◆ Considering their overall offense history (current offenses and prior convictions), what kinds of offenders are they? How does their current offense compare to any prior conviction(s)? Are they repeat offenders in the same category or has the general category of their offense increased or decreased in severity?
- ◆ How do females and males differ in their offense profiles?

##### What are their family backgrounds?

- ◆ Who took care of the youth most of the time while they were growing up?
- ◆ Who were they living with when they were taken into custody for their current stay?
- ◆ What caretaking responsibilities did they have when they entered custody?
- ◆ Are the adults in their family primarily non-English speakers?
- ◆ Do they have children of their own? Are they pregnant or is someone pregnant with their child? How do childbearing patterns differ for females and males in placement? How do these findings compare to childbearing in the general youth population?

##### What is their educational background and status?

- ◆ What are the youth's grade levels? Are they educationally on track for their age? How many had to repeat a grade? How do they compare to similar-age peers in the general youth population?
- ◆ What percentage have a learning disability? How does this compare to youth in the general population?
- ◆ What academic achievements and/or sanctions have they received? What percentage were suspended or expelled? How does this compare to general population youth?
- ◆ Do males and females differ on educational status measures?

##### What are their expectations for the future?

- ◆ Have youth been told when they will be released?
- ◆ Do they know where they will go after they leave their current facility?
- ◆ Do they know what will be expected of them when they are released?
- ◆ Do they think they will reoffend in the future? If so, do they think they would be arrested? If arrested, would they be placed again into custody? How do they think their future punishment would compare with their current punishment (less, the same, or more)?
- ◆ Have they made any plans for finding a place to live, getting a job, going to school, receiving treatment?
- ◆ What do they see as their personal strengths?
- ◆ When they think of their future life, do they expect to be married, have children, have a steady job?
- ◆ How much education would they like to attain? Do they think they will achieve that level? If not, why not?
- ◆ Do females and males in custody have different expectations for their futures?

## Circumstances of the Current Offense

Alcohol or drug use was a factor in current offenses for a number of the youth. Forty-four percent of youth in custody say they were under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of one or more of the offenses that led to their being placed in custody. Additionally, most youth (55 percent) had committed their current offense with someone else. These findings are consistent with earlier observations of the tendency of juveniles to commit their offenses with others (McCord and Conway, 2005; Warr, 1996) and while under the influence of drugs or alcohol (Wallisch, 1992; White et al., 2002). But although others (e.g., Stormshak, Comeau, and Shepard, 2004) have observed that delinquent youth tend to have both drug and alcohol problems and deviant peers, SYRP reveals a previously unreported finding: not only do the same youth report both drug and alcohol abuse and association with deviant peers, but the youth who report them say that both factors occurred during the same crimes. SYRP finds that youth who commit their offenses with others are also significantly more likely to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of those offenses. Overall, the odds of youth being under the influence are almost three times as great when they are with an accomplice than when they act alone. The difference is even greater for youth who report the less serious property offenses (e.g., trespassing, vandalism), drug offenses, public order offenses, or status offenses. In these cases, the odds of youth being under the influence are more than four times as great when they are with an accomplice than when they act alone.

## Most Serious Current Offense

More than two-fifths of youth in custody (43 percent) are currently classified as person offenders. Nearly one-half of them (20 percent of youth) are classified with some form of assault as their most serious current offense. Most person offenders (69 percent) say they knew their victims. Another one-fourth of youth in custody (26 percent) have a property offense as their most serious current offense, with most of them (19 percent of youth) reporting burglary, arson, or theft. For more information about youth's most serious current offenses, see table 3.

**Table 2: Offenses Leading to Youth's Current Custody Situation**

Current Offense	Youth in Custody		Percentage of Probation/Parole Violators (N = 58,180)	Percentage of Non-violators (N = 42,700)
	Estimated Number	Percentage		
<b>All offenses</b>	<b>101,040</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Person</b>	<b>43,320</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>53</b>
Murder, rape, kidnapping	10,730	11	5	18
Robbery	14,520	14	13	16
Assault with a weapon	9,310	9	9	10
Assault without a weapon	17,110	17	18	16
<b>Property</b>	<b>45,310</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>43</b>
Burglary, arson, or theft	35,190	35	36	34
Other property	28,060	28	32	22
<b>Drug</b>	<b>28,590</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Public order</b>	<b>23,080</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Status</b>	<b>42,760</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Technical violation*</b>	<b>30,730</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>na</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>26,100</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>21</b>

Notes: na = not applicable. Estimated totals are rounded to the nearest multiple of 10. Rows sum to more than the estimated total number of youth in placement because youth are classified in every offense category they reported. The table excludes 139 participating youth (representing 2.3 percent of the estimated total custody population) who did not indicate any current offense among those listed. Youth not yet adjudicated are classified according to the offense(s) they are charged with or are accused of committing.

