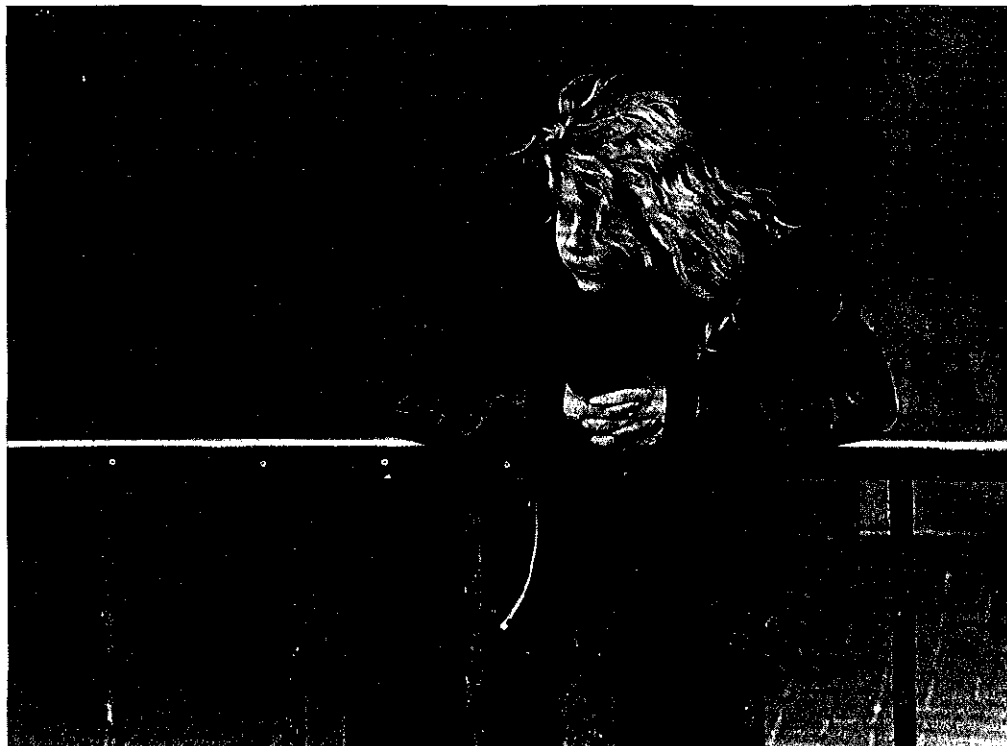


# Is San Francisco **SOFT ON JUVENILE CRIME?**



## **REALITY vs. MYTH**

A report by:  
Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth,  
the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, and  
the Criminal Justice Program at San Francisco State University  
December, 1996

## **IS SAN FRANCISCO'S JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM TOO LENIENT? CONFRONTING REALITY ABOUT YOUTH CRIME**

### **Summary**

This study examines the realities and myths of present juvenile crime control policies in San Francisco. Because of San Francisco's small per capita youth population, some have used statistics based on our total population to suggest that we arrest and detain comparatively few children. Our own analysis, based on youth population figures for the eight highest juvenile crime counties, shows the exact opposite to be true.

San Francisco ranks second highest among the eight counties in the number of juvenile arrests per 1,000 youth population -- our rate is about double that of Los Angeles and Alameda. Once a child is arrested, juvenile probation authorities may choose to detain him/her in secure custody, or employ other arrangements to assure that court appearances are kept and that no more criminal behavior ensues. Of the eight counties, San Francisco has the highest rate of secure detention -- 70 percent of those arrest, which is over twice the rate of Los Angeles and over three times the rate of Santa Clara.

These facts show that high arrest and detention rates do not prevent juvenile crime. Tolerant, benign San Francisco has one police officer for every 18 children (three times the rate of Los Angeles) but only one school counselor for every 500 high school students. Given the fact that most youth involved in the criminal justice system come from poor families and are in need of a broad range of services, San Francisco's focus on detention as the primary mode of intervention must be reconsidered.

