

**YOUTH VIOLENCE MYTHS AND REALITIES:  
A TALE OF THREE CITIES**

**Testimony by**

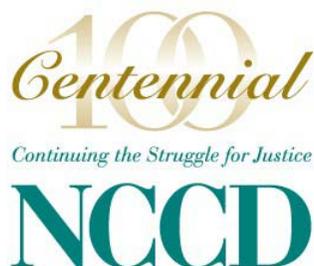
**Dr. Barry Krisberg**

**President, National Council on Crime and Delinquency**

**House Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security**

**Youth Violence: Trends, Myths, and Solutions**

**February 11, 2009**



**National Council on Crime and Delinquency**  
1970 Broadway, Suite 500 • Oakland, CA 94612  
tel 510/208-0500 • fax 510/208-0511 • [nccd-crc.org](http://nccd-crc.org)

## YOUTH VIOLENCE MYTHS AND REALITIES: A TALE OF THREE CITIES

Wrongly assuming that crime rates and demography are inextricably linked, a number of academics warned of an impending juvenile crime wave. In 1995, John Dilulio attached the term “superpredator” to the then preadolescents that he predicted would be part of a huge and ruthless juvenile crime wave (dominated by youth of color).<sup>1</sup> These youth were described as “fatherless, jobless, and Godless” by Dilulio, who was joined in his dire predictions by James Q. Wilson, Charles Murray, and James Fox. But soon after the peak in the mid 1990s, juvenile crime rates fell for the next ten years<sup>2</sup> and several studies showed that Dilulio and others had gotten the issue wrong. The temporary spike in youth violence was not simply a matter of more youths on the streets, and did not indicate a change in the nature or basic behavior of youth. Rather, the short term rise in crime was attributable to economic disparity, adult drug dealers using youths as pawns, and, most importantly, easy access to guns.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, Dilulio and other “Chicken Little” warnings about “a new horde from hell that kills, maims, and terrorizes”<sup>4</sup> had taken hold. A barrage of “get tough on (youth) crime” laws were enacted and for the most part remain in effect today, long after the very temporary juvenile crime wave subsided. A combination of media coverage, political fear mongering, and a misinformed public—and conservative mountebanks such as Wilson, Murray, and Dilulio—came together to change the very nature of the national debate on juvenile justice.

Unlike the adult criminal justice system, the juvenile justice system is designed to treat young people as youth; not as fully developed and self-responsible adults, but as still growing and reachable children. However, the late 1990s saw the beginning of a trend in legislation and policy that continues to this day as the juvenile system was made to more closely resemble the adult system. Indeed, the distinction has legally blurred as states across the country have made it easier to prosecute youth as adults in the adult criminal justice system. Meanwhile, research has shown that

---

<sup>1</sup> Dilulio, JJ. (1995). *The Coming of the Super-Predators*. The Weekly Standard, v001, i11.

<sup>2</sup> OJJDP, 1999. Challenging the Myths.

<sup>3</sup> Blumstein, A., nd. Youth, Guns, and Violent Crime.

<sup>4</sup> Dilulio, quoting former judge Dan Coburn, in testimony before Congress, 1996.

such harsh tactics do not increase public safety but do perpetuate cycles of crime and chaos in the already troubled personal lives, families, and communities to which these youth belong.<sup>5</sup>

Fast forward to 2008. This combination of ideology, political rhetoric, and their impacts, has not yet been successfully replaced with a less sensationalist media, a better informed public, or, in most jurisdictions, more rational policies. Newspapers still spread fear with articles about “kiddie” car thieves,<sup>6</sup> “homegrown terrorists,”<sup>7</sup> and youth who “just wanted to kill.”<sup>8</sup> Viewing with horror the increased pressures to put children in adult prisons and jails, Dilulio, who in 1995 said, “No one in academia is a bigger fan of incarceration than I am,”<sup>9</sup> now sensibly argues for less detention and a more community-based response to crime. However, statutes continue to be pushed and passed that pull more youth into a more punitive juvenile justice system and into the adult system. Media coverage of youth and crime still leave the public fearing the young people among them and likely to vote for the most punitive responses to delinquency.