\* This category includes violations of probation or parole that are not classifiable as offenses in other categories in this table (e.g., testing positive for drugs, violating house arrest or electronic monitoring, or running away from a placement or facility).

## Differences Between Male and Female Offenders

Males and females differ in their offense patterns (figure 1). Greater percentages of males than females are in placement for murder, rape, kidnapping, robbery, drug offenses, and public order offenses. Greater percentages of females than males are in placement for status offenses and assaults.

SYRP findings underscore the historically greater rates of status offenses among females (Chesney-Lind, 2001; Chesney-Lind and Sheldon, 2004). FBI data from 2003 (the year SYRP was conducted) on arrests of youth younger than 21 years old show that females are charged with status

offenses twice as frequently as males (12 percent of arrested females versus 6 percent of arrested males).<sup>6</sup> Related SYRP findings, displayed in figure 1, indicate that status violations are the most serious offense leading to custody for twice as many females as males (18 percent versus 9 percent).

During the past decade, arrests of juvenile females increased more (or decreased less) than male arrests for the same offense categories. The Uniform Crime Reports show that between 1999 and 2008, juvenile arrests for aggravated assault dropped 21.8 percent for males but only 2.5 percent for females. During this same period, simple assault arrests for juvenile males decreased 5.8 percent but increased



**Table 3: Most Serious Offense Leading to Youth’s Current Placement and Youth’s Most Serious Career Offense**

Offense	Most Serious Offense Leading to Current Placement		Youth’s Most Serious Career Offense	
	Estimated Number*	Percent	Estimated Number†	Percent
<b>All youth</b>	<b>101,040</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>101,040</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Person</b>	<b>43,320</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>57,410</b>	<b>57</b>
Murder, rape, kidnapping	10,730	11	13,310	13
Robbery	13,010	13	17,610	18
Assault with a weapon	6,130	6	8,460	8
Assault without a weapon	13,440	14	18,030	18
<b>Property</b>	<b>25,420</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>25,990</b>	<b>26</b>
Burglary, arson, or theft	18,920	19	20,120	20
Other property	6,510	7	5,880	6
<b>Drug</b>	<b>9,380</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7,340</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Public order</b>	<b>3,220</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1,750</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Status**</b>	<b>9,880</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4,930</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Technical violation</b>	<b>3,080</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>630††</b>	<b>1††</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>4,420</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1,880</b>	<b>2</b>

Notes: Estimated totals are rounded to the nearest multiple of 10. Percentages are based only on youth who identified offenses. Career offenses consider youth’s prior convictions.

\* Columns sum to slightly less than the estimated total number of youth in placement because of participants who answered “none of the above” or “don’t know” to the offense questions or said they would rather not answer these questions. This precluded current offense estimates for 2.3 percent of the population (139 survey participants).

\*\* A status offense is an offense only prohibited for a certain group of people (e.g., alcohol drinking under age 21).

† Columns sum to slightly less than the estimated total number of youth in placement because of participants who answered “none of the above” or “don’t know” to the offense questions or said they would rather not answer these questions. This precluded career offense estimates for 1.1 percent of the population (64 survey participants).

†† Estimates for this category are less reliable because they are based on fewer than 100 participating youth.

15.9 percent for juvenile females (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009). Additional research has shown that females have not become more violent during this period (Steffensmeier et al., 2005). Rather, the evidence indicates that the shift is likely an unintended result of changes in arrest policies, specifically the use of mandatory and proarrest laws for domestic violence. In these cases, juvenile females are being arrested for altercations with family members—incidents that were previously handled informally or documented

as status offenses (e.g., “ungovernable”) (Strom et al., unpublished paper). This trend is evident in analyses of arrest data (Snyder and Sickmund, 2006), which find that a greater percentage of aggravated assaults by juvenile females are against family members or intimate partners, as well as in SYRP, which finds that females in custody for violent offenses are more likely than males to report that they know or are related to their victims (82 percent of females versus 67 percent of males with current person offenses).