### **Background**

The future of San Francisco's juvenile justice system is once again the subject of intense debate. The debate reflects a historic struggle between those who believe that arrest and detention should continue to be the primary response to youth crime and those who believe that the system should be restructured to provide a broad continuum of rehabilitative interventions. Over the next few months decisions determining the future of juvenile justice policy in San Francisco will be made. It is essential that these decisions be based on objective information about the effectiveness of the City's current approach to youth crime.

A review of recent reports and media accounts about juvenile crime in San Francisco reveals several common assumptions:

- ▶ San Francisco's juvenile crime rate is higher than most other counties because of the under utilization of detention in comparison to those counties.
- ▶ The City's stated desire to emphasize rehabilitation rather than strict law enforcement measures has resulted in less vigorous police intervention.

- ▶ San Francisco's juvenile crime rate is growing and will continue to grow unless stricter measures are taken.

These popular conceptions presently dominate the debate over juvenile crime policy throughout the country. In San Francisco, this debate has raged for over three decades. Despite years of public outcry, media exposes, and expert reports on the failure of the city's juvenile justice system, the system remains unchanged and unaccountable for its outcomes.

The proponents of increased arrest and detention of youth believe that San Francisco has been "coddling young thugs" in a misguided and naive attempt to rehabilitate, rather than punish, already hardened young offenders. The strength of, and institutional support for, this position is reflected in the City's fiscal policy. The funds spent on the public protection agencies comprise over 25% of San Francisco's budget. In the past five years alone, the public safety budget has increased by \$400 million.

Now is the time for San Francisco to adopt a vision of the future and establish a positive direction for the city's juvenile justice system. It is imperative that the city develop policies and programs addressing juvenile crime that really work. What is at stake is not only public safety, but the lives of the 4000 youngsters annually referred to the Juvenile Court, the fiscal well-being of the city, and the well-being of all the city's youth.

### Methodology

To understand San Francisco's approach to juvenile crime, we compared the eight California counties with the highest levels of serious youth crime. Specifically, we looked at the number of youths subject to arrest and detention in Alameda, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Diego, San Joaquin, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and San Francisco Counties.

To determine relative capacity for law enforcement intervention, the number of sworn peace officers was compared to county youth populations. Data on county juvenile arrest rates, sworn peace officers, and youth populations was obtained from the Bureau of Criminal Statistics of the California Department of Justice in its annual California Crime profile. Detention rates were obtained from individual county probation departments through phone interviews or annual department reports.

A literature review of recent reports on the state of juvenile crime and its causes in San Francisco was also conducted.

### Results

Contrary to public perception, the data reveals that San Francisco has the highest detention rate by far of any of the eight counties studied. In fact, San Francisco's ratio of 61 detentions per 1000 youths is twice the eight county average of 32 detentions per 1000 youths (**Table 1**). A further review of the data shows:

- ▶ San Francisco detention rates are almost 15% higher than Alameda County, the county with the next highest rate.
- ▶ San Francisco detention rates are more than **triple** San Diego's rate and **four times** Los Angeles' rate.

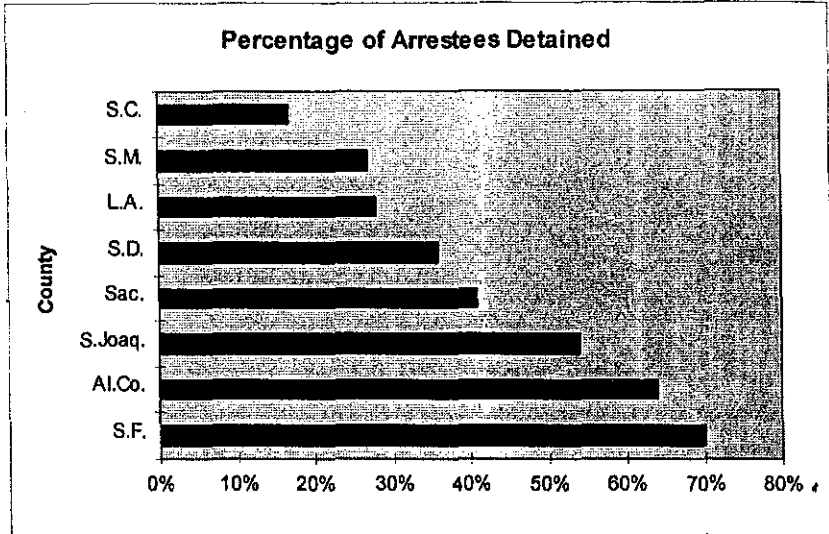


TABLE 1

Moreover, contrary to popular speculation, San Francisco detains youths at levels unprecedented in any other major county in California. This means a youth in San Francisco is more likely to be detained following arrest than in any of the counties studied. This statistic is even more extraordinary since California's juvenile detention rates are the highest in the country.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that a youth in San Francisco is more likely to be detained following arrest than in most other jurisdictions in the country.