### **The NCCD Three-City Study**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation funded NCCD to assess the intersection of media coverage of youth crime, public perception, public policy, and true trends and issues in youth crime in three US cities: Dallas, Texas, Washington, DC, and San Mateo, California. In particular, NCCD sought to help policymakers and citizens of these cities form policy based on accurate data and facts instead of fear and mythology. NCCD’s project had four parts: (1) review newspaper coverage in the three cities for the past two decades, (2) review crime statistics to assess what trends were truly occurring, (3) interview some of the key stakeholders (juvenile court judges, chiefs of police and probation, probation staff, police, prosecutors, and public defenders) who best understand the juvenile justice system, and (4) conduct in-depth interviews with the youth caught in the system. It is the stories of these youth—told in their own words and supported by statistics and stakeholder expert comment—which best illustrate their plight and the successes and failings of society’s response to serious juvenile crime.

---

<sup>5</sup> Holman, B., & Ziedenberg, J. , 2006. *The dangers of detention: The impact of incarcerating youth in detention and other secure facilities*. Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute.

<sup>6</sup> (2004, July 29). Reclaiming the City’s Youth. *The Washington Post*.

<sup>7</sup> Milloy, C. (2006, July 19). Juvenile Delinquency Gets Old Fast for Victims. *The Washington Post*.

<sup>8</sup> Ellis, T.M. and Ball, L.S. (2006, August 2). Teen just wanted to kill, police say: Frisco youth admits serial-killer fascination; original suspect cleared. *The Dallas Morning News*.

<sup>9</sup> Dilulio, JJ. (1995). *The Coming of the Super-Predators*. *The Weekly Standard*, v001, i11.

**Project methods.** Each city had ongoing youth crime issues where there was evidence of innovative leadership, programs, or approaches to address this concern. The cities were different from each other in overall level of crime, population size, racial and ethnic makeup, region of the country, and the dominant approach to solving youth violence.

NCCD interviewed 32 stakeholders, including representatives of the police, probation, youth corrections, the court, prosecutors, public defenders, and community-based organizations. Thirteen were judges or department heads.

NCCD interviewed 24 youth (19 boys and 5 girls). Their ages ranged from 12 to 19 years, with most between 15 and 17 years. Twelve were Latinos, 10 African American, and 2 were White. Each youth was in custody in residential placement, in most cases after being adjudicated delinquent. Fourteen of the 24 youth were being held for a violent offense, seven of which involved weapons. The most serious violent offenses were murder, aggravated assault with bodily injury (including a shooting), and kidnapping at gunpoint. Six youth stated they were in gangs and one more spoke of hanging out with gang members. Many youth not in gangs, particularly in Washington, DC, spoke of their neighborhood friends or “crews” in terms similar to the way self-reported gang members spoke of their fellow gang members.

## Summary of Findings

The lessons not yet learned from the 1990s myth of the “superpredator” are multifold.

