




# JUVENILE JUSTICE STATISTICS

## NATIONAL REPORT SERIES FACT SHEET

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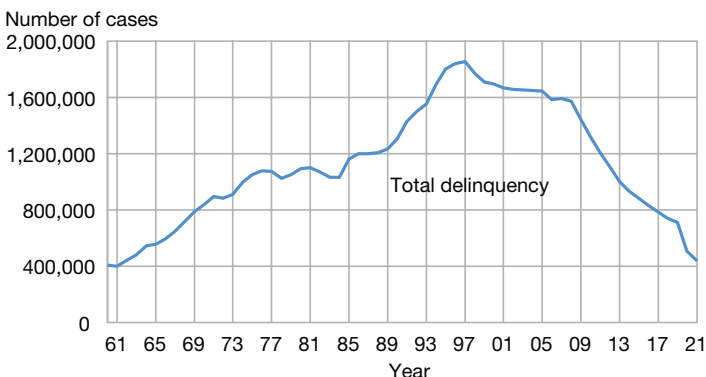
## Delinquency Cases in Juvenile Court, 2021

Eliana Beigel and Sarah Hockenberry

### Counts and trends

In 2021, juvenile courts in the United States handled 437,300 delinquency cases that involved youth charged with criminal law violations, 13% less than the number of cases handled in 2020. From 2005 through 2021, the number of delinquency cases declined 73%, with decreases in all four offense categories: property offense cases and public order offense cases (down 78% each), drug law violation cases (down 75%), and person offense cases (down 62%). In 2021, person offense cases accounted for the largest proportion (37%) of the delinquency caseload, followed by property offense cases (30%), public order offense cases (22%), and drug offense cases (11%).

**The delinquency caseload decreased 76% since the 1997 peak, from 1,855,500 cases to 437,300**



**Between 2005 and 2021, the number of cases handled by juvenile courts decreased for all offenses except criminal homicide**

Most serious offense	Number of cases	Percent change		
		2005–2021	5-year 2017–2021	1-year 2020–2021
<b>Total delinquency</b>	<b>437,300</b>	<b>-73%</b>	<b>-44%</b>	<b>-13%</b>
<b>Person offenses</b>	<b>163,000</b>	<b>-62%</b>	<b>-29%</b>	<b>-6%</b>
Criminal homicide	1,500	34	40	27
Forcible rape	7,200	-33	-9	12
Robbery	13,500	-48	-34	-15
Aggravated assault	20,200	-57	-19	-6
Simple assault	95,000	-66	-35	-8
Other violent sex offenses	6,300	-54	-12	6
<b>Property offenses</b>	<b>132,300</b>	<b>-78%</b>	<b>-48%</b>	<b>-17%</b>
Burglary	26,000	-74	-48	-17
Larceny-theft	41,800	-85	-62	-27
Motor vehicle theft	13,700	-58	-17	-3
Arson	1,300	-81	-41	-7
Vandalism	27,100	-73	-32	-8
Trespassing	11,400	-78	-51	-24
Stolen property offenses	6,400	-69	-24	9
<b>Drug law violations</b>	<b>46,300</b>	<b>-75%</b>	<b>-55%</b>	<b>-18%</b>
<b>Public order offenses</b>	<b>95,700</b>	<b>-78%</b>	<b>-51%</b>	<b>-17%</b>
Obstruction of justice	42,700	-78	-56	-22
Disorderly conduct	22,300	-83	-55	-21
Weapons offenses	12,900	-69	-27	5
Liquor law violations	2,100	-86	-56	-18
Nonviolent sex offenses	7,800	-37	-29	-6

■ Although the number of juvenile court cases for most offenses decreased in the 5 years between 2017 and 2021, the number involving criminal homicide increased considerably (40%).

**Notes:** Totals include offenses not detailed. Percent change calculations are based on unrounded numbers.

## Gender

Nearly three-quarters of the overall delinquency caseload involved males. In 2021, juvenile courts handled 320,800 cases involving males, compared with 116,500 cases involving females. Between 2005 and 2021, the relative decline in delinquency cases overall was similar for males and females (down 73% and 74%, respectively); however, the decline in property and public order cases was greater for females while the decline in drug cases was greater for males.