In regard to police interventions as measured by arrest rates, San Francisco had the second highest juvenile arrest rate at 86 per 1000. In addition to arrest, San Francisco youth are detained at inordinately high rates. In contrast to what might be expected, high *detention* rates do not necessarily follow, and indeed are often antithetical to, high arrest rates. For example, Santa Clara County which has the highest arrest rate in the state (95 per 1000 -See **Table 2**) detains only one youth for every six arrested.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, San Francisco detains one youth for every 1.4 arrested. It appears that San Francisco youth are subject to arrest and detention at higher levels than any other county.

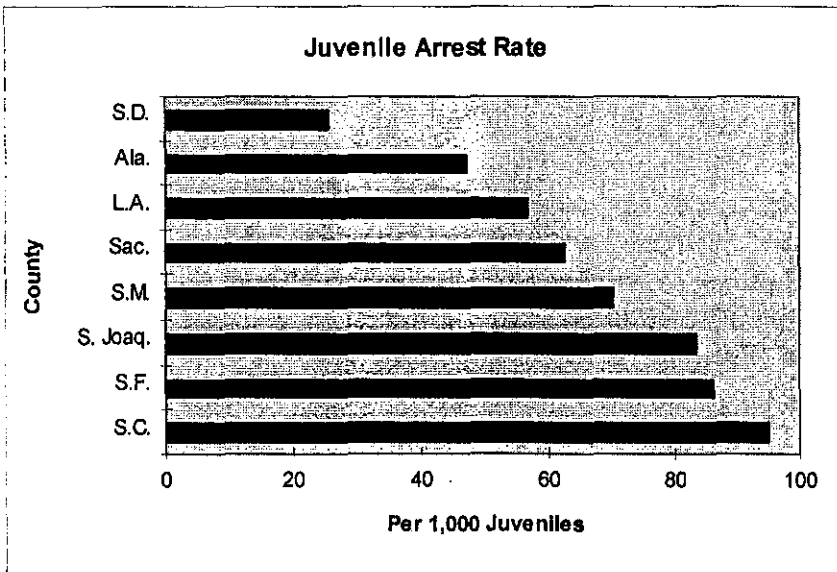


TABLE 2

Our final inquiry examined the relative capacity for law enforcement intervention by comparing the county youth population to the number of sworn peace officers. Presently, San Francisco, with just 18 youths per sworn peace officer, has more peace officers relative to its juvenile population, than any other county. The county with the next closest ratio is Sacramento, with 50 youths for every sworn peace officer (see **Table 3**, next page) San Francisco's high ratio of officers

Comparison of Peace Officers by County

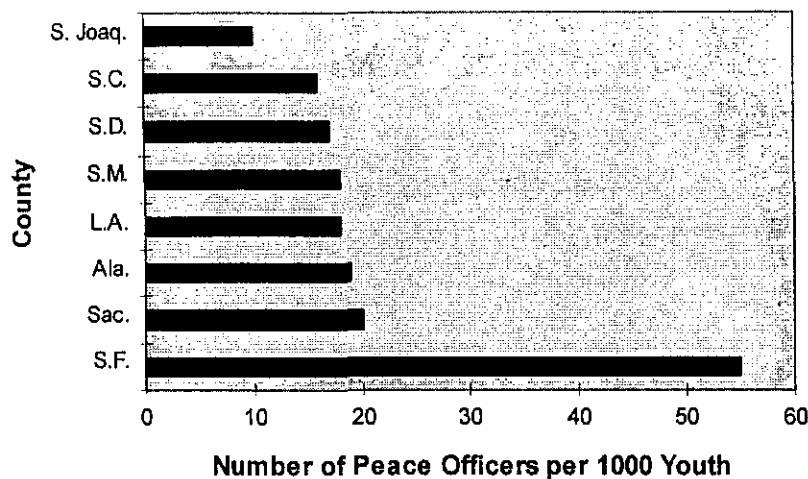


TABLE 3

to youth translates into greater scrutiny and monitoring of the City's youth population, and far more police contact with youth than occurs in other counties.

