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Research Brief

Are Teenage Criminals Getting Younger and Younger?

Exposing another Urban Legend

by

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Introduction

Hundreds of news stories and expert commentaries, with very few exceptions, declare that juvenile crime is soaring, is becoming more violent, and involves more killers and criminals who are younger than those of the past. Occasionally, youth crime is depicted as declining, but only when an interest group is positioned to take credit.

A typical recent news story, “Younger and Twice as Violent,” stated that young-teen crime was “exploding” nationwide, quoting a prosecutor:

Younger kids than 18 are now fitting into that demographic who are committing more and more crime... The 18-year-old of my day is, in terms of criminal activity, probably the equivalent of at least a 16-year-old if not a 15-year-old today. (Vosk & Berry, 2009).

Likewise, CNN’s “Anderson Cooper 360” (2007) special report, citing the murders of 28 Chicago schoolchildren in the previous year, declared “youth violence is on the rise around the country.” Cooper and his sources variously blamed the “growing culture of violence, especially among young people,” reflecting “a generation that does not value life,” “a general lack of respect for authority that is worse than it used to be,” and “violent video game and media culture.” Chicagoan and reporter Gary Tuchman lamented, “how this city has changed” from when he was growing up and could walk to school safely; even “ten years ago, kids respected police.” Such statements are easily debunked. Coroner reports from 2007 show murders of Chicago youth ages 5-17 reached their *lowest* level than at any time since statistics were first recorded 40 years ago. In 1970, there were 86 youth murders; in 1980, 61; in 1995, 115; and in the most recent year, 32. CNN and its sources could have expressed concern about murder without stigmatizing an entire generation, but instead chose to create a false impression.

These stories recite standard myths that teenagers are more criminal and homicidal, committing worse violence at younger ages. But, by the best information available¹, is this common wisdom true? In fact, for most major offenses, youth arrest rates nationally stand at their lowest level today than at any time in at least four decades, and perhaps ever. Far from becoming more violent, younger ages show the biggest declines in nearly all forms of crime. For example, the average age of a teenager arrested for murder in 2008 (18.1 years) was four months *older* than the average age of a teenage murder arrestee in 1960 (17.7 years), while the average teenage violent felon was two months older in 2008 than in 1960. Further, teenage offenders are arrested for less violent offenses today than in the past. In 1960, half of all teenage violence offenders were arrested for misdemeanors such as simple assault; in 2008, more than three-fourths.

¹ YouthFacts.org has taken initial steps to provide references for reporters and researchers interested in fact-checking. In particular, we provide annual arrest numbers and rates from the FBI (2009) Uniform Crime reports for many key offenses (adjusted for changes in populations and national report coverage to provide consistency), from 1960 through 2008, at: <http://www.youthfacts.org/crimetables.html>. While FBI-tabulated arrests understate true crime volumes for all ages, they are the only long-term measure of crime.

Data and Method

Annual arrest numbers for many key offenses by age are available from the FBI (2009) Uniform Crime reports, which have included law enforcement agencies for measurable populations in the United States from 1960 through 2008². Arrests of those younger than 10 are added to totals for ages 10-14 and 10-19. Census figures are used to adjust annual FBI report's arrest numbers upward to reflect national totals and to calculate arrest rates by offense and age (populations used are ages 10-14 and 10-19). FBI crime clearance estimates indicate that arrest statistics overstate the youthful contribution to crime because juveniles' arrests involve significantly fewer crimes per offender than do adult arrests. Further, before 1970, youth arrests were undercounted since many youthful offenders were not fingerprinted and were charged with status crimes rather than specific criminal offenses.

Three indexes are calculated: (a) the proportion of all teenage murder arrestees who were younger than 15 (raw numbers that reflect public *perception* of crime); (b) the rate of murder arrests of age 10-14 versus the rate for age 10-19 as a whole (the measure that factors in population changes to assess whether younger teens on average are becoming more or less crime-prone over time) (Figures 1-5); and (c) the median ages of teen offenders over time (Figure 6). Comparisons with adult ages also are presented (Table 1).