## Justice System Involvement

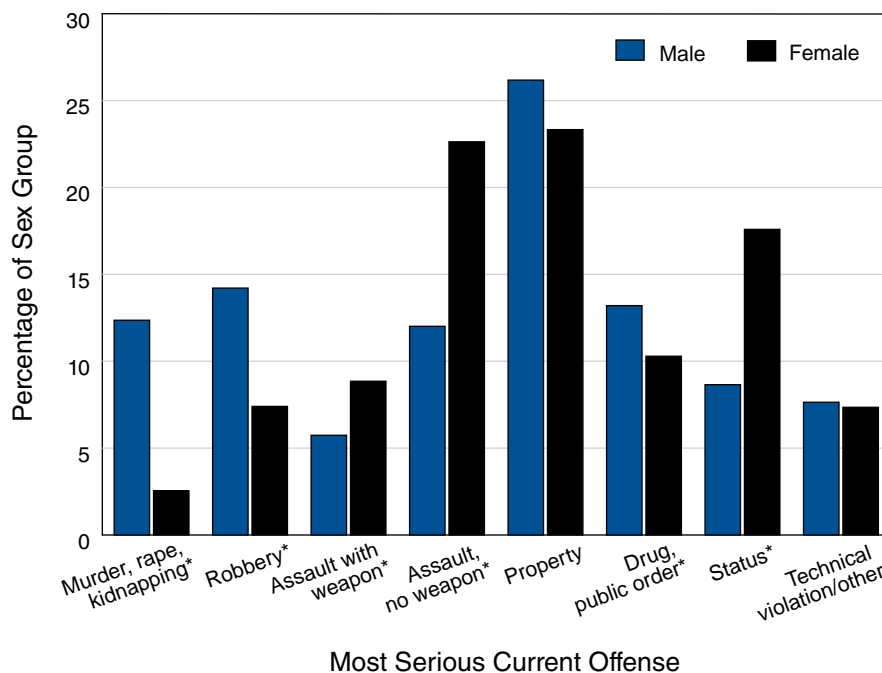
SYRP asks youth whether they were previously taken into custody, on probation or parole, or convicted of any offenses—information that enters into court decisions about where to place them in the juvenile justice system. The large majority (85 percent) of youth interviewed have prior convictions. Ten percent report only prior custody, probation, or parole. Only 5 percent of youth in custody have no prior involvement with the justice system.

The authors examined youth’s answers about their current offenses and previous convictions and classified youth according to their most serious career offense. Youth with no prior justice system involvement are more likely to have committed murder, rape, or kidnapping as their most serious current (and career) offense (35 percent) than youth with only prior custody or probation (13 percent) or with prior convictions (12 percent). Most youth with prior convictions (74 percent) have committed another person offense or property crime<sup>7</sup> as their most serious career offense.

In addition, for most youth with prior convictions, their current most serious offense is less severe or at the same level of severity as the most serious offense in



**Figure 1: Males and Females in Custody by Their Most Serious Current Offense**



\* Percentages of males and females differ significantly in these offense categories.

their prior convictions. Only 22 percent of youth identified a current offense that is more serious than their prior convictions.

## Adjudication and Placement in Programs

Two-thirds of youth in custody (66 percent) have been adjudicated and assigned to placement in their current program (i.e., committed). Seven percent have been adjudicated and await placement and/or disposition, 14 percent have not yet been adjudicated, and 13 percent have been adjudicated but SYRP could not determine their disposition status.

### Committed Youth in Detention Programs

The percentage of youth who are committed is substantially less in detention programs than in other types of programs (28 percent in detention versus 80 percent in other programs). Although this difference is expected, readers might be surprised that the percentage of committed youth in detention is this high, in view of the concerns in the juvenile justice field regarding the use of detention facilities for postadjudication placements (Roush,

1999). Nevertheless, sentences to detention have become increasingly popular and are available as a disposition in 32 states. In addition, 40 states use detention as a sanction for probation violations (National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2006).

### Length of Stay

The amount of time youth offenders spend in a facility typically depends on many factors, including time in detention prior to adjudication, the nature and severity of their offense(s), and their commitment status. SYRP does not assess youth's total length of stay but can measure how long they have been in their facility at the time of their interview. About one-third (35 percent) of all youth in custody have been in their facility for 60 days or less, and the same percentage (35 percent) have been held between 61 and 180 days. About 1 in 10 (11 percent) have been in their facility for more than a year.