### Implications

The results of this study contradict many of the popular assumptions perpetuated by the media, which fuel the debate over juvenile justice policy in San Francisco. In response to the misguided conventional wisdom that the system is too lenient, San Francisco has utilized the arrest-detention approach to juvenile crime control more widely than any other jurisdiction. This is partially attributed

to its historically small youth population and relatively large number of police officers.

In his 1995 nationally acclaimed book, *The Scapegoat Generation*, Mike Males concludes that the rising level of violent juvenile crime is directly attributed to the rise of youth poverty. Violent crime follows poverty and the current rise in youth violence mirrors similar rises in adult violent crime when economic status is considered.

According to Males,

*There is no discernible difference in violence between adolescents and the adults of the age groups who are raising them. Teenagers do not respond to poverty more or less violently than do grown-ups; teenagers just experience more poverty. Once the poverty factor is removed, "teen violence" disappears, and with it all the agonized why-why-why saturating the media and political landscape (usually fanned by experts who should know better) whenever the cameras roll another teen murder scene.*

In light of new federal welfare policies that will disproportionately impact youth and result in the loss of millions of dollars in benefits to San Francisco's neediest families, the relationship between poverty and crime must be taken into account when developing an effective juvenile justice system.

With San Francisco's juvenile justice system focused on arrest and detention, the allocation of resources has been skewed and innovation has been stifled. Evidence of the problem is the fact that the ratio of peace officers to youth is 1:18, while the ratio of high school counselors to youth is a mere 1:500. Efforts to implement potentially more effective approaches -- approaches that ad-

dress the underlying problem of poverty -- have been limited and frequently aborted. Juvenile Probation supervision most frequently involves little more than a monthly office visit with a probation officer. Community follow-up and support services are almost non-existent.

Two major "solutions" offered by the proponents of the arrest-detention approach— increasing the size of the Juvenile Hall, and increasing the detention of first-time offenders— would not solve the problem. Of the approximately 3,000 youths detained in San Francisco's Youth Guidance Center (YGC) on a yearly basis, 85% are released within three weeks. The present average length of stay is 12 days. Doubling the capacity of the YGC would only allow an increase of detention stays to an average of 24 days after which the vast majority of youths are returned to their community. Of the first-time offenders brought into the system, 70% will not return - even if the system does nothing to follow up.

**Recommendations**

It is imperative that the city develop policies and programs addressing juvenile crime that really work. What is at stake is not only public safety, and the fiscal well-being of the city, but the lives of the 4000 youngsters referred annually to the Juvenile Court, and the well-being of all youth. The public's fear of juvenile crime has a chilling effect on the way youth are treated in every community. In recent months, for instance, neighborhoods have opposed such potentially beneficial activities as skateboarding and wrestling, activities designed to offer youngsters positive alternatives to crime and the streets. Rather than support these programs, communities have mounted vigorous opposition because their concern about juvenile crime has led to hostility toward and fear of teenagers in general. This situation merely compounds and exacerbates the problem of juvenile crime, leaving the city caught in a vicious circle from which it is very hard to escape.