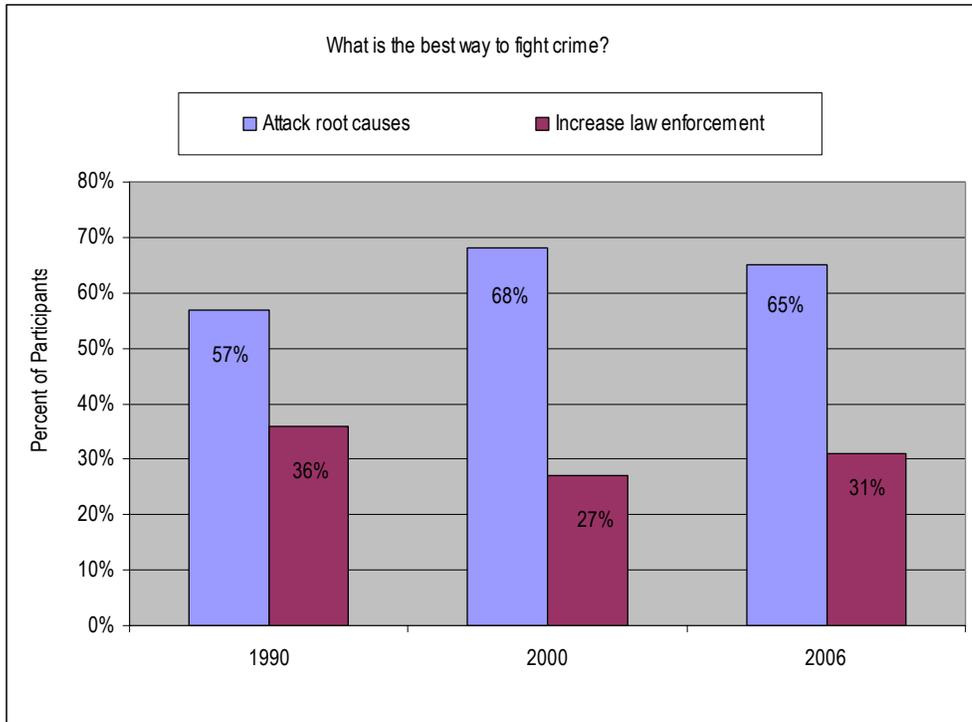
1. Public perception of violent crime is largely a function of media coverage of crime, especially youth crime. Many adults have little contact with youth and most never directly experience youth crime. This leaves them to base their impressions of youth and youth crime on external sources such as word of mouth, public officials, and, in particular, the media.
2. Media coverage does not reflect a sufficiently thorough or, in many cases, accurate understanding of youth or youth crime. Most stories about young people depict them as troubled or, more likely, as trouble for society; stories about youth typically associate youth with violence, whether as victim or instigator. Far too much coverage focuses on infrequent but heinous cases, without any context.

3. The public needs to be an informed partner in the conversation about short- and long-term responses to crime. Polls show that the public does not favor harsh treatment of most youth, yet they are often asked by politicians to support policies based on misleading information.
4. Professionals in the juvenile justice system recognize that discussions of crime trends need to have a comprehensive, evidence-based perspective that should be founded on accurate and timely data. Assessments of youth crime and associated policy cannot be based on oversimplified theories, short-term trends, or selective information.
5. Communities often need to respond to shorter-term crime trends, and changes in police tactics can be an effective part of that response. Public fear can be kept in check when the system is responsive. However, the law enforcement response needs to be planned and carried out responsibly, strategically, and not in a panic mode.
6. At its core, the comprehensive and evidence-based approach is based on the real stories of the system-involved or at-risk youth themselves. Only in their consideration can comprehensive and effective policies and practices be put in place to effectively respond to youth crime.

Key elements of these findings are elaborated on in this summary of the study. Topics covered include the nature of media coverage of crime and youth, the interplay of media coverage with policy decisions and real crime statistics, the attitudes of the public, and the true stories told by these youth. Recommendations stemming from the study are also presented.

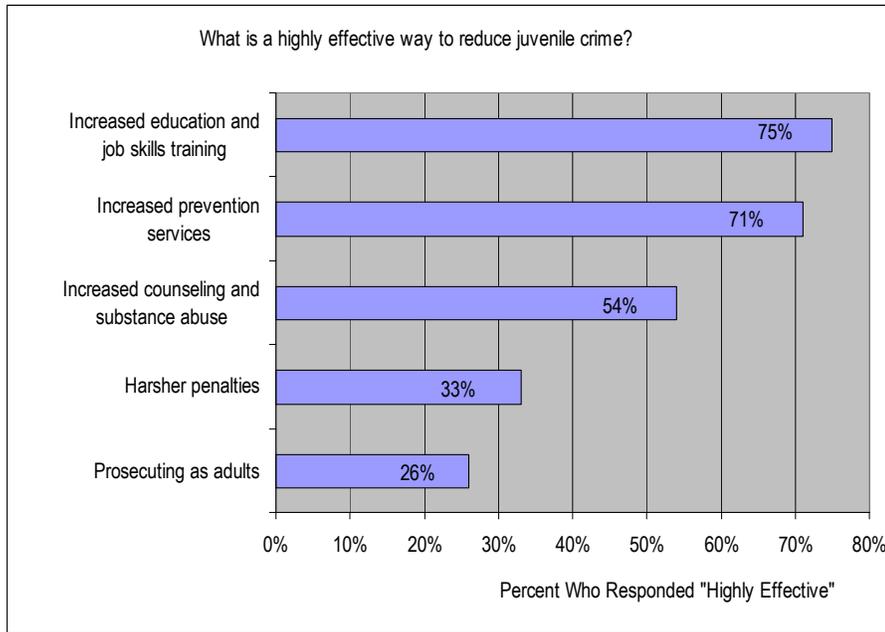
### **The Public is Open-minded about Rational Responses to Arrested Youth**