Results

For major crimes, teenage arrestees have become older over the last half-century. By 2008, the contribution of youths under age 15 to murder, violent crime, and serious felonies was at or near its lowest level in at least half a century.

Homicide. The average teenage homicides today is older than at any time in at least five decades as the odds of younger teens committing murder have dropped sharply. The peak in young-teen murderer proportions occurred in 1961, when 9.4% of all teen homicide arrestees were under age 15, and 10-14 year-olds were 0.167 as likely to be arrested for murder as all teens (FBI, 2009)³. In 2008, young-teen murder reached an historic low, when just 3.3% of teenage murder arrestees were under age 15, and the ratio of young-teen to all-teen murder arrest rates was 0.069—both less than half the levels in 1960.

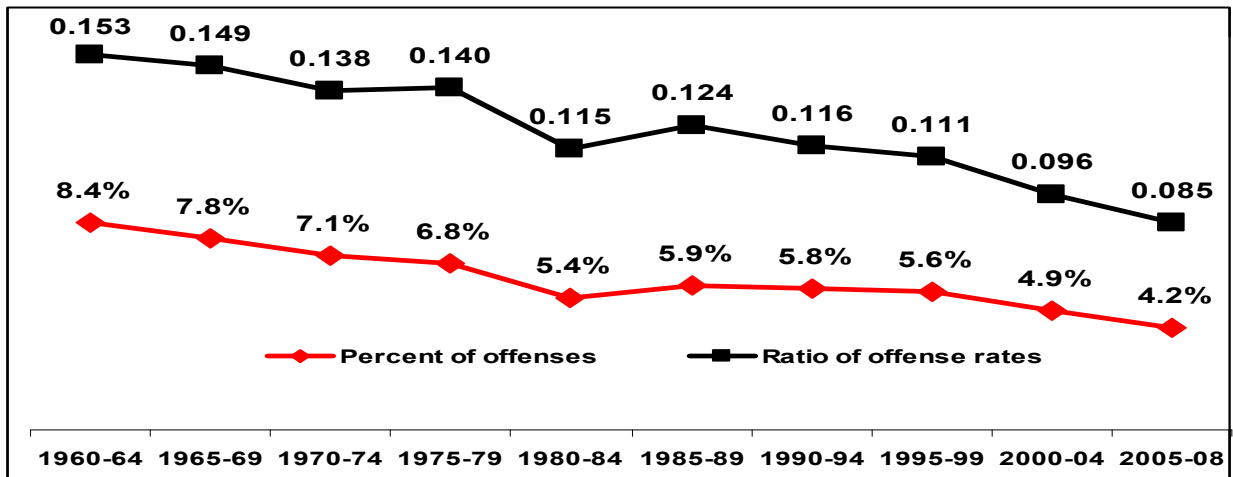
Figure 1 shows the dramatic *aging* of the teenage murderer population. In the early 1960s, 8.4% of all teens arrested for murder were under age 15, and the murder arrest rate of younger teens was 0.153 that of teens as a whole. Today, just 4.2% of teen murders involve assailants younger than 15, and the ratio of the younger-teen murder arrest rate to those of teens as a whole has dropped to 0.085 (FBI, 2009).

² Prior to 1960, FBI reports were too incomplete to calculate national totals, and even adjusted 1960s numbers may be undercounts.

³ A 10-14 year-old was 16.7% as likely to be arrested for murder as a teen aged 10-19.