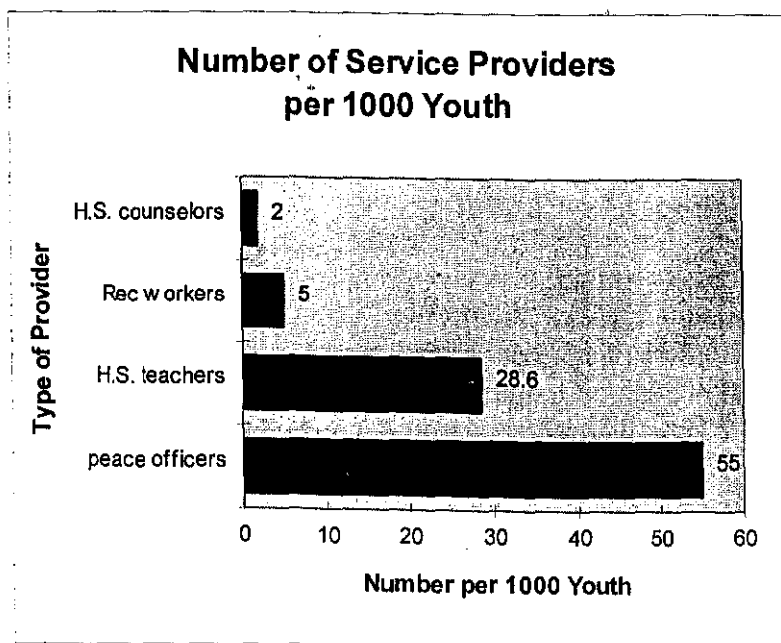


TABLE 3

**1. Expand the social safety net to raise San Francisco's 25,000 impoverished youth above the poverty level**

Most serious youth violence occurs where there is high unemployment and poverty. Programs designed to raise families out of poverty while allowing parents to care properly for their children offer the best defense against youth violence. In addition to increasing the availability of jobs that can support families and income supports when employment is not feasible, child care and health care must also be accessible to all San Francisco children and youth. While increasing the social

safety net requires a major reordering of city priorities, San Francisco's progressive political climate offers a unique opportunity to break with conventional national trends. The fight against child poverty is the primary protection against youth violence.

## **2. Continue to expand after-school resources for youth**

There is a severe shortage of after school recreational, cultural and educational opportunities for San Francisco's youth. While some progress has been made, the City should continue expanding facilities and programs, so that there are activities for youth in every neighborhood. These programs should include Beacon Schools, where school facilities remain open late into the evening, acting as neighborhood centers with a variety of activities. Also needed are expanded Recreation and Park facilities, employment training, tutoring, and leadership development.

## **3. Appoint a new generation of leadership at the Youth Guidance Center**

San Francisco's juvenile justice system has a long record of mismanagement, incompetence, and lethargy. If the system is to become a national model capable of addressing the multiple needs of a diverse population, new dynamic leadership must be appointed with the knowledge, determination, and skills necessary to overcome the resistance inherent to organizational change.

## **4. Implement the Jefferson Report recommendations for restructuring the Juvenile Probation Department**

In 1987, the City of San Francisco commissioned a comprehensive study of the juvenile justice system. Researchers asserted that San Francisco must expand the range of quality services for youths by reducing its emphasis on short-term detention. The recommendations were adopted by the Board of Supervisors and the Mayor as the desired direction of the City's juvenile justice system. However, in the nine years since the report was published, little progress has been made in adopting these changes even though the recommendations contained in the report were based on policies and programs successfully implemented in other jurisdictions.

## **5. Redirect more of the efforts of police officers to diversion and community policing**

It is clear from the data that much of the focus of the San Francisco Police Department is on arrest when dealing with youth. Police officers are ideally positioned to provide intervention that focuses more on prevention and linking youth with appropriate community services. While police officers currently have the authority to divert youth, a formal, beefed-up diversion program would assure that officers use tools other than arrest with greater frequency. Twenty years ago, a police diversion program was particularly successful in preventing juvenile crime in San Francisco. This program should be reinstated on a large scale.

## **6. Establish a continuum of quality community-based programs capable of providing comprehensive services to high risk-delinquent youths**

The expansion of community-based services has been resisted by probation department staff, despite the absence of adequate services for youth probationers. This resistance has impaired the development of comprehensive programs that have proven effective in other jurisdictions. Specific services that are needed include day treatment, intensive tracking and monitoring, temporary shelter care, experiential stress/challenge program, and specialized secure treatment.

**Conclusion**

The premise that a high level of police intervention and detention deters juvenile crime has been thoroughly tested in San Francisco, without positive results. A reconsideration of present policies and expenditures is necessary, particularly in light of recent changes in Federal welfare law that will significantly increase the number of impoverished children and youth. New approaches should focus on reducing poverty, providing alternatives to the streets, and expanding and improving the continuum of rehabilitative programs available to youth.