It is important to understand that, when asked to step back from the media's portrayal of crime issues, the public does not support overly harsh treatment of delinquent youth. The majority of the public feels that, in order to reduce crime, more resources should be directed toward the root economic and social causes of crime rather than toward law enforcement, the judicial system, and corrections. This has been public sentiment consistently since 1990.



Source: The Gallup Poll as cited by the Bureau of Justice Statistics' *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics Online*, [http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/toc\\_2.html](http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/toc_2.html).

According to the results of a 2007 Zogby/NCCD poll, the public was clearly concerned about youth crime and felt that young people should be held accountable for misconduct. However, they also believed that the most effective ways to reduce youth crime were to increase prevention efforts for at-risk youth and, for youth already involved in the system, to increase services, including education, occupational training, counseling, and substance abuse treatment. They felt overly punitive penalties like transfers to the adult system increase recidivism but, unfortunately, they had limited confidence in the effectiveness of the juvenile system.



\*1,043 nationally representative adults were asked if the listed measures are “highly effective, somewhat effective, or ineffective” in reducing youth crime. The percentage of respondents indicating “highly effective” is charted. Margin of error is  $\pm 3.1\%$ . Source: NCCD (2006, April). Attitudes of US Voters toward Prisoner Rehabilitation and Reentry Policies, [http://www.nccd-crc.org/nccd/pubs/zogby\\_feb07.pdf](http://www.nccd-crc.org/nccd/pubs/zogby_feb07.pdf)

### What *Does* the Public Hear?

System stakeholders stress that community understanding and support are key to a successful response to youth crime. However, when community members must rely on inadequate sources for their information, they cannot make an informed assessment of the issue—or of the actual risk of being a victim. The danger of a misinformed public is the knee-jerk support of more punitive responses to youth crime and neglect of the long-term, comprehensive strategies that most juvenile justice stakeholders think are necessary.

The NCCD review of newspaper coverage of youths and violence<sup>10</sup> and associated interviews with system stakeholders found that the public receives much of its information about youth from the media and that the information they receive is distorted.

“There’s a daily diet of bad news that on some level creeps into one’s world view. Even if you haven’t been a victim, what you perceive makes you feel vulnerable.”

<sup>10</sup> Articles covered youth and crime in the past two decades, usually from the Dallas Morning News, the San Jose Mercury News, and the Washington Post.

Stakeholders and NCCD's research typically were in agreement on the nature and impact of the media: The media's portrayal of youth and crime impacts public perception and city policy. The media plays a big role in influencing public perception of crime. As one stakeholder in Washington said, "The [Washington] Post makes policy in this city."

Even positive stories about youth or the justice system did not give context, just specifics to particular cases or events: good storytelling, but not good reporting. For instance, stakeholders in Washington pointed out positive stories, such as the opening of Washington's Court Social Services' drop-in center, an innovative program by Washington's Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS). They felt these were covered without context and were characterized as exceptions to the norm.

The press often quotes a politician as he declares a rise in youth crime without support of the facts. The media are clearly used to spin preferred policies to the public.

### **The Interplay of Media Coverage, Policy Decisions, and Real Crime Data**

A few examples from the three cities illustrate ways in which media coverage is linked with policy decisions, and how crime trend statistics are used and, often, misused to inform the discussion.