Figure 1

Change in homicide arrest numbers and rates of 10-14 year-olds compared to all teens age 10-19, 1960-2008 (five-year averages)

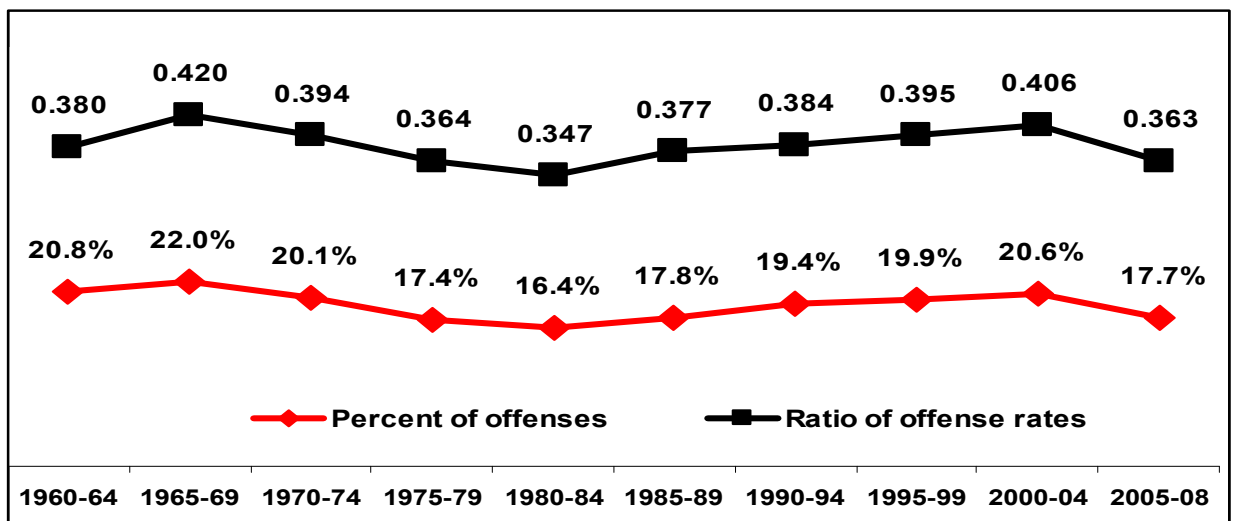


Source: FBI (2009)

Violent crime. Teenage arrestees for the FBI’s four Part I violent felonies (homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) are slightly older today than in the 1960s and ‘70s. Figure 2 shows five-year averages. In the early 1960s, 20.8% of teen violence offenders were under age 15, falling to 17.7% in 2005-08 (FBI, 2009). In 2008, both the percentage of teenage violent felons who were under age 15 (16%) and the ratio of 10-14 violent crime rates to those of age 10-19 (0.334) stood at their lowest levels in nearly half a century (FBI, 2009).

Figure 2

Change in violence arrests of 10-14 year-olds compared to all teens, 1960-2008



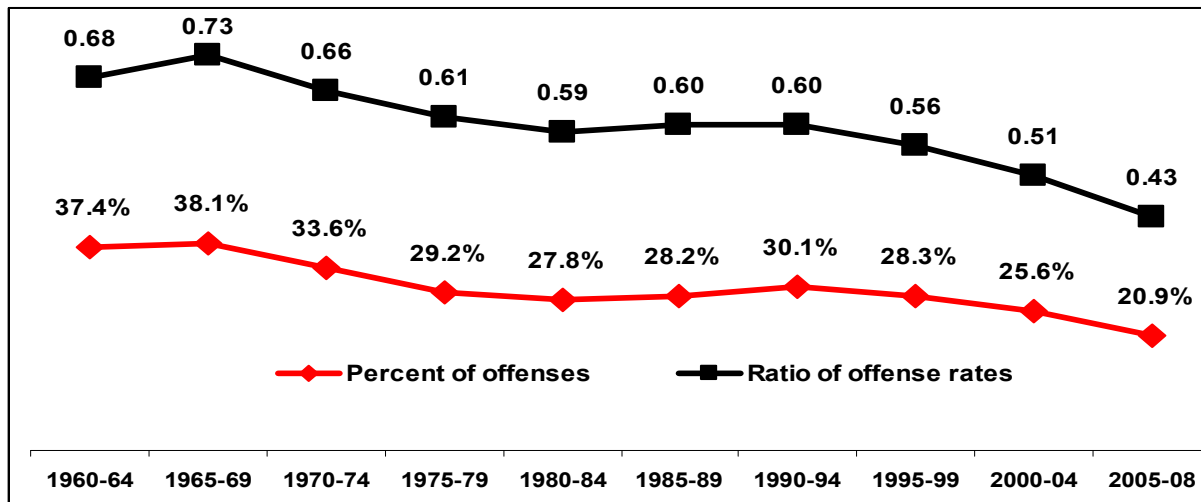
Source: FBI (2009)