The City's failure to realize any benefits from its historical approach should be examined by other jurisdictions contemplating similar policies. Given the experience of San Francisco, national reconsideration of crime reduction policies must be considered.

<sup>1</sup> Data on national detention rates can be gathered from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

<sup>2</sup> The Santa Clara County rates are likely related to its recent curfew law that has resulted in a dramatic increase in juvenile arrests for minor offenses.

---

**The Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice (CJCJ)** is a private non-profit organization established in 1985, whose mission is to reduce society's reliance on incarceration as a solution to social problems. CJCJ does this through the provision of programs to people facing imprisonment, education efforts about imprisonment and its effects, and technical assistance to groups wishing to establish and/or evaluate programs working with those facing imprisonment. CJCJ can be reached by calling (415) 621-5661, or writing to them at 1622 Folsom St., 2nd Floor, San Francisco, CA 94103.

**Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth** has been working to protect the health and welfare of San Francisco's children for 21 years. Our advocacy has led to expanded afterschool programs, increased services for homeless children, improvements in Juvenile Hall and the creation of jobs for youth. Coleman led the campaign to pass the landmark Children's Amendment, making San Francisco the first city in the country with a guarantee in its charter protecting funding for children. Coleman Advocates can be reached by calling (415) 641-4362, or writing to them at 2601 Mission St., Suite 804, San Francisco, CA 94110.



## References

- Nakao, Annie, New Program Gets Tough on Juvenile Crime, *San Francisco Examiner*, March 19, 1995.
- King, John, "S.F. Crime Policy for Juveniles Fails Massively: Hard-core offenders get off to easy, police report says." *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 1, 1993.
- Goldberg, Leslie, "Young S.F. thugs are coddled, cops say: Juvenile justice system is a mess with crime rate highest in the state, report asserts." *San Francisco Examiner*, April 30, 1996.
- Mullen, Kevin, "Youth crime flourishes in atmosphere of tolerance." *San Francisco Examiner*, May 8, 1996.
- Matier, Phillip, and Andy Ross, "Teenage Crime Wave in S.F. - Homicide Arrests Up 87%" *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 1, 1994.
- Hinkle, Pia. "Crime and Politics: San Francisco Kids Are The Victims As Politicians And The Press Get Tough On Crime." *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, February 2, 1994.
- Jefferies, Michael and Diarmuid Philpott. *Juvenile Crime and Adult Responsibility*. San Francisco Police Department. December 1992.
- Mayors Juvenile Justice Task Force. *Final Report*. San Francisco Mayor's Office. March 1994.
- Males, Michael. *The Scapegoat Generation*. .....(1996)
- Pertman, Adam. More States Getting Tough on Juveniles Offenders: Youths Being Tried in Adult Courts for Serious Crimes. *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 15, 1996.
- Walsh, Diana. Brown Targets City's Juvenile Justice System. *San Francisco Examiner*, March 27, 1996.
- Juvenile Justice System Badly Needs Reform. *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 16, 1996.
- Macallair, Dan. Juvenile Justice At Last?. *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, December 20, 1995.
- Macallair, Dan and Andrea Shorter. The City's Juvenile Injustice System, *San Francisco Examiner*, January 29, 1996.
- California Department of Justice. *Criminal Justice Profile, 1995: Santa Clara County*. State of California.
- California Department of Justice. *Criminal Justice Profile, 1995: San Diego*. State of California.
- California Department of Justice. *Criminal Justice Profile, 1995: Los Angeles*. State of California.
- California Department of Justice. *Criminal Justice Profile, 1995: San Joaquin*. State of California.
- California Department of Justice. *Criminal Justice Profile, 1995: San Mateo*. State of California.
- California Department of Justice. *Criminal Justice Profile, 1995: Sacramento*. State of California.
- California Department of Justice. *Criminal Justice Profile, 1995: Alameda*. State of California.
- California Department of Justice. *Criminal Justice Profile, 1995: San Francisco*. State of California.

The Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Wellness Foundation, Haigh-Scatena Foundation and Nathan M. Ohrbach Foundations. Coleman Advocates would also like to thank the Gap Foundation, the Irvine Foundation, the Butler Foundation and the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund for their support.