

Chapter 3. Characteristics of Juvenile Offenders in Texas

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Introduction

Cox, Conrad, Allen and Hanser (2007) discuss the multiple factors involved in determining involvement in delinquency. Most risk-factors fall into two types, social or physical. This chapter will use these types of characteristics to provide a general description of juvenile offenders in Texas. It is important to keep in mind that the data used to derive these generalities are official data and do not include information on juveniles who engage in delinquent behavior, but are not brought to the attention of the juvenile justice system. All readers should be aware of this unknown or sometime called “dark figure of justice” when reviewing juvenile offender characteristics. Interestingly, offenders and victims often share very similar characteristics (Lauritsen, Sampson, and Laub, 1991; Peterson, et al., 2004).

Social Factors

There are multiple social factors in a juvenile’s life that affect his/her chances of becoming involved in delinquent activities. This section will examine several of these social factors in a juvenile’s life including; family, education, social class, gangs, and drugs.

Family

Research has consistently shown that a juvenile’s family setting is one of the most influential factors in the juvenile’s life (Hawkins, Herrenkohl, Farrington, Brewer, Catalano, and Harachi, 1998). A common finding among research has been that children from “broken homes” or single parent homes are more likely to become involved in delinquent behaviors. As Table 3.1 indicates, 77% of the new commitments to TYC custody in 2006 came from homes in which their parents were never married, were divorced, or were separated.

Table 3.1

Parental Status of Texas Youth Commission Youth, 2006

Parents Marital Status	#	%
Parents never married	1008	39%
Parents still married	458	18%
Parents divorced	818	32%
Parents separated	148	6%
Mother deceased	39	2%
Father deceased	113	4%

Source: Texas Youth Commission
www.tyc.state.tx.us.

The environment within a juvenile’s home also has an important affect on his/her behavior. The family environment can include things like how well a juvenile and his/her parents get along or how well a juvenile’s parents get along with each other. TYC (2007) reported that

in 2006, 36% of the new commitments had a history of being abused or neglected. TYC (2007) also reports that 74% of the juveniles in its custody come from “chaotic environments”.

Education

Another social factor that plays an important role in a juvenile’s life is education. Research has shown that juvenile’s who are not committed to school are more likely to become involved in delinquent behaviors (Hawkins, et al., 1998) .

According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) there were 4,521,043 students enrolled in the Texas public school system during the 2005-06 school year, which was a 19% increase from enrollment for the 1995-96 school year. When looking at the change in enrollment by racial/ethnic groups over the same ten year period of time, enrollment for Hispanic students increased 46.5%, while enrollment for White students decreased 6%. During the 2005-06 school year Hispanic students were the largest group, comprising 45.3% of the students enrolled in Texas public schools. White students were the second largest group (36.5%) followed by African American students (14.7%). Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American groups made up the two smallest groups, with 3.1% and 0.3% respectively (TEA, 2007).

The TEA (2006) reported that the overall graduation rate for the class of 2005 was 84.0%. However, looking at the graduation rates by racial/ethnic groups, TEA (2006) reported that graduation rates ranged from 92.7% for Asian/Pacific Islander students to 77.4% for Hispanic students. The graduation rates for White, Native American, and African American students were 89.5%, 84.3%, and 81.7%, respectively.

When looking specifically at drop out rates for Texas students in grades 7 through 12, the TEA (2006) reports that for the 2004-05 school year the drop out rate for White students was 0.5%. The drop out rate for African American students was 1.2%, more than double the rate of White students. Hispanic students had the highest drop out rate of 1.4%, which is almost three times that of White students (TEA, 2006).

While the total student enrollment increased 19% over a decade, the number of students enrolled in Limited English Proficient (LEP) classes increased 48.3%. For the 2005-06 school year 15.7% of students in Texas public schools were enrolled in LEP classes (TEA, 2007). This language barrier may make it harder for students in LEP classes to become committed to school and may help to explain the higher drop out rates for Hispanic students.

The TYC (2007) provides some data about the educational level of juveniles committed to its custody in 2006. The median reading level among juveniles committed to TYC in 2006 was a 6th grade level, which is four years behind their peers. The math level was a 5th grade level, which is five years behind their peers (TYC, 2007).

