

Not This Time: A Response to The Warnings of the Juvenile Superpredator

By Howard N. Snyder

It is starting. You can see it in local newspapers and hear it on national television. In the mid-1990s, when we last experienced the promotion of the “juvenile superpredator” notion, the research community’s response was inadequate. Consequently, while there was little empirical support for the idea, its proponents temporarily won the debate by creating a great label for their opinion and repeating it as often as possible to whomever would listen. Back then, the research community could have done a better job showing the inaccuracies in the empirical information used to support the notion — but it did not. As a result, and before the proponents of the juvenile superpredator notion admitted they were wrong (i.e., when there was no “bloodbath” and crime actually declined substantially), significant policy and practice changes were made that many are now trying to reverse. We are hearing the cry again — again with little empirical support. This time the research community is not sitting back, but taking every opportunity to clarify the empirical evidence surrounding this debate.¹

Serious violent crime in the United States peaked in 1991. It then declined in each subsequent year through 2004. In September 2006, the FBI reported that the rate of violent crimes known to law enforcement increased in 2005. Some verbal and high-profile folks have taken this news to be an indicator that we are at the beginning of a new crime wave. Some have even stated that they expect the FBI’s next national report, to be released at the end of this year, will show that the violent crime increase will continue into 2006 and that much of this increase will be linked to crimes by juveniles. Such

Figure 1. The number of Violent Crime Index* offenses reported to U.S. law enforcement increased in 2005 for the first time since 1991.

Year	Offenses per 100,000 people
1980	597
1981	593
1982	571
1983	538
1984	540
1985	558
1986	620
1987	612
1988	641
1989	667
1990	730
1991	758
1992	757
1993	747
1994	714
1995	684
1996	637
1997	611
1998	568
1999	523
2000	507
2001	505
2002	494
2003	476
2004	463
2005	469

*The Violent Crime Index is the sum of reported murders and nonnegligent manslaughters, forcible rapes, robberies, and aggravated assaults.

Source: *The FBI’s yearly Crime in the United States reports, 1980-2005.*

predictions are increasing the public’s concern about crime — juvenile crime in particular. However, before this speculation gets out of hand, as it did with the juvenile superpredator frenzy in the mid-1990s, let us look more closely at what we know — at what the data actually say.

It is true that the violent crime rate in the United States increased from 2004 to 2005, but the increase was only by 1 percent (see Figure 1). The increase in 2005 was so small that the 2005 rate was still 1 percent below the 2003 rate. In fact, if the violent crime rate increased annually as much as it did between 2004 and 2005, we would have to wait 48 years — until the year 2053 — before the violent crime rate in the United States returned to its 1991 level.

A similar pattern is seen when we focus just on murders, the crime most commonly mentioned as a sign of an upcoming crime wave. The murder rate peaked in 1991 at 9.8 murders for every 100,00 people in the United States. It fell annually between the mid-1990s and 2000, dropping to a rate of 5.5. Between 2000 and 2005 the rate varied between 5.5 and 5.7, and it did actually increase from 2004 to 2005 — from 5.5 to 5.6. Once again, if the 2004-2005 change is a indication of future changes, we will all be long retired before the U.S. murder rate returns to its 1991 level.

In all, there is little statistical support for an upcoming crime wave. It might happen, but the statistical evidence to support the prediction does not exist today. Maybe, when the 2006 crime data are released in the fall of 2007, the predictions we have heard for 2006 may prove to be accurate, but the fairest assessment of available information is that there is no support for the statement that we are at the beginning of a new crime wave.

Many who are telling their listeners that the United States is entering a period of increasing violence indicate that it is being driven by juvenile offenders. To support their argument, they cite the FBI's most recent statistics that the number of juvenile Violent Crime Index arrests increased 2 percent between 2004 and 2005 — the first increase since 1994. More specifically, they note that the FBI reported increases between 2004 and 2005 in juvenile arrests for murder and robbery (20 percent and 11 per-

cent, respectively) and declines in juvenile arrests for forcible rape and aggravated assault (11 percent and 1 percent, respectively). One must look behind these figures.

The juvenile arrest rate for murder peaked in 1993 with 14.4 juvenile murder arrests for every 1,000 people ages 10 to 17 in the United States (see Figure 2). Between 1993 and 2004 this arrest rate fell substantially, dropping more than 75 percent, falling from 14.4 to 3.3. On its surface, the 20 percent increase in the juvenile arrest rate for murder between 2004 and 2005 appears to be alarming, but the increase was from the historically low value of 3.3 to another relatively low value of 3.8. In fact, the 2005 juvenile murder arrest rate is: 1) equal to the 2000 rate, 2) below the juvenile murder arrest rates in 2001 and 2002, 3) equal to the average rate of the prior four years. Viewed through this lens, the 2004-2005 increase does not seem that bad and certainly is not a bellwether of future disaster. The same type of analysis minimizes the concern about the 2004-2005 increase in juvenile arrests for robbery.

In summary, there is no evidence in the FBI's newest crime and arrest statistics of an upcoming crime wave or the beginning of a new era of juvenile superpredators, despite statements by some to the contrary. We have to wait to see what the 2006 data will tell us. The criminal justice professionals within and outside of ACA should take every opportunity to counteract the misperceptions of recent crime trends. And those of us in the research community who did not adequately combat the misuse of information in the 1990s, hopefully, have learned our lesson and will become better advocates for empirically-based policy debates.

ENDNOTE

¹ For another response to this notion see Butts, Jeffrey and Howard Snyder. 2006. *Too Soon to Tell: Deciphering Recent Trends in Youth Violence*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Chapin Hall.

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Figure 2. The arrest rate of juveniles ages 10 to 17 for murder increased twice since 1993, in 2001 and 2005.

Year	Juvenile arrests for murder per 100,000 people
1980	6.4
1981	7.0
1982	6.6
1983	5.4
1984	5.4
1985	5.7
1986	6.4
1987	6.9
1988	8.5
1989	10.0
1990	11.9
1991	13.1
1992	12.5
1993	14.4
1994	13.2
1995	11.9
1996	9.7
1997	8.4
1998	6.8
1999	4.6
2000	3.8
2001	4.3
2002	4.1
2003	3.3
2004	3.3
2005	3.8

Source: OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book. Available online at <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstatbb>.