The violent crime pattern is slightly more complex than for murder, given changes in laws and enforcement (particularly post-1980 trends to make criminal arrests for domestic and school assaults that formerly were handled as informal discipline or status offenses) that have affected arrests independently of actual crime trends. From its 1966 peak to 1980, the age of teen

violence offenders dropped sharply, followed by an increase through 2000, and then followed by another sharp decline (FBI, 2009).

All major felonies. The FBI defines eight serious felonies (the four violent felonies plus four property crimes: burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson) as Part I offenses, the “index” of major crime. Figure 3 shows the most dramatic pattern of all: the rapid decline in teenage Part I offenders. In the peak year of 1962, 39.4% of all teenage Part I felons were under age 15; in the record-low year, 2008, just 18.4% (FBI, 2009).

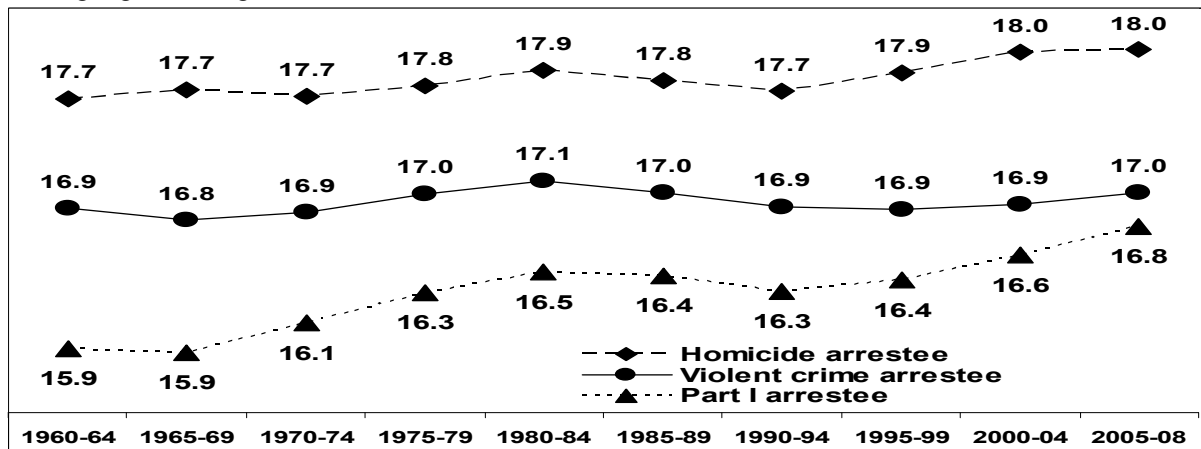
Figure 3
Change in index arrests of 10-14 year-olds compared to all teens, 1960-2008



Source: FBI (2009)

Average ages of teenage arrestees over time. Figure 4 shows that teenagers arrested for murder tend to be about four months older, violent crime arrestees two months older, and Part I offenders 11 months older today than they were in the 1960s. Teen criminals generally are older now than ever before (FBI, 2009).