**All Crime Characterized as a *Youth Issue in Washington, DC.*** The rate of juvenile arrests for violent offenses in Washington, DC dropped 60% between 1996 and 2002 and then rose for four years before leveling off at about 25% lower than the 1996 rate. The increases in city arrests beginning in 2002 were heavily emphasized in newspaper coverage as a *juvenile* crime wave, when in fact the increase in the juvenile proportion of total arrests was less than *one* percentage point in this time period. The fact that arrest rates for adults were also rising was not generally reported. The youth percentage of total Washington DC arrests was about 6% or lower from 1997 to 2006 -- well below the youth proportion of the total city population, which remained around 20% in this period.

Further, for most of this period, reports to the police of violent crime were decreased, suggesting that changes in law enforcement policies and tactics accounted for at least some of the changes in arrest rates. Despite some short-term increases, the rate of reported violent crime (for all ages) dropped by 50% between 1995 and 2007.

**Dallas media ignores decrease in crime.** Rates of violent crime reported to Dallas police dropped 30% between 1995 and 2007. Dallas County rates of juvenile arrests for violent crime dropped every year since 1994, ending 62% below that year's rate.

However, Dallas newspaper coverage deemphasized falling rates. Instead, articles stressed the potential for trends to reverse due to an increasing juvenile population and teenage boys apparently becoming more violent. Articles emphasized a rise in specific crimes and the failure of the Dallas Police Department to meet its goals for crime reduction. And articles continued to focus on sensational cases.

Stakeholders stressed that cities should expect ebbs and flows in crime, and that it is essential to place short-term changes in a larger context. Stakeholders stressed that part of the problem was the lack of readily available and understandable data that the media could use to bolster their coverage.

**Sensationalism fans fear of youth in San Mateo, California.** Stakeholders suggested that the media's tendency to use frightening language surrounding all gang and violent activity, and to emphasize new crime waves and trends, made some city leaders, particularly school administrators, hesitant to admit their gang problems. Admitting these problems might lead to unwanted publicity and, in the case of schools, reduced funding; unfortunately, this meant that parents and others were left in the dark about important issues. Such characterizations also made the public more hesitant to support non-punitive responses to youth crime.

**Emphasis on short-term trends leads to short-sighted policy in San Mateo, California.** Some stakeholders worried that even when media publicity led to effective and needed programming, once the media moved on to cover another issue, the effective programs lost their funding. For example, when the gang situation received a lot of attention in the mid- to late-nineties in San Mateo (particularly in East Palo Alto), the County put a great deal of resources into gangs: a task force, increased awareness by courts, a probation-intensive supervision unit, and more prosecutions of gang members. When attention shifted to other types of crimes during the late-90s, resources shifted and these programs ended. San Mateo stakeholders suggested this led to an increase in gang crime; now that gang crime is receiving more attention again, the gang task force has been revived.

**“Crime emergencies” in Washington, DC.** In Washington, “crime emergencies” can be called by the police chief in response to short-term spikes in certain crimes. In the 2000s, several of these so-called emergencies noted spikes in robbery and Unauthorized Use of Vehicle (UUV) offenses. Rates of juvenile arrests for UUVs had a one-year rise 2002-2003 followed by a three-year decline, with another rise in 2006-2007. Increases in rates of youth arrests for robbery/carjacking (reported in combination by the Washington Metropolitan Police Department) were longer term and rose consistently from 2001 to 2006 and then dropped slightly.

These declarations of crime emergencies have significant ramifications. They allow, among other things, commanders flexibility to adjust schedules and restrict days off, provide millions of dollars in police overtime, impose youth curfews, increase police access to confidential juvenile records, give judges added discretion to deny bail and detain adults and juveniles that commit certain crimes, and install surveillance cameras in residential neighborhoods.

Stakeholders in Washington suggested that their policy leaders often justified new expenses and procedures as “emergency” actions; this not only frightened the community but made it difficult to enact long-term policy with more thoughtful policy debates. Also, stakeholders emphasized that these “emergencies” influenced long-term changes in policy and legislation. Many policies stay on the books regardless of subsequent downturns in crime. This includes some of the most punitive policy changes of the past two decades including mandatory minimums, enhanced penalties, and easing restrictions on trying youth as adults. These changes have had long-term and detrimental impacts on the youth in the system—they are more likely to get caught up in the system and may be denied access to preventative and rehabilitative community programming.