### Family Background

SYRP asks youth about their family backgrounds, including who raised them and whom they lived with at the time they were taken into custody. Many youth in

custody (46 percent) report that both parents helped raise them, although this could have been in separate households. A slightly lower percentage (42 percent) had just one parent caring for them when they were growing up. Eleven percent report no parental care while growing up.

At the time they were taken into custody, more youth were living with one parent (45 percent) than with two parents (30 percent), and one-fourth of youth (25 percent) were not living with any parent. SYRP data describing where youth were living when they entered custody indicate that the risk of being taken into custody is significantly greater for juveniles who live with a single parent (558 per 100,000) or with no parent (1,652 per 100,000) than for juveniles living in two-parent households (153 per 100,000).<sup>8</sup> Table 4 shows more information about who raised youth in custody and whom they lived with when taken into custody.

SYRP also indicates that significantly more females than males enter custody from no-parent living arrangements (32 percent of females versus 24 percent of males) and from foster family or agency care (7 percent of females versus 4 percent of males). However, more males than females lived with a single parent (46 percent of males versus 40 percent of females).

## Childbearing

Fourteen percent of youth in custody report that they have children. More males have children than females (15 percent versus 9 percent). These rates are much greater than in the general population (2 percent of males and 6 percent of females between ages 12 and 20) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Twelve percent of youth, some of whom already have children, say they are currently expecting a child (i.e., females report they are pregnant; males report that someone is pregnant with their child). A combined total of 20 percent of youth in custody have or are expecting children.

Other researchers have observed strong associations between teen fatherhood and delinquent behavior in smaller, local samples of juvenile offenders and at-risk youth (Thornberry et al., 2000; Unruh, Bullis, and Yovanoff, 2003, 2004). SYRP findings indicate that this association is reflected in the national population of male youth in residential placement. The association is not as strong for female youth in placement, probably because

**Table 4: Family Background of Youth in Custody**

Family Background	Estimated Number	Percentage
<b>All youth</b>	<b>101,040</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Caretaker when growing up</b>		
Two parents	46,770	46
One parent	42,690	42
No parent	11,580	11
<b>Living arrangement when taken into custody</b>		
Two parents	29,980	30
One parent	45,390	45
No parent	25,670	25

Notes: Estimated totals are rounded to the nearest multiple of 10. Parents include both biological parents and stepparents. Youth who reported that two parents took care of them while they were growing up did not necessarily live in a two-parent household.

pregnant females are less prevalent in the placement population than males who are expectant fathers.

## Educational Background

Researchers have consistently documented a number of educational deficiencies among delinquent youth in local samples. Delinquent youth perform at less than expected academic levels (Wang, Blomberg, and Li, 2005; Zabel and Nigro, 2001). They have poor school attendance and greater rates of grade retention<sup>9</sup> (Laird, 1980; Silberberg and Silberberg, 1971; Wang, Blomberg, and Li, 2005; Zabel and Nigro, 1999). When they are in school, they exhibit more disciplinary problems, resulting in greater suspension rates (Finn, Scott, and Zarichny, 1988; Loeber and Farrington, 1998; Wang, Blomberg, and Li, 2005; Zabel and Nigro, 1999). SYRP results corroborate these findings in the nationwide population of youth in custody.

SYRP asks youth about their enrollment, school experience, grade level, and learning disabilities. Although a majority (76 percent) of youth were enrolled in school when they entered custody, this is significantly less than the rate of youth in the general population who are the same age (88 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Only 3 percent of youth who were not enrolled when they entered custody had

already graduated from high school or earned their general equivalency diploma.

More than one-half (53 percent) of youth in custody admit skipping classes in the year before they entered custody, and the majority (57 percent) had been suspended in the same year. Also, 26 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds say they repeated a grade in the year prior to entering custody, which is more than twice the lifetime rate of grade retention (11 percent) among youth of the same age in the general population (Lugaila, 2003). Almost one-half (48 percent)

of youth in custody are at less than the typical grade level for their age, compared with 28 percent of youth in the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

Additionally, SYRP data indicate that youth in custody have disabilities that would make school more difficult for them. Thirty percent of youth in custody report that they have been diagnosed with a learning disability, compared with 5 percent of youth between the ages of 10 and 20 in the general population (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2003).