Figure 4
Average age of teenagers arrested for homicide, violent, and Part I felonies, 1960-2008



Source: FBI (2009)

Table 1
Arrest rates by offense and age group, 1965-2008

Homicide Arrests per 100,000 population by age group, 5-year averages										
<u>Years</u>	<u><13</u>	<u>13-14</u>	<u>15-17</u>	<u>18-24</u>	<u>25-34</u>	<u>35-44</u>	<u>45-54</u>	<u>55-64</u>	<u>65+</u>	<u>All ages</u>
1965-69	0.51	2.22	11.70	24.10	19.30	12.30	7.50	4.20	2.10	10.77
1970-74	0.61	3.21	16.70	30.80	23.40	14.50	8.10	4.40	2.10	13.59
1975-79	0.51	2.65	13.80	25.60	18.70	12.00	6.80	3.40	1.60	11.53
1980-84	0.34	2.31	13.30	23.80	17.30	10.40	5.70	2.80	1.20	10.63
1985-89	0.38	3.16	16.30	24.90	15.20	8.70	4.60	2.30	1.00	9.92
1990-94	0.37	5.22	30.80	36.20	14.20	7.20	3.90	1.80	0.80	11.07
1995-99	0.39	3.19	19.00	30.40	11.30	5.50	2.80	1.50	0.60	8.27
2000-04	0.18	1.46	9.00	19.70	8.90	4.30	2.30	1.10	0.40	5.59
2005-08	0.10	1.30	9.10	18.40	9.00	4.00	2.20	1.00	0.40	5.33
Change in homicide arrest rates, 2005-08 vs.:										
1965-69	-81%	-41%	-22%	-23%	-53%	-67%	-71%	-75%	-80%	-51%
1970-74	-84%	-59%	-46%	-40%	-61%	-72%	-73%	-76%	-81%	-61%
1990-94	-74%	-75%	-70%	-49%	-36%	-44%	-44%	-44%	-47%	-52%
2000-04	-48%	-11%	+1%	-7%	+1%	-6%	-3%	-4%	-6%	-5%
Violent crime										
1965-69	52.3	157.9	333.1	395.3	257.6	140.4	69.9	31.9	11.8	163.7
1970-74	63.8	226.0	497.7	546.2	327.2	178.7	85.9	37.7	14.5	227.4
1975-79	62.6	236.4	551.7	565.7	331.9	187.9	92.2	40.1	14.7	244.0
1980-84	60.4	239.9	571.2	609.1	372.1	197.8	97.9	41.6	14.1	260.1
1985-89	72.1	275.1	594.0	652.6	449.8	224.7	105.6	43.6	14.2	283.4
1990-94	95.8	422.5	919.6	856.0	556.7	284.9	121.8	49.6	16.0	354.4
1995-99	93.2	367.8	767.5	785.8	504.9	313.9	127.8	51.0	16.1	322.6
2000-04	71.5	266.8	523.7	630.5	400.3	275.2	122.3	43.8	13.3	254.8
2005-08	53.1	253.3	541.8	598.3	376.4	246.4	132.1	43.9	12.5	239.1
Change in violent crime arrest rates, 2005-08 vs.:										
1965-69	+1%	+60%	+63%	+51%	+46%	+76%	+89%	+37%	+7%	+46%
1970-74	-17%	+12%	+9%	+10%	+15%	+38%	+54%	+16%	-13%	+5%
1990-94	-45%	-40%	-41%	-30%	-32%	-14%	+8%	-12%	-22%	-33%
2000-04	-26%	-5%	+3%	-5%	-6%	-10%	+8%	0%	-6%	-6%
Index crime										
1965-69	1,053.2	2,395.7	3,231.9	1,645.1	743.9	384.0	200.4	100.6	39.9	861.8
1970-74	1,110.1	2,801.3	4,076.8	2,275.3	957.7	485.7	250.3	127.1	55.2	1,125.6
1975-79	1,119.6	2,897.1	4,524.1	2,534.0	1,078.8	554.5	298.8	154.0	70.1	1,239.7
1980-84	1,041.7	2,674.8	4,276.2	2,728.7	1,338.8	669.7	364.1	192.8	85.7	1,267.0
1985-89	1,099.1	2,874.9	4,366.9	2,878.3	1,605.5	806.0	381.1	190.7	82.8	1,319.6
1990-94	1,045.3	3,341.2	4,994.6	3,016.4	1,760.8	958.0	402.9	182.0	78.2	1,383.2
1995-99	828.5	2,727.3	4,242.1	2,695.7	1,492.5	968.3	390.3	148.9	53.9	1,191.5
2000-04	507.4	1,800.4	3,028.0	2,267.8	1,172.2	852.6	384.0	128.6	38.1	933.6
2005-08	323.8	1,467.7	2,790.6	2,186.4	1,161.8	827.2	450.3	141.2	36.8	884.1
Change in index crime arrest rates, 2005-08 vs.:										
1965-69	-69%	-39%	-14%	+33%	+56%	+115%	+125%	+40%	-8%	+3%
1970-74	-71%	-48%	-32%	-4%	+21%	+70%	+80%	+11%	-33%	-21%
1990-94	-69%	-56%	-44%	-28%	-34%	-14%	+12%	-22%	-53%	-36%
2000-04	-36%	-18%	-8%	-4%	-1%	-3%	+17%	+10%	-3%	-5%