Forty percent of the juveniles committed to TYC in 2006 were eligible for special education services (TYC, 2007); while in the Texas public school system only 11.3% of students were enrolled in special education services (TEA, 2007). Eighty-three percent of the new commitments to TYC in 2006 had an IQ below 100 (TYC, 2007).

According to TYC (2007) for 53% of the commitments in 2006 the last grade that they had completed was 8th. Only seven percent of the commitments to TYC in 2006 had completed the 10th grade or higher.

Social Class

Research has shown a relationship between social class and juvenile delinquency. Farnworth, Thornberry, Krohn, and Lizotte (1994) used data from the Rochester Youth Development Study to test the relationship between social class and juvenile delinquency.

Farnworth and colleagues divided delinquency into three categories; general delinquency, common delinquency, and street crimes. Their category of general delinquency included all types of delinquent acts, while common delinquency consisted of less serious delinquent behaviors, and street crimes referred to more serious delinquent acts. They found a stronger relationship between street crimes and social class than between the less serious categories of delinquent acts and social class (Farnworth, et al., 1994). However, Farnworth and colleagues (1994) do note that official delinquency data is more likely to show a relationship between social class and juvenile delinquency than self reported data.

The TYC provides limited data on the social class of juveniles who are committed to its custody. In 2006, 60% of the new commitments were from low-income homes (TYC, 2007). Juveniles from low-income families are overrepresented in the Texas juvenile justice system, as the TEA reported that 55.5% of the students enrolled in 2005-06 were from economically disadvantaged families (TEA, 2007). According to the TEA students are classified as economically disadvantaged if they are eligible for free or reduced price meals, if their families are eligible for other types of public assistance, or if the income for the family is at or below than the poverty level set by the federal government (TEA, 2007).

Gangs

Gangs will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 12. For now it is important to know gang involvement is one of the social factors which is strongly related to juvenile delinquent behavior. Gang membership is associated not only with delinquent behavior, but with victimization as well. Peterson, Taylor, and Esbensen (2004) found that the most common reason juveniles give for joining a gang is for protection. However, they also found that contrary to the beliefs of many juveniles, the victimization rates were not lower for individuals who joined a gang. In fact, juveniles involved in a gang reported a higher rate of victimization (Peterson, et al., 2004).

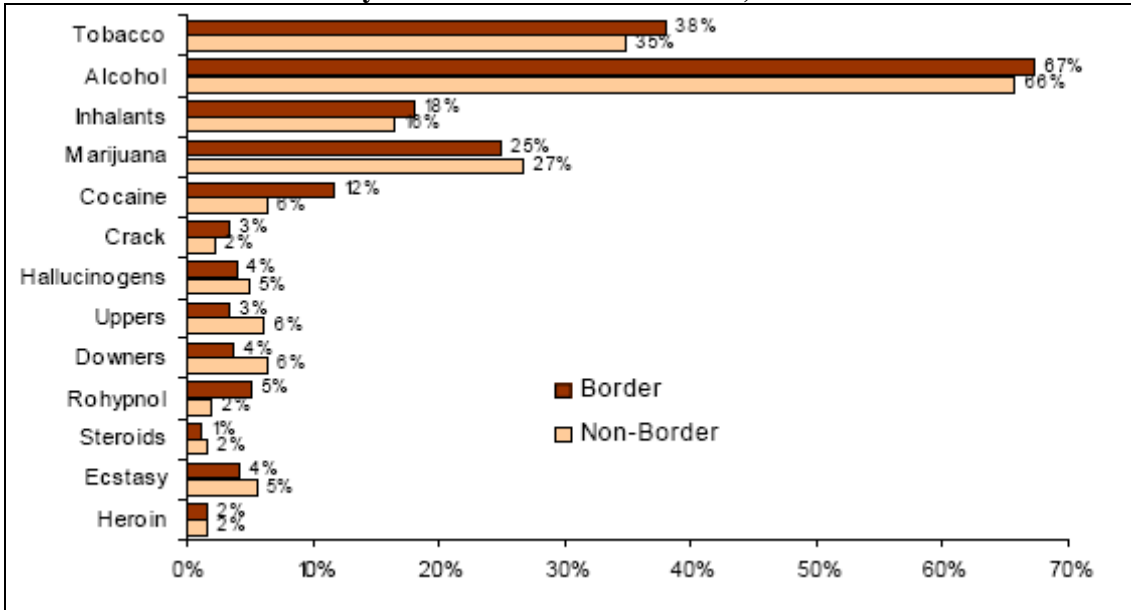
Drugs

Drugs are an important factor to consider when describing juvenile offenders. Not only is using drugs itself a delinquent behavior, but using drugs can lead to other delinquent behaviors. According to the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) juveniles in Texas are more likely to report having used cigarettes, alcohol, crack/cocaine, or ecstasy than juveniles in a national survey. The Texas DSHS (2006) also reports that 53% of students in grades 7 through 12 reported using alcohol for the first time before age 13. A number of students reported using tobacco and marijuana for the first time before age 13 (45% and 28%, respectively).