**Successful media and community outreach in San Mateo, California.** Stakeholders understood that it was sometimes easier for the public to understand a tough stance against crime rather than rehabilitation programming and alternatives to incarceration. Opportunities to explain to the public the value of such programming, and the negative consequences of long sentences for youth were lost every time an article sensationalized crime without providing context and response options.

In the late 1990s into the 2000s, San Mateo stakeholders realized that the development of their new Youth Services Center presented a perfect opportunity to inform the media and public, especially concerning the importance of rehabilitation. This was during a period of short-term fluctuations but overall decreases in youth-related crime. San Mateo newspaper coverage

characterized the crime trends in positive terms, without much of the “doom on the horizon” language used in other cities. The media described efforts to bring the rates even lower through rehabilitative youth and family programming, hallmarks of the new center.

This good coverage of the new youth center in San Mateo—comparatively well-balanced and insightful media coverage in several local newspapers—showed the purpose, goals, background, and pros and cons of the new facility. The success of the new center, and the nature of the reporting, was at least partly due to the concerted efforts of police and probation to “sell” the center. Stakeholders said they had made special efforts to inform the discussion, and that it worked.

### **The Untold Story: What Youth Told Us**

Factors impacting crime evolve over time, including the availability of weapons, the popularity of one drug versus another, community resources, economic conditions, public sentiment, and the resources, policies, and approaches of city agencies.

The evidence-based view that stakeholders argue for is one that carefully considers long-term crime trends, evolving factors impacting crime, and, perhaps most importantly, the changing—and often not changing—circumstances of youth at risk of system involvement.

So what does the media leave out? A very complicated story. Every youth interviewed had a different story, yet there were clear patterns as well.

**Parents and home life.** The 24 youth interviewed described their chaotic home lives, too often dominated by substance abusing, violent, or absent parents; multiple residence changes; and family members in trouble with the law. Most youth lived in poverty. Youth mentioned parents who dealt drugs in order to pay household bills, and some parents had pleaded with the court to release their child on probation because his or her job helped support the family. Sometimes parents moved their families to seek better circumstances for their children, but more often, financial or other disruptions forced the move.

The adults raising these youth fit easily into common stereotypes. Many youth lived in single-parent homes, yet many—one-third of those interviewed—lived in two-parent homes. Relationships between parents and youth were mixed. Many said they loved their parents and felt bad for letting them down. Almost half described their relationships as positive, with their parents

loving and supporting them, and making efforts to improve the youths' lives. Youth with an absent parent most often spoke of missing that parent rather than holding ill will toward them; they wished they could have a relationship.

Unfortunately, the youth spoke of parents who, despite good intentions, could not provide the structure or guidance that they needed. Some parents' employment, often at multiple jobs, left them with little time to meet the youths' needs. Some parents had troubles of their own, health issues, drug abuse, or system-involvement. Most youth had at least one family member or relative who was or had been involved in the criminal justice system. At least one youth described parents selling drugs on the streets in order to pay household bills. Most of the juvenile justice professionals that we interviewed agreed with these young people's observations. The stakeholders stressed factors that compromise successful parenting, including parental drug use, lack of awareness of children's lives, and lack of time to discipline and support children due to work hours or imprisonment. Still, the stakeholders felt many parents and guardians seemed to be struggling to create a positive home life.

Both youth and stakeholders spoke of gaps in understanding between youth and their parents, including cultural factors related to recent immigration, generational differences, and technology advancements, as youth used electronics and the internet as part of their social lives, education, and street life. Relatives—often a brother or cousin not much older than the youth—sometimes filled the role of absent or incapable parents, and these relationships often proved unhealthy. The gaps of understanding between parents and youth were so great in some cases that, according to both youth and stakeholders, parents turned to city agencies, most often the police or probation, to step in when they could not handle their children. With schools also turning to law enforcement for help with difficult students, this contributed to what some stakeholders described as an overreliance on the juvenile justice system.

**Schools.** Perhaps like most adolescents, the young people that we interviewed stressed the social rather than academic aspects of school. They described school environments that lacked the necessary structure and stability to help them succeed academically. Gang activity and violence were common.