Sources: FBI (2009); U.S. Census Bureau (2009a,b). Populations for calculating rates for <13 is 10-12; for 65+, 65-84.

Comparison with adult age groups

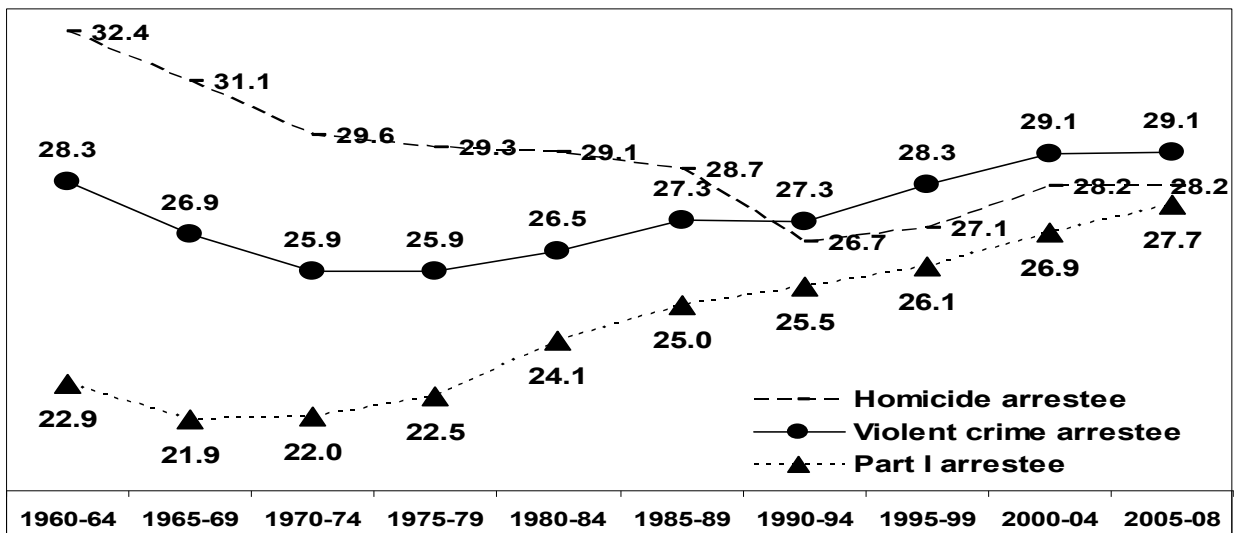
Table 1 compares teenage arrestees by more detailed age with adult arrestees for the period for which such age figures are available (1965-2008) (FBI, 2009). The results are consistent: the youngest age (12 and younger) shows the largest decline in murder and index felony arrest rates, and the smallest increase in violence arrest rates, of any age group and for every time period.

