Youth Violence in Michigan
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Every day in Michigan ...

- 55 juveniles, ages 10-17, are arrested for an index crime*
- 9 juveniles, ages 10-17, are arrested for a violent index crime
- 10 children are placed in out-of-home care for delinquency
- 157 youth drop out of high school
- 1 youth, age 15-19, dies from an accident, homicide or suicide

Source: Kids Count in Michigan: 1999 Data Book (p. 19)

Michigan has approximately 10 million residents, with juveniles (ages 17 and younger) constituting more than 25% of the population [1]. Arrests of juveniles (ages 16 years and younger) numbered 33,000 in 1999, representing approximately 8% of the 400,000 total arrests for crimes committed in the state that year [2]. In Michigan, youth are arrested for index crimes (including murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson), more than 6,000 times each year [1].

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s 2000 Kids Count Data Sheet [3], Michigan ranks 23rd among U.S. states in rate of teenage deaths by accident, homicide, and suicide. As in other states, the adolescent death rate in Michigan has declined since 1993, but remains at 59 deaths per 100,000 teens each year—which means that more than 400 teens die in Michigan each year due to accident, homicide, or suicide.

Some of the state’s seven districts have reported decreases in certain crimes. However, both the 1st District (which includes Lansing) and the rural 7th District reported an increase in murder rate in 1999, and the 2nd District, which includes Detroit, reported an increase in aggravated assaults [2].

Youth Under the Jurisdiction of the Michigan Department of Corrections

Another indicator of the problem of youth violence in Michigan is the number of youth under the jurisdiction of the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC). Last July, 519 juveniles (defined as youth below the age of 18) were under the jurisdiction of MDOC.** Using data from MDOC’s Alpha Client Index Report, the Michigan Collaborative for Juvenile Justice Reform reported that, of those under the department’s jurisdiction:

- 97% were male
- 53% were African American youth, 40% were Caucasians, 5% were multi-racial, and 2% were classified as “other race”
- Average age at commitment was 17.03 (range = 14.02 – 17.99)
- Most came from urban counties: Kent (13%), Wayne 13%), Berrien (9%), Saginaw (6%), Genessee (6%), and Jackson (6%)

*According to the Kids Count in Michigan 1999 Data Book: “The Uniform Crime Reports of the Michigan State Police tabulates the number of arrests for eight index crimes: murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson. The first four are considered violent index offenses. The arrest count reflects numbers of arrests [rather than numbers of youth arrested]; repeated arrests of the same individual for different offenses are counted each time. Although in Michigan’s criminal justice system seventeen year-olds are not considered ‘juveniles,’ they are included in national statistics as juveniles. They are included here for comparability to national data. The rate is based on the number of index crime or violent index arrests per 1,000 children ages 10-17” (p. 215).

**Information reprinted with permission from the Michigan Collaborative for Juvenile Justice Reform, which prepared the document, “Youth Under the Jurisdiction of the Michigan Department of Corrections,” (unpublished), using data from MDOC’s Alpha Client Index Report.
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- 54% were convicted of property crimes, 38% for crimes against people, 4% for drug/narcotic offenses, and 4% for other felonies
- 48% were incarcerated at the Michigan Youth Correctional Facility in Baldwin and 39% at other Michigan correctional institutions or “boot camps,” while 8% were on parole through local field offices and 3% were being monitored electronically

Gang Activity

The Michigan Youth Gang Violence Task Force noted in its 1997 report that gangs exist in all 83 counties of the state, although it is difficult to quantify the extent of the problem [4]. Urban areas such as Detroit have notable gang activity [5]. Nationally, there is also increasing gang activity in suburbs and rural areas [6-8], and there is no reason to believe the trend is any different in Michigan.

School Violence

Although students are more likely to be victims of serious violent crime away from school than either at school or on the way to school [9], incidents of school violence generally attract a great deal of attention from the public and the media. The death of six-year-old Kayla Rowland in Genessee County last year bears testament to this fact.

Michigan, like many other states, has enacted policies calling for “zero-tolerance” with regard to school violence. These policies emanated from the federal Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994,* which obliges school districts to implement a policy “requiring referral to the criminal justice or juvenile delinquency system of any student who brings a firearm or weapon to a school served by such agency.” Under the Act, no funds are made available to any school district unless it has a policy requiring referral to the criminal justice or juvenile delinquency system of any student who brings a firearm or weapon to a school in that district. Michigan’s statute, however, is more stringent than federal law requires.