The majority of the stakeholders were very concerned with a school's ability to positively intervene in the lives of young people.<sup>11</sup> In particular they were concerned with truancy and dropouts, though reentry after expulsions or time spent in juvenile facilities was also a major concern. These disruptions served to make academic success even less likely. Both youth and stakeholders thought schools too often involved the police in problems on campus and in truancy issues.

**The Street.** With their parents and schools unable to keep them on track, and with extensive unsupervised time on their hands, the neighborhood was an influential aspect of these youths' lives. Most of them described the difficult environments in their communities. Young people in the juvenile justice system stressed their personal exposure to gangs, drugs, and violence at a young age. The youth turned to street life for a variety of reasons—money, status, social life; their motivations were complex. They turned to those who could provide some of the bonds and structure they were lacking at home or at school. And they sought a modicum of control over their own lives. Some were urged into risky behavior by relatives, some were pressured simply because of where they lived or the clothes they wore. Some spoke of spending little time in the neighborhood, and even among those with active street lives, most were not in formal gangs. But the environment outside their homes and schools seemed always to play a significant and troubling role in their lives.

**The Juvenile Justice System.** Some of the youth reported that time in confinement allowed them to think about their lives and past actions and expressed a desire to change. However, this desire did not necessarily translate into concrete plans for a positive future. Most interviewed youth felt—and stakeholders generally agreed—that during their confinement they were not making positive progress towards creating a better life for themselves. They felt removed from their social, family, and economic obligations. Further, they felt some of their experiences, including failure to complete probation, made it difficult to turn things around. The youth rarely mentioned resources that had been helpful to them.

Although they had concerns, stakeholders generally commended the efforts of law enforcement and juvenile justice agencies to address the needs of youth. Stakeholders discussed innovative youth programming within the police department, probation, and detention and the increased resources available to youth once in the system. However, some stakeholders questioned

---

<sup>11</sup> Representatives of schools were not among the stakeholders interviewed.

whether the juvenile justice system was the right venue for delivering services, given its main function as law enforcement.

## **Policy Considerations**

It is usual for crime rates to fluctuate; however, newspaper reports as a whole emphasize and often exaggerate rises in crime, while drops in crimes are minimized. When overall crime rates are static or dropping, the media look for change in individual types of crime. Increases in crime do not warrant the typically exaggerated coverage mostly focused on shocking crimes. Further, crime in general is often attributed to youth when, in fact, adults commit the vast majority of all types of crime. Positive stories about youth, as opposed to those that emphasize trouble and violence, are hard to find, leaving the public with a distorted view of youth and their role in crime.

Interviewed stakeholders did not necessarily share the same political views on delinquent youth: some preferred greater emphasis on law enforcement, accountability, and public safety, while others preferred to emphasize programming, community-based efforts, and prevention. However, regardless of these views, in doing their work, stakeholders considered the full range of factors that influence youth behavior. Although elected officials may feel the need to respond to crime as reported in the media, or may use such coverage as leverage for pushing their preferred programs, stakeholders recognize the cyclical nature of crime and the need to focus on long-term strategies rather than short-term changes. Stakeholders felt that policies focused on short-term trends or sensational crimes used resources that would be better spent on more long-sighted methods. In fact, they felt that shortsighted policies may, in fact, make the situation worse.

### **Ask the youth!**

Perhaps the most interesting findings stem from what NCCD learned in the youth interviews. The stories they told were common to other youth involved in the justice system: unsettled households, violent communities, the inexorable draw of drugs, gangs, and delinquent behavior, inconsequential early system contacts, and gradually deeper movement into the system.

As a whole, the stories serve as an outline of the root causes of crime and a blueprint for early intervention and prevention programs. In effect, they evaluate how the adults in their lives and society at large had met their responsibilities to young people (We did not fare very well.). They suggest how to do better, if not for them, then for their young siblings and the next generation. The

youth told their stories with insight and, notably, without passing the sort of judgment that others had passed on them throughout their lives. Most of these youth had a clear idea of why things turned out the way they had for them. Most took personal responsibility for their plight. While acknowledging the failures of the adults responsible for their care, few blamed anyone but themselves. Furthermore, the youths' assessment of their own situations agreed in almost every respect with how the stakeholders—experts in the field—assessed the same thing. The youth were, in short, experts on themselves. And they added a personal element that illuminates how society can better serve them and others like them to avoid system contact.