Nonetheless, more than two-thirds of youth in custody report that they have aspirations of higher education. About one-half (47 percent) say they want to go to college and another one-fifth of youth (21 percent) say they would like to go to graduate school, medical school, or law school. Females are significantly more likely than males to aspire to some type of advanced degree (37 percent of females versus 18 percent of males). Most youth in custody think they will achieve their educational goals. When asked how far they thought they would go in school, the majority (57 percent) say they expect to go at least as far as they want.

Youth's positive aspirations also apply to their future employment. Most youth in custody (88 percent) say they expect to have a steady job in the future.

## Expectations About Release

More than one-half (51 percent) of youth in custody say they have been told when



they will be released. One-third (33 percent) expect to be released in 1 month or sooner, 23 percent think they will be in custody for another 1 to 3 months, one-fifth (20 percent) believe they will be released in another 3 to 6 months, and one-fifth (20 percent) expect to be in custody for longer than 6 more months.

Youth who have been committed (i.e., adjudicated and assigned to placement

in their current program) expect their further time in custody to be considerably longer than other youth. Only 26 percent of committed youth believe they will be released in 1 month, compared with 51 percent of other youth.

When they leave their current facility, one-half of youth (50 percent) say they will be placed on probation or parole, 11 percent think they will be released with no court

supervision, and 8 percent expect to go to another facility. Close to one-third of the population in custody (30 percent) say they have not been told what will happen when they leave. Once released, majorities of youth in custody think they will have to report to a probation or parole officer (59 percent) or attend school regularly (56 percent). Some (42 percent) say they will have to take drug tests and a similar percentage (40 percent) say they will be

## Similarities and Differences Between Youth Surveys

The Survey of Youth in Residential Placement (SYRP) and the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement (CJRP)<sup>1</sup> both provide information about the size of the custody population; its age, sex, and race/ethnicity composition; and youth's most serious current offenses. SYRP findings on age, sex, race/ethnicity, population size, and current offenses closely parallel those reported for the 2003 CJRP (Sickmund, Sladky, and Kang, 2008). Any differences in population size and in age and sex distributions may stem from methodology differences or from changes over time and seasonal fluctuations: SYRP describes the population in spring, whereas CJRP reflects the population in October.

SYRP and CJRP custody rates differ slightly, with SYRP rates slightly lower than those given in the CJRP Databook (Sickmund, Sladky, and Kang, 2008). This difference reflects the use of slightly different population denominators. CJRP rates are based on the number of juveniles in the general population ages 10 through the upper age of the original court jurisdiction in each state,<sup>2</sup> whereas SYRP rates are based on all juveniles ages 10 through the upper age of extended juvenile court jurisdiction.<sup>3</sup>

The two surveys also offer different race/ethnicity classifications, reflecting their different methodologies and answer categories: CJRP requires administrators to assign a single race/ethnicity classification to each youth, whereas SYRP permits youth to identify as multiracial. The CJRP-type classification has been used universally until only recently, and it still remains the standard for available administrative data (Snyder and Sickmund, 2006). SYRP's expanded answer choices conform to the new Census Bureau standard for measuring race/ethnicity. Moreover, this expansion reveals that multiracial youth have a substantially greater custody rate (see page 2).

In comparison to CJRP data, SYRP findings indicate that the most serious offense leading to current placement is more commonly a person offense (Sickmund, 2004; Sickmund, Sladky, and Kang, 2008). The SYRP data show that 43 percent of youth are in their current placement because of a person offense, whereas the CJRP data show only 34 percent. This discrepancy is an understandable consequence of measurement differences between the SYRP interview answers and administrative data used to categorize offenses.

CJRP asks facility administrators for a single response that summarizes each youth's offense record. In contrast, the SYRP self-report interview explicitly asks separate questions about all offenses, affording youth more opportunities to report a more serious offense. The vast majority of youth in placement have previous convictions, so when asked to recall and report the events that led to their current placement, they may not clearly distinguish these events from their prior offenses. In actuality, their view on this may be quite realistic because courts undoubtedly consider offense histories when deciding to place youth. Finally, differences between what the youth did and the charges to which they finally pled should be systematic, with pled charges less serious. If youth describe what they actually did and administrative records indicate the charge for which they were adjudicated after their plea, then self-report data will convey offenses that are more serious. (For example, a youth may describe an assault while the record may show a disorderly conduct charge.) Given these dynamics of memory, interpretation, and circumstances, neither the self-report nor the administrative record is necessarily more valid. Both methods provide important, alternative perspectives on offender youth in placement.