Most serious offense	Percent change 2005–2021	
	Male	Female
Total delinquency	–73%	–74%
Person	–62	–61
Property	–77	–82
Drugs	–77	–67
Public order	–77	–80

The female proportion of the delinquency caseload changed little for most offense categories between 2005 and 2021.

Most serious offense	Female proportion	
	2005	2021
Total delinquency	28%	27%
Person	30	31
Property	28	22
Drugs	20	26
Public order	28	26

## Race

Forty-four percent of delinquency cases handled in 2021 involved white youth, 35% Black youth, 17% Hispanic youth, 2% American Indian youth (including Alaska Natives), and 1% Asian youth (including Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders). In 2021, the U.S. juvenile population consisted of 53% white youth, 15% Black youth, 24% Hispanic youth, 2% American Indian youth, and 6% Asian youth.

Race	Race profile of cases, 2021				
	Total delinquency	Person	Property	Drugs	Public order
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
White	44	44	55	41	44
Black	35	39	20	38	35
Hispanic	17	14	21	19	17
American Indian	2	2	3	2	2
Asian	1	1	1	1	1

**Note:** Detail may not add to totals because of rounding.

The racial disproportionality in delinquency cases varied across offense categories. White youth accounted for a larger proportion of drug offense cases (55%) than any of the other general offense categories. In contrast, Black youth were involved in 20% of property offense cases, but accounted for larger proportions of person (39%), drug (38%), and public order (35%) offenses.

Hispanic youth were involved in 21% of property offense cases, accounting for their largest share across offense categories. Asian and American Indian youth accounted for a small proportion of cases across all offense categories.

Variations in case processing by race can be examined by looking at the rate at which cases involving different groups of youth proceed from one decision point to the next as they move through the court system. The referral rate (per 1,000 youth at risk of juvenile court involvement) for delinquency cases involving Black youth (31.7) was about three times the rates for white (11.4) and Hispanic (9.5) youth. Cases were more likely to be petitioned for formal processing for Black youth (63%) than white (51%) or Hispanic (52%) youth. Once petitioned, cases involving Black youth were less likely to be adjudicated (45%) than cases involving white (50%) and Hispanic (52%) youth, and slightly more likely to be waived to criminal court (1.6%) than white and Hispanic youth (0.8% and 1%, respectively). Once adjudicated, cases involving Black or Hispanic youth were more likely to result in residential placement (32% and 31%, respectively) than cases involving white youth (22%). Conversely, adjudicated cases involving white and Hispanic youth were more likely to result in probation (68% and 67%, respectively) than cases involving Black youth (62%).

## Age

In 2021, youth younger than age 16 at the time of referral to court accounted for 53% of all delinquency cases handled. This age group accounted for 58% of person offense cases, 54% of property offense cases, 50% of public order offense cases, and 36% of drug law violation cases. Person offense cases had the largest proportion (10%) of youth younger than age 13 at referral, followed by property (7%) and public order (6%) offense cases. For drug offense cases, a smaller proportion (2%) involved youth younger than age 13.

### Delinquency Estimates

The estimates are based on data from nearly 2,400 courts with jurisdiction over 83% of the nation's juvenile population (youth age 10 through the upper age of original juvenile court jurisdiction in each state) in 2021. The unit of count is a case disposed. Each case represents the most serious offense of one youth that a court with juvenile jurisdiction processed on a new referral, regardless of the number of offenses contained in that referral. A youth may be involved in more than one case during the calendar year. Although the National Juvenile Court Data Archive houses historical data, the estimates in this fact sheet cover the 2005–2021 time period to accommodate consistent reporting of racial/ethnic data and to focus on recent trends.

It should be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in March 2020, had an impact on the policies, procedures, and data collection activities regarding referrals to and the processing of youth by juvenile courts. This impact likely continued into 2021. However, it is not possible to determine the true impact of COVID-19 on the processing of delinquency cases handled by juvenile courts from data submitted to the Archive.