The Michigan “zero-tolerance” law** enacted in 1999 requires the expulsion of students for certain acts of weapons possession, as well as for physical or verbal abuse—terms whose definitions are open to interpretation. Michigan’s policies are resulting in greater numbers of expulsions, especially among minority students and students between the ages of 12 and 15. Many enter the criminal justice system through what may be referred to as the “expulsion pipeline.”

Michigan Citizens Are Calling for Prevention

In the last decade, groups in Michigan have been raising their voices to call for prevention and community action to reduce youth violence.

- One indication of citizen interest is provided by Michigan State University’s November 2000 conference, “Violence Prevention: What Works, What Doesn’t, What’s Promising,” which attracted more than

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**Michigan Compiled Laws, Annotated, section 380.1311.
300 participants from around the state. (For information from this conference, contact Dr. Lori Post at lapost@msu.edu).

- Interest in focusing on preventive strategies is provided by the action plan developed by the Michigan Collaborative for Juvenile Justice Reform (MCJJR) [11]. The plan emphasizes prevention-based policies as crucial to curtailting later delinquency and violence. Its 10 priorities include prenatal care, parenting education, quality child care, conflict resolution and student assistance programs in schools, and early intervention and rehabilitation of juvenile offenders including the three principal provisions of balanced and restorative justice (BARJ; see pages 16-17 of this Briefing Report for a description of BARJ) [11].

- Three years earlier, in its 1997 report, the Michigan Youth Gang Violence Task Force also recommended a list of prevention strategies including risk detection, health promotion, family support, positive alternative activities, education, employment, and community organization [4].


As these indicators suggest, violence prevention is an issue much on the minds of Michigan citizens.

Michigan’s Current Policies

Michigan has a generally decentralized juvenile justice system. Local courts help to organize delinquency services, supervise intake and probation, and contribute to the administration of community-based alternative services, non-secure and secure detention, and aftercare (National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) [13].

The state Committee on Juvenile Justice, organized in 1974, oversees and directs policy for the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Act in Michigan. It funds programs in diverse areas including aftercare/reintegration services, alternatives to jailing, community-based services, delinquency prevention, gender-specific services, juvenile-oriented community policing, minority over-representation, and native American pass-through. Committee members are appointed by the Governor. The committee functions as an independent body, although it is administratively connected to the Family Independence Agency (FIA) [13].

In 1996, the Michigan Legislature passed a juvenile justice reform package in response to widespread public sentiment that juveniles were becoming an increasing threat to citizens. The existing system had been designed to rehabilitate "wayward youth" who were committing offenses considered "less heinous." This legislation clarified the parameters for treating juveniles who commit more serious offenses, including "the more severe and lengthy penalties provided in the adult system" [14, pp. 1-4].

How Does Michigan Determine Youth Placement?

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In 1998 the Family Independence Agency (FIA) formally adopted Balanced and Restorative Justice, or BARJ, as the state's juvenile justice framework [13]. As described on page 17 of this report, a balanced approach is one that simultaneously considers three goals: (1) accountability to victim and community, (2) competency development of youth offenders, and (3) community safety [16].

Michigan’s juvenile justice program, as operated by the FIA, currently includes two of the three goals in OJJDP’s balanced approach: competency development and community safety. The Michigan Office of Juvenile Justice states:

   The Agency’s program directs delinquent youth through the continuum of treatment models and services determined to provide safe and proper care that is appropriate to the youths’ individual needs while taking into account community safety. The treatment models seek to provide youth and families with the knowledge and skills needed to reduce delinquency behaviors, promote appropriate attitudes and strengthen their capacity for self sufficiency to enable them to function responsibly in their . . . home communities and become contributing members of society safe placement and family reunification goals must always be balanced against the need for community safety and be based upon careful evaluation of the youth’s presenting circumstances [9].

What Else Can Michigan Do?

Michigan’s adoption of the BARJ approach is a good step toward overcoming the problem of youth violence in the state, but it is only a first step. Much work remains to be done. The programs described in this report provide policy options worthy of consideration.