SYRP data concerning offense behaviors go well beyond what administrators (surveyed through CJRP) can currently provide. SYRP gives details about the circumstances of current offenses, identifies patterns of past involvement in the justice system, identifies first offenders, and classifies youth by their most serious career offense. Until records systems become substantially more advanced, researchers must rely on interviews with youth to obtain this extensive information.

<sup>1</sup> CJRP surveys residential facilities in the United States to collect data on youth in custody; SYRP collects data from facilities and the youth themselves. Like SYRP, CJRP collects information on sex, age, race/ethnicity, most serious offense, court adjudication status, and more.

<sup>2</sup> This is the oldest age at which a juvenile court has jurisdiction over an individual for law-violating behavior. In 38 states, the juvenile court has original jurisdiction over all youth charged with an offense who were younger than age 18 at the time of the offense, arrest, or referral to court (King and Szymanski, 2006). In many states, the juvenile court has original jurisdiction over young adults who committed offenses while they were juveniles.

<sup>3</sup> This is the oldest age for which the juvenile court can retain jurisdiction over youth's dispositions in delinquency matters. Extended jurisdiction laws enable the juvenile court to provide sanctions and services even for older juveniles who have reached the age at which original juvenile court jurisdiction ends. This upper limit varies by state, depending on what is considered to be in the best interests of the juvenile and the public. In 33 states, this is age 20 (King and Szymanski, 2006).



required to work at least part time. Only a little more than one-third (35 percent) say they will be expected to go to counseling, and just more than one-fifth (22 percent) say they will have to pay for damages they caused.

## Youth Expectations About Future Offending and Sanctions

SYRP asks youth whether they think they will reoffend in the future. To assess youth's thoughts on the workings of the juvenile justice system and on graduated sanctions,<sup>10</sup> SYRP asks whether they expect to be apprehended and confined for any future offenses and what they believe their future punishments will be.

Most youth in custody (59 percent) say they definitely will not reoffend in the future. This belief is particularly prevalent among first-time offenders (78 percent). Although this is the socially desirable response, the anonymity of the interview should have minimized youth's concerns about conveying a good image. Despite this, the majority of youth in all groups affirm they will not reoffend. At the same time, nearly two-fifths (39 percent) think it unlikely they would be caught if they reoffended in the future. Nonetheless, the majority of youth recognize that if they were caught for a future offense, they would be punished. More than three-fourths (76 percent) think they would be remanded to custody, and 75 percent believe their future punishment would be greater than their current punishment.

Youth's expectations about the workings of the juvenile justice system are revealing, particularly considering that nearly two-fifths of youth in custody think they are unlikely to be apprehended for any repeat offense (most of whom say they "definitely will not be arrested"). Perhaps these youth feel they will be better at eluding law enforcement in the future, or perhaps they recognize the considerable challenge that officers face in solving crime and apprehending those responsible. Whatever their reasoning, youth's answers on this series of SYRP questions suggest that arrest or apprehension is the weakest link in the sanctioning process.

## Conclusion

The findings presented here represent a major advance in statistics about youth in custody. They provide a rich portrait

of the characteristics, backgrounds, and expectations of these youth. SYRP results provide information about the national population of youth in placement that is not available through any other source. For example, until now no information has been available for the national population in custody regarding the overall prevalence of all offenses for which youth are incarcerated or the characteristics of these offenses, such as the presence of accomplices and youth's use of drugs or alcohol during the offenses.

A number of the SYRP findings reiterate results from small, local studies. These findings provide a valuable contribution to the research literature on delinquent youth because they demonstrate that the patterns are not just local but apply more generally to the national population of youth in custody. Other observations provide unprecedented glimpses into the backgrounds, expectations, and beliefs of juveniles in custody.

Several findings have implications for reducing recidivism and enhancing positive outcomes:

- ◆ **Develop programs that address the specific needs of youth who are parents or expectant parents.** SYRP discovered that 20 percent of youth in custody already have children or are expecting a child. Juvenile justice programs have not commonly focused on the unique needs of these young parents and have overlooked how youth's unmet needs may affect their children. To reduce youth's recidivism and enhance the outcomes for their children, future initiatives should focus on programs that support parent-child bonds, improve youth's parenting skills, develop realistic release plans to preserve these new families, and enhance youth's ability to support and safely parent their children in the future.
- ◆ **Capitalize on youth's aspirations to motivate positive changes in their lives.** SYRP found that most youth say they want to go to college, or even to graduate school, and that the large majority expect to hold a steady job in the future. Intervention programs to reduce recidivism could motivate critical changes in youth's behavior by tapping their own specific aspirations for their further education and productive future lives.