Violent crime arrests rose among all ages over the 43-year period, with the largest increases in the 45-54, 35-44, and 15-17 age groups. Note that there are temporary periods in which certain crimes among younger ages rose faster than among older ages such as 1965-69 and 1985-94, while others show increases among older ages relative to younger ones, such as 1975-84 and 1995 to the present. One can see that Baby Boomers have shown the largest increases in violent crime rates throughout their lifespans, as teens in the '60s, young adults in the '70s, and now as middle-agers. Further, juvenile arrest increases during the 1960s and early '70s were boosted by policy shifts away from charging vague status offenses and toward charging specific crimes, and the 1980s increases for all ages were influenced by greater policing of domestic violence.

The decline in younger ages' Part I felonies over the last four decades is remarkable, given the increases among middle-aged adults. For example, in the late 1960s, a 10 to 12 year-old youth was five times more likely to be arrested for a Part I felony than a 45-54 year-old; today, the middle-aged felony rate exceeds that of the youngest teens.

Figure 5

Average age (all ages) of murder, violence, and Part I felony arrestees, 1960-2008



Source: FBI (2009)

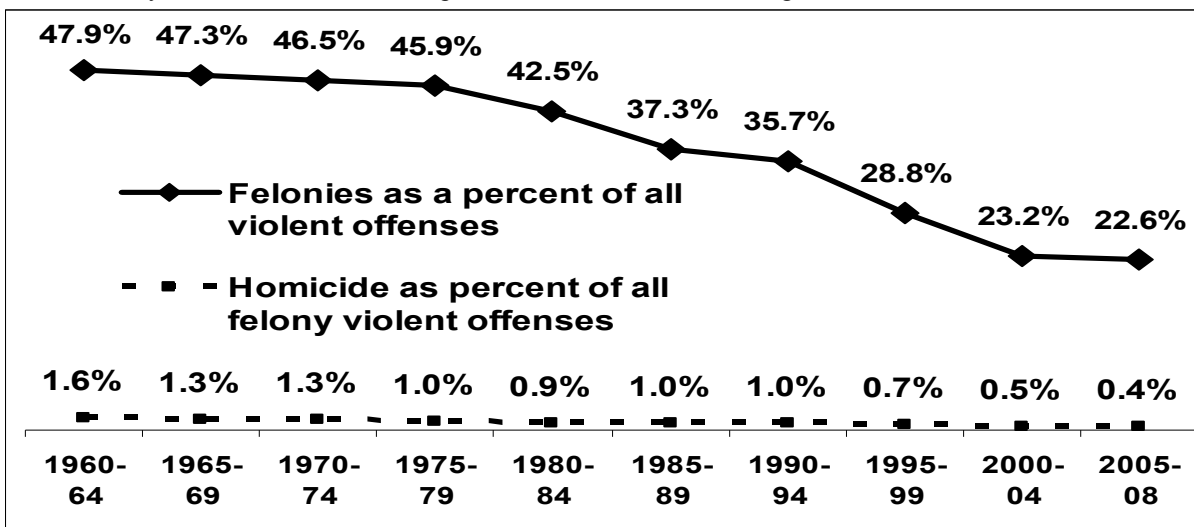
Figure 5 pinpoints the changes in the average ages of arrestees over the last half-century. The notion that when all ages are considered, murder arrestees have become younger is supported, but with two important caveats. First, the drop in the average age of homicide arrestees is not recent, but took place from 1960 to the early-1990s, then increased over the last decade and a half by nearly two years. Second, it was not the youngest teens, but older teens and young adults age 16-29, that caused this age decline. Third, the younger ages of murder arrestees involved a

worsening in behavior by a couple of hundred young people in a population of 40 million aged 15-24 who were concentrated in local areas of high poverty and economic distress (FBI, 2009).

