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Research Odyssey: Notes on Juvenile Delinquency in the States

Editors' note: *We approached Sarah Anderson with the challenge to document her research experience as it related to her project on juvenile delinquency. The following note is an informal discourse with the reader which focuses on the plight of the researcher. We like to think of Sarah's piece as an honest portrayal of the Research Odyssey common to many social scientists.*

Presently, juvenile justice is widely acknowledged as being in a state of flux in the United States. The early 1990s saw the most substantial rise in violent crime committed by juveniles ever experienced in this country. On the heels of decades of skepticism about the effectiveness of *parens patriae* (the state as parent), this rise was the "proof" for many "experts" who believe that the juvenile justice system should be abolished. These skeptics reason that one criminal court could still have some latitude when sentencing younger offenders, but that kids are now committing adult crimes, so it is time to treat them as adults.

Fortunately, this is not the prevailing view. While it is a force in the field, many more "experts" think the juvenile justice system simply needs renovations. Different states treat offenders differently, and some states are role models in the way their juvenile justice systems are managed and executed. Generally, state juvenile delinquency prevention systems were overhauled as a result of the high crime rates in the early 1990s. For my political science Senior Seminar research project, I wanted to look at what factors affected state delinquency rates. I was looking for what effects the reforming (or lack thereof) of these systems has had on the crime committed by juveniles in the states.

Working for the Washington, D.C. Public Defender's Office in the fall of 1995, I witnessed first hand the inadequacies of our legal system with respect to juvenile offenders. I believe that juvenile justice is a worthwhile topic because of its relevance to every member of American society. If we do not help children in trouble today, they will not have the capacity to be functional members of society tomorrow. Having taken a sociology special topic course on juvenile delinquency and completed a research paper in that course, I felt confident in my ability to locate and analyze contributing factors on the state level. What I did not anticipate, and in hindsight, I believe I could not have anticipated, was the difficulty I encountered in obtaining juvenile justice statistics on the state level. My first juvenile justice paper was a descriptive one; that was, it was subjective and opinionated. Political Science 402 required a more objective approach backed by empirical data.

Researching juvenile justice is difficult for a number of reasons. First and foremost, juvenile court records are sealed. While this did not present a direct imposition on my research, agencies that compile juvenile justice statistics have a difficult task in obtaining data comparable to that which is available on adult criminal justice. Juveniles only become truly media-accessible when they are transferred to adult criminal court, which may be why we hear so much about the rise in violent juvenile crime today. Generally speaking, the American public does not take an interest in crime until it becomes a viable threat. Murderers, particularly young ones who are stereotyped as naive and innocent, are often newsworthy because they feed the paranoia which prevails in our society. For these reasons, I wanted to see if juvenile crime truly is as prevalent and heinous as it is generally portrayed by the media.

Crime statistics are divided into many different categories, which also makes compilation difficult. Data are not collected by any centralized state agency. Correctional facilities are the sole exception to this rule, as they keep data on the state level; unfortunately, by the time a juvenile is detained or sentenced, most of the facts concerning the crime itself are considered to be moot, so these statistics provide little insight into contributing factors of juvenile crime. Almost all the available data are aggregate data compiled by federal agencies about how many crimes were committed in a given year. Comparative analysis, therefore, was impossible using these federal statistics.

Like many other types of public policy, the literature on juvenile justice is cyclical. It becomes a "hot topic" for a few years, then, as interest dwindles and another "hot topic" comes to the forefront, fewer studies are conducted, fewer materials get published and even less are read. Presently, juvenile justice is a hot topic, but the publishing time-lag is a serious setback. The most recent and accessible aggregate compilations are two to three years old. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw an increase in the publication of juvenile justice literature. However, most books on the subject are either descriptive or hypothetical analyses of the causes of juvenile justice, focusing on a few cases. Generally speaking, these books are informative, but not useful in this type of research.