## Detention

A youth may be placed in secure detention at various times during case processing. Detention is primarily used for temporary holding while youth await adjudication, disposition, or placement elsewhere. Many states detain youth to ensure their appearance at subsequent hearings, to protect the community, or to secure the youth's own safety. Intake staff may also detain youth for diagnostic evaluation purposes. All states require that a detention hearing be held within a few days of placement (usually within 24 hours). At the hearing, the judge reviews the initial detention decision, considers what is in the best interests of the community and the youth, and decides whether to continue the youth's detention. Most states also use detention facilities for sanctioning purposes—youth may be committed to a detention facility as part of a disposition order, or detained for a violation of an existing court order or as a sanction for a probation violation. Actual detention practices vary substantially across jurisdictions. These court data count the number of cases that involve detention of the youth at some point between referral to court and case disposition. A youth may be detained and released more than once between referral to court and case disposition. In most delinquency cases, the youth is not detained (74% in 2021). The proportion of cases involving detention in 2021 (26%) has changed little since 2005 (24%).

The likelihood of detention varies by general offense category. In 2021, person offense cases were the most likely to involve detention (31%), followed by public order offense cases (28%). In comparison, youth were less likely to be detained in property offense cases (22%) and drug offense cases (16%). Although the proportion of cases involving detention remained stable between 2005 and 2021, the number of delinquency cases in which the youth was detained decreased 72%, similar to the overall delinquency caseload trend.

## Intake decision

The juvenile court intake function varies by state, but is typically the responsibility of the juvenile probation department, the prosecutor's office, or the juvenile court. At intake, authorities decide whether to dismiss the case, handle it informally (without filing a petition), or file a petition to formally request a hearing to determine whether a youth was responsible for a delinquent act or to transfer jurisdiction to criminal court. In 2021, 20% of all delinquency cases (87,700 cases) were dismissed at intake, generally for lack of legal sufficiency. An additional 24% (105,600 cases) were handled informally, with the youth agreeing to some sort of voluntary sanction (e.g., restitution). In more than half of all delinquency cases (56% or 244,100 cases), authorities filed a petition and handled the case formally. The proportion of delinquency cases petitioned for formal handling changed little between 2005 and 2021.

## Waiver to criminal court

In most states, juvenile court judges may waive juvenile court jurisdiction in certain cases and transfer jurisdiction to criminal court so the youth can be tried as an adult. The court decision in these matters follows a review

of the case and a determination that probable cause exists to believe the youth committed the criminal act for which they were referred. The judge's decision generally centers on the issue of whether the youth is amenable to treatment in the juvenile justice system. The prosecutor may argue that the youth has been adjudicated several times previously and that interventions the juvenile court ordered have not prevented the youth from committing subsequent criminal acts. The prosecutor may also argue that due to the seriousness of the crime, the juvenile court cannot intervene for the time period necessary for rehabilitation before the youth reaches the upper age of juvenile court jurisdiction. (For more information, see *Delinquency Cases Waived to Criminal Court, 2020*, at <https://ojdp.ojp.gov/publications/delinquency-cases-waived-criminal-court-2020.pdf>.)

In 2021, juvenile court judges waived jurisdiction over an estimated 2,800 delinquency cases, sending them to criminal court. This represents 1% of all formally handled delinquency cases. The number of cases waived was relatively flat from 2005 to 2008, then declined 49% through 2015. Despite some fluctuation in recent years, the number of cases waived in 2021 was 57% below the 2005 level.

For each year between 2005 and 2021, person offenses accounted for the largest proportion of waived cases. In 2021, 66% of all waived cases involved person offenses.

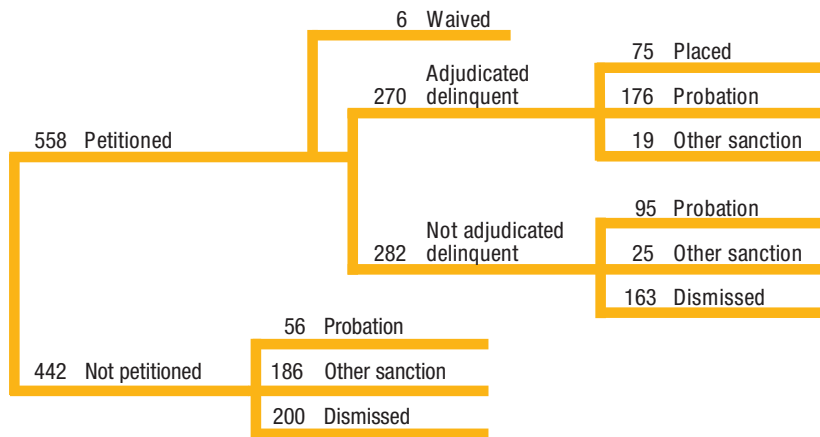
Most serious offense	Offense profile of cases waived to criminal court			
	Number		Percentage	
	2005	2021	2005	2021
Total delinquency	6,500	2,800	100%	100%
Person	3,000	1,800	46	66
Property	2,000	600	31	22
Drugs	900	100	14	5
Public order	600	200	9	7

