

Chapter 3: Characteristics of Juvenile Offenders in Illinois

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The number of juveniles incarcerated in Illinois in 2005 was reported to be 1, 434. Of these:

- 92% were male
- 54% were black, 34% Caucasian, and 12% “other.”
- One percent of the juveniles serving time in 2005 had been convicted of murder
- Eleven percent were convicted of Class X felonies
- Offenses against property were most common among those incarcerated (39%)
- Offenses against persons accounted for 37% of those incarcerated
- Sex offenses for 12%
- Drug offenses for 10%
- Twenty-two percent of juveniles were housed in maximum security facilities
- Sixty-three percent were housed in high medium security facilities
- Eighty-three percent of the juveniles incarcerated were classified as delinquents
- Nine percent were incarcerated for court evaluation
- Six percent were classified as felons.

(Source: Illinois Department of Corrections, [IDOC], 2005).

Official profiles of juvenile offenders reflect only the characteristics of those who have been apprehended and officially processed (see Chapter 3). While they tell little or nothing about the characteristics of all juveniles who actually commit delinquent acts, they are useful in dealing with juveniles who have been officially processed. These official statistics currently lead us to some discomfiting conclusions about the nature of delinquency in America as it relates to social and physical factors.

As the data presented above indicate, there is no denying that black youth are disproportionately involved in official delinquency in Illinois. While there are still those who argue racial connections to such delinquency, the evidence that such behavior is a result of family, school, and neighborhood conditions, and perhaps the actions of juvenile justice practitioners, rather than genetics is overwhelming. Whatever the reasons for the high rates of delinquency, and especially violent offenses, in black neighborhoods, it behooves us all to address this issue with as many resources as possible in the interests both of those living in high crime areas and the larger society.

Similarly, it is apparent that males far outnumber females in official counts of delinquency. Neither race/ethnicity nor gender can be considered a direct cause of delinquency and it is important to remember that official statistics reflect only a small proportion of all delinquent activities. Profiles based on the characteristics discussed in this chapter are valuable to the extent that they alert us to a number of problem areas that must be addressed if we are to make progress in the battle against delinquency. Attempts to improve the quality of family life and the relevancy of education, and attempts to change discriminatory practices in terms of social class, race, and gender are clearly desirable.

Review Questions

1. How do the images of juvenile delinquents based upon official data in Illinois compare to nationwide images?
2. What do the official data from Illinois tell us about the actual incidence of juvenile delinquency in the state?
3. Can race/ethnicity or gender be considered certain causes of delinquency?
4. Which is the most common among juveniles incarcerated in Illinois- offenses against property or against persons?
5. Are most incarcerated juveniles in Illinois felons?