After assessing the available data, I decided (with Dr. Renner's assistance) to analyze ten state characteristics. These became my ten independent variables and are as follows: Population; Population Density; Percent of Households in the

State that are Run Solely By A Female (hereby referred to simply as Percent Female Heads of Household); Percent of Children in the State Living Below the Poverty Line (Children in Poverty); Percent of Eligible Children Enrolled in Head Start Programs in the State (Head Start Enrollment); Percent of the Population that is White (Percent White); Percent of the Population that is Under Age 18 (Percent Under 18); Median Income of the State (Income); Per Capita Expenditures on Public Schools in the State (Spending); and Percent of Children Who Graduated during the 1989-1990 School Year Who Entered High School during the 1986-1987 School Year in Public Schools (Graduation Rate). I chose population, income, and percent white because these are common control variables. Population, income, and race have all been shown to have varying effects on nearly anything else being studied. These are fairly standard independent variables. The last two variables were logical choices, as they are related to juveniles and education.

One unique variable, Head Start Enrollment, is a wild-card. It had not occurred to me to include a variable such as this (although I did plan to look at education) until I came across its use in CD's *State Fact Finder*. Head Start is both a "hot topic" and a divisive issue. Its supporters claim that it can influence the rest of a child's life by stressing the importance of education early-on. Others think that although it does make a difference, this difference is limited to the first few years of school. When these children reach the age where they will be committing delinquent acts, the difference that Head Start made is non-existent.

I obtained data for three dependent variables. The relevant dependent variable is the Violent Crime Index, obtained from *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: A National Report* (a publication available from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention). The Violent Crime Index measures the number of arrests per 100,000 juveniles, ages 10 - 17, and includes the crimes of murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

I had no expectations as far as significance was concerned, but I did optimistically expect the correlation between Head Start and my dependent variables to be indirect. One question surrounding this variable is whether or not the programs in these states were even available when the juveniles who are in the system today were pre-school age. If not, any correlation would have to be linked to something else. Perhaps states that have a high percentage of children enrolled in Head Start stress education more than those with lower percentages. This variable may end up being a reflection of state priorities with regard to children and crime more than anything else.

When analyzing the data, I came across one finding that stood out: Head Start Enrollment is statistically significant for the Violent Crime Index. One question I would need to investigate further is whether the juveniles committing crimes today were enrolled in such programs, or if such programs were even in existence ten years ago. Clearly, something related to the philosophy of Head Start is affecting the juvenile crime in states. Whether this significance is caused strictly by the Head Start programs or by states doing something else is a relevant issue to be explored in future research.

Head Start is probably more popular in the cities than in rural areas. I know based on my own experience that Head Start Programs do not exist in any small town in which I have lived. This could help explain some of this significance. Regardless, Head Start is clearly worth a closer look. While many people have examined the impact it has on future education of pre-school students, it may also have possible links to crime. The cross tab for the independent variables and the Violent Crime Index is shown below.

Overall I was pleased with my findings concerning Head Start, but was disappointed with my project. These indices were not what I had originally envisioned. I simply did not take into account the lack of available information concerning the juvenile justice system in the United States. When confronted with this problem, I was not prepared with a "plan B." If I were to do it over again, I would examine more general state data and formulate my own hypotheses concerning state juvenile delinquency rates and policy output. As with any research project, this one illustrated the point that research can be extremely difficult and time-consuming. Above all, a researcher must be flexible and willing to modify his or her opinions to fit the previous research.

Violent Crime Index

Analysis of Variance

DF

R Square .66247

Regression 10

Standard Error 131.2801

Residual 39

F = 7.65438 Significant F = .0000

Variable	B	Beta	T	Sig T
Spending	-.074	-.063	-.438	.6637
% Under 18	4.420	.055	.437	.6644
Grad Rate	-2.583	-.102	-.561	.5780
Head Start	-21.123	-.347	-2.653	.0115*
% White	-.423	-.025	-.189	.8510
Population	.107	.289	2.421	.0202*
Pop. Dens.	1.213	.547	3.355	.0018*
% Ch. Pov	-2.865	-.080	-.323	.7483
% Fem HH	23.912	.241	.886	.3809
Income	-.640	-.017	-.062	.9508
(Constant)	482.261	.656	.5154	

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