SYRP can inform program and policy by providing details about the kinds of offenders in custody. Further analyses of the SYRP data can answer a wide range of questions about youth's offense patterns, including the following:

- ◆ **Do certain combinations of offenses typically occur together?** What types of offenses do the same youth tend to commit?
- ◆ **How do the offenses that gang members report differ from the offenses that other youth report?** Do gang members have different offense profiles than other youth? Are gang members more likely to report using a weapon, injuring their victims, having accomplices, or being under the influence of alcohol or drugs when they committed their current offenses?
- ◆ **How do youth's current offenses relate to their family situations?** What are the current offenses of youth who were living with two parents when they entered custody, and do these offenses differ from the offenses of youth who were living with a single parent or with no parent? What kinds of offenses do youth commit if they have children of their own or are expecting a child?
- ◆ **Do different types of offenders have different expectations about their future education or employment or about their future offending and sanctions?** Are violent offenders less positive about their future education or employment? Are they more skeptical about the workings of the justice system?

## Endnotes

1. All SYRP custody rates are computed as rates per 100,000 U.S. youth, including youth in the ages covered by extended juvenile court jurisdiction. Numbers of youth ages 10 through 20 in the general population were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau's monthly population estimates for April 2003, which was the midpoint of SYRP data collection (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2004). These numbers were adjusted by removing youth not within the purview of the juvenile court in states where extended court jurisdiction ends before age 20.
2. The SYRP bulletins report only differences that are statistically significant.
3. Fewer than 100 SYRP respondents are in this age category ( $n=82$ ). Here and throughout the SYRP bulletins, estimates

based on fewer than 100 respondents are flagged as less reliable.

4. The body of research on multiracial youth and delinquency is just emerging, so although these findings suggest that elevated rates of delinquency may be evident among multiracial youth in the custody population nationwide, the findings should be considered in context. Only recently have studies and data collection activities—both small and large scale—allowed respondents to indicate mixed race/ethnicity. Further research is needed to better understand the factors that may influence this finding. Until these findings are better understood, their implications for disproportionate minority contact programs and policies are unclear.

5. Some participants ( $n=139$ ) did not select any of the listed offenses.

6. The authors computed these rates from information provided in tables 39 and 40 of *Crime in the United States, 2003* (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2004).

7. Property crimes include burglary, arson, and theft as well as the less serious property offenses—trespassing, joyriding, and vandalism.

8. Corresponding statistics on 12- to 17-year-olds in the general population are available (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2004). The rates given in the text reflect this subgroup (and exclude younger and older SYRP youth).

9. Grade retention means that youth repeated a grade in school.

10. “Graduated sanctions” refers to justice system responses that can take a variety of specific forms but always involve a continuum of consequences (dispositions, punishments, services, or intervention programs) calibrated to address the severity and chronic nature of the specific crimes and the individual offender’s history and characteristics.

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### WesDax: Providing Survey of Youth in Residential Placement Data Online

WesDax is an online query and analysis system that allows users to construct their own results from the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement. The system is designed for audiences without technical or statistical expertise, including policymakers, service providers, and the general public.

The WesDax system:

- ◆ Operates in a standard Web browser and requires no special software.
- ◆ Offers a tutorial for new users, including a glossary of terms.
- ◆ Computes accurate totals and percentages.
- ◆ Can provide statistical measures of precision (in the form of standard errors or confidence intervals).

To use WesDax, see the “Online Analysis” link at [www.syrp.org](http://www.syrp.org).

### The Survey of Youth in Residential Placement

Further information about the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement can be found in the *Survey of Youth in Residential Placement: Technical Report* and other bulletins in this series, which include:

- ◆ *Introduction to the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement.*
- ◆ *Youth’s Needs and Services: Findings From the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement.*
- ◆ *Conditions of Confinement: Findings From the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement.*
- ◆ *Nature and Risk of Victimization: Findings From the Survey of Youth in Residential Placement.*

For more complete results of the survey findings on youth’s characteristics and backgrounds, see the “Reports” link at [www.syrp.org](http://www.syrp.org).

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