That greater violence and criminality is not a generational trend is shown by the fact that violent crime arrestees are no older today than they were a half-century ago. Violent felony arrestees, averaging 26.9 years old in the 1970s, have since risen steadily by three years and now average over 29 years old (FBI, 2009). This trend matches the overall aging of the population from 1965 to 1990. Further, of greatest importance from a generational standpoint, the huge decline in serious Part I felonies among the young relative to the old means that the average age of Part I felons has risen nearly six years, from 21.9 in the late 1960s to 27.7 today—that is, the felon population has aged twice as fast as the population as a whole (FBI, 2009). This aging of the serious felon population involves improvements in behavior by hundreds of thousands of young people even as middle-aged felony crimes (reflected in rising imprisonment as well) worsened.

Is juvenile crime becoming more serious? Figure 6 shows that young-juvenile violence arrests have become less serious over time. In the early 1960s, nearly half of violent crime arrests of youths under age 15 were for felonies, and 1.6% of felony violence arrests were for murder. By the 2000s, felonies comprised less than one-fourth of young-teen violence arrests, and murder just 4 in 1,000 felony violence arrests (FBI, 2009). The average violence arrest among youths today is for a misdemeanor such as simple assault. Again, this may be due to trends toward charging youths with specific offenses rather than the vaguer “status offense” or “delinquent tendencies” of the pre-1970 era, and the greater policing of domestic violence, which boosted misdemeanor assault for all age groups.

Figure 6
Serious felony violence and murder as a percent of all violence arrests, age <15



Source: FBI (2009)

Conclusion

Several major trends are evident in younger teens' violent crime:

- Over the last 40 to 50 years, the average American violent offender—including the average teenage offender—has become older, not younger.
- Teenage violent offenses have become considerably less serious—that is, more likely to be misdemeanors than felonies and to involve lesser violence rather than murder—over the last half century.
- The average younger teen today is much less likely to be a murderer or other serious criminal offender, both in absolute rate and in comparison to older teens and older adults, than the average younger teen of the 1960s, '70s, '80s, or '90s—with an especially impressive drop over the last 10 to 15 years.
- The falling age of all murder arrestees is not recent, but occurred from the 1960s to the early 1990s. Meanwhile, violent offenders have aged steadily for three decades and serious, Part I, offenders have been aging since 1968.

These facts are diametrically the *opposite* of those presented in news reports and by interest groups. The typical news stories cited above indicate why interest groups use isolated local cases as a springboard to depict general surges in younger-teen violence and crime. Major interest groups—police and law enforcement agencies seeking more funding and personnel, nonprofit groups promoting their projects, academic researchers pursuing grants, and news media seeking higher ratings, often benefit from perceptions of a growing youth crime crisis. There also is a plausible psychological benefit that adults derive from branding modern young people more violent at younger ages, which means older folks are more moral, less criminal, and better citizens by contrast.

The losers in the mythical image of youth ever-more violent at ever-younger ages are young people themselves who, lacking the power to compete in media and interest-group forums, become objects of irrational fear, and suffer crackdowns, banishings, and harsher punishments from being labeled a dangerous demographic. Public policy suffers when crime policies are misdirected toward mythical crises rather than addressing real ones. It is time to end the century of demographic scapegoating and to afford young people the ethics of accuracy and fairness applied to adults and adult groups.

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Mr. Macallair's research and publications have appeared in such journals as the *Stanford Law and Policy Review*, *Journal of Crime and Delinquency*, *Youth and Society*, *Journal of Juvenile Law and Policy*, and the *Western Criminology Review*. His studies and commentary are often cited in national news outlets. Mr. Macallair recently edited a book on juvenile justice reform and co-authored two recent studies on the California youth corrections system. He teaches in the Department of Criminal Justice Studies at San Francisco State University and is an invited speaker and trainer at conferences and seminars throughout the country.

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