**Note:** Detail may not add to totals because of rounding.

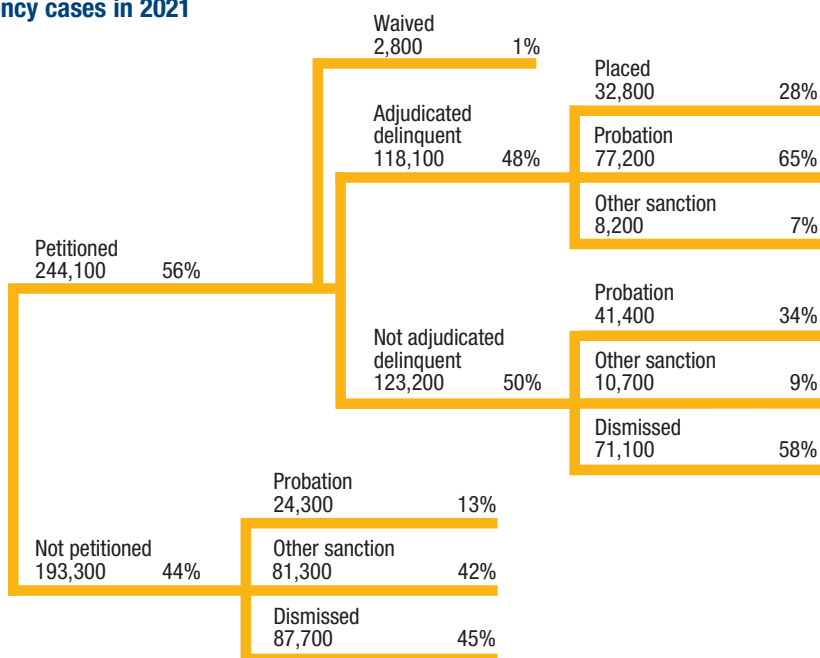
## Adjudication and disposition

Adjudicatory hearings establish responsibility for an alleged delinquent act. When a youth is adjudicated delinquent, it means the court found the youth committed a delinquent act. In 2021, youth were adjudicated delinquent in 48% (118,100) of petitioned cases. Following an adjudication of delinquent, the court holds disposition hearings to decide which sanctions it should impose and whether it should place the youth under court supervision. Many cases result in multifaceted dispositions, and most involve some type of supervision, known as probation. A probation order often includes additional requirements, such as drug counseling, restitution to the victim, or community service. In 2021, formal probation was the most severe disposition ordered in 65% of cases in which the youth was adjudicated delinquent, and in 28% of cases, residential placement was the most severe disposition. A smaller proportion of cases received some other sanction as their most severe disposition. The proportion of adjudicated cases ordered to residential placement has remained steady in recent years, 28% in both 2005 and 2021, as has the proportion ordered to probation, 63% in 2005 and 65% in 2021. The proportion receiving other sanctions has also remained level, 9% in 2005 and 7% in 2021.

## Case flow for a typical 1,000 delinquency cases in 2021



## Case flow for 437,300 delinquency cases in 2021



**Notes:** Cases are categorized by their most severe or restrictive sanction. Detail may not add to totals because of rounding. Annual case processing flow diagrams for 2005 through 2021 are available at [https://ojdp.ojp.gov/statistical-briefing-book/court/faqs/jcscf\\_display](https://ojdp.ojp.gov/statistical-briefing-book/court/faqs/jcscf_display).

## For more information

This fact sheet is based on the report *Juvenile Court Statistics 2021*, which is available at <https://ojdp.ojp.gov/library/publications/juvenile-court-statistics-2021>. To learn more about juvenile court cases, visit OJJDP's online Statistical Briefing Book (<https://ojdp.ojp.gov/statistical-briefing-book>) and click on "Youth in Court." OJJDP also supports *Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics*, a web-based application that lets users analyze the data from the *Juvenile Court Statistics* report. This application is available from the "Data Analysis Tools" section of the Statistical Briefing Book.

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