Although these youth were among the most serious offenders in the system, they were not the heartless monsters described in many news reports. Interviewers found the youth to be funny, engaging, and thoughtful; they typically treated the interviewers with courtesy and respect. Their motivations for high-risk and delinquent behavior were complicated. However, they often involved common adolescent needs for interpersonal connections and a sense of belonging and self and perhaps seeking a little order among the chaos in their lives.

In short, trends in crime do not indicate tougher responses to youth crime—these youth are not superpredators. System reform is necessary and demands a comprehensive, long-term approach based on the perspective of the youth, families, and community.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations stem from youth interviews, stakeholder comments, and the other findings of the NCCD study.

**Initiate a campaign for accurate public information.** OJJDP and state agencies need to collect and make available the information necessary for meaningful discussion and reporting on youth, crime, and city responses. These resources must be timely and accessible to interested audiences with a range of backgrounds, expertise, and interests, to include not just researchers or academics, but the media, elected officials, law enforcement and other city agencies, and the general public. Types of information that need to be available include crime data, the youth and family perspective, risk and protective factors for crime, the structure and purpose of the juvenile justice system, the nature and impact of effective best practices in programming and service-provision for at-risk and system-involved youth, the impact of incarceration, current research in causes and

responses to crime, issues related to class, race, ethnicity, and immigration, and blueprints for effective city-wide responses to crime.

**Support a media training effort.** OJJDP and other justice agencies need to establish methods and resources for informing the media to the true nature of youth crime, the lives of youth in troubled communities, and how cities respond. This effort should include an internet-based clearinghouse of information formatted for easy access, understanding, and use by the media. It should also include conferences, seminars, and trainings designed to give the media a comprehensive understanding of youth and crime as well as expertise in the use of available data and informational resources.

**Expand funding for public education.** Public perception impacts the system at almost every level, from funding for new programs to crime-focused legislation and ballot measures, to understanding the benefits and detriments to system involvement for youth, to improved intergenerational communication and relations in the community. OJJDP and concerned foundations need to better inform the public and seek productive relationships among agencies, community groups, and individuals. This effort may include justice system events and programs linking justice representatives with local communities through community-based forums and services. Cultural sensitivity should be an essential element of these efforts.

**Promote healthy families and effective parenting.** Frustrated and bewildered parents need help recognizing risk factors for delinquency and effectively advocating for their system-involved children. Justice agencies, collaborating as necessary with public health and human service agencies, need to engage and educate parents on effective parenting skills.

**Broaden training for police and probation officers who work with troubled young people.** Federal funding needs to support appropriate training and institutional support for police and probation officers as they take on broader roles in communities.

**Remember that juvenile justice system-involved youth are ADOLESCENTS.** All of these recommendations must be planned and implemented with consideration of this core fact. These youth are not superpredators, they are not lost causes, but rather have made mistakes. But making mistakes is an integral part of growing up. These youth may be in dangerous ruts, but they maintain hope for new directions. And they need help.

To better understand and engage system-involved youth, the first step is to understand their development. Those convicted of serious crime are not so unlike average youth. They are observant, they have a sense of themselves, they are proud, yet they are often immature. They have complicated lives and motivations. Their home lives may be less than ideal, but they are all they know. They need help contemplating the consequences of their actions beyond punishment and loss of freedom. They need help seeing the big picture. They need help, for example, understanding the purpose of the services offered them, and help developing reentry plans. They need help seeing past their release date and reunion with their troubled homes and communities.

One youth interviewed seemed content to be in secure placement for the time being. She was a gang member; she had an emotional disorder; she reported that she had been abused at home; she said her father had been arrested for drug use and sexual assault. She said, simply, "I don't mind being in Juvi. Better to be here and be safe." However, our society must be capable of providing for safe environments for vulnerable young people outside of locked doors, razor wire barriers, and prison-like settings.