Marijuana is the most common illegal drug used among Texas students, although other drugs still remain a problem. Eight percent of students surveyed reported that they had used crack/cocaine at least once in their lives. The Texas DSHS also looked at drug use among students who lived in areas close to the Mexican border as compared to students who do not live close to the border. Figure 3.1 shows these comparisons for lifetime use of drugs.

Figure 3.1

**Use of Illegal Drugs by Texas Students in Grades 7-12
By Border vs. Non-Border Area, 2006**



Source: Texas Department of State Health Services.

www.dshs.state.tx.us/sa/research/survey/2006/adolescentsubstabase_2006.pdf.

The Texas DSHS (2001) reported that 91% of offenders in TYC had reported using illegal drugs at some point in their lives and that 84% had used an illegal drug in the prior year. Forty-six percent of the juveniles committed to TYC in 2006 were chemically dependant (TYC, 2007)

In 2006, TYC reported that 11% of the juveniles that had been committed to its custody had been adjudicated on drug related offenses (TYC, 2007). Drug offenses were the second most common offense among both males and females who were committed to TYC in 2006 (TYC, 2007).

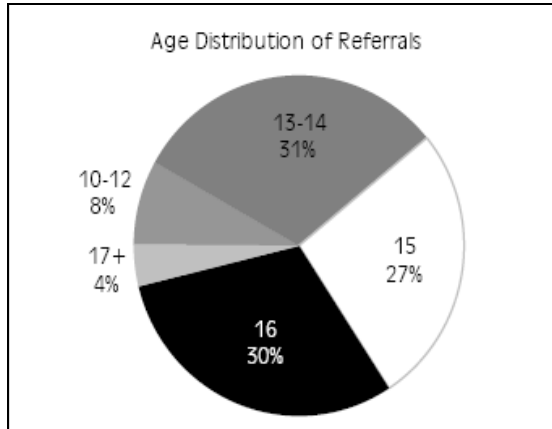
Physical Factors

Physical factors include age, gender, and race. These factors are also important to consider when providing a general description of juvenile offenders.

Age

Research has shown that most juvenile delinquency occurs when juveniles are in their mid teens. Data reported by the TJPC (2004) is consistent with this finding. The average age of those juveniles referred to TJPC in 2004 was almost 15 years (14.5 years). Figure 3.2 shows that juveniles referred at the ages of 15 and 16 comprise more than half (57%) of the total number of referrals to TJPC (TJPC, 2004).

Figure 3.2
Distribution, by Age, of Referrals to TJPC in 2004



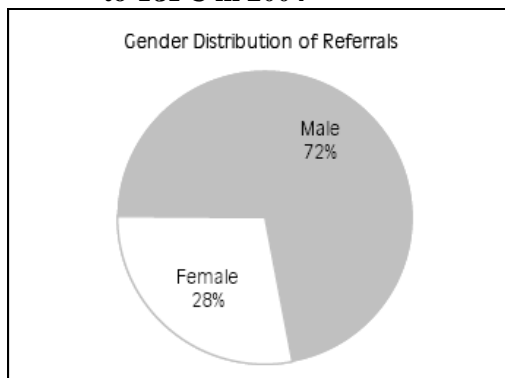
Source: Texas Juvenile Probation Commission (2004)
www.tipc.stat.tx.us/publications/reports/RPSTAT2004.pdf.

Gender

Gender is another physical characteristic that is used to describe juvenile offenders. Research and data have shown that males tend to commit more delinquent acts than females; however the number of females who are involved in delinquent behavior has continued to rise (Valdez, 2007). It was also mentioned in Chapter 2 that crimes committed by female juveniles are generally less violent crimes than those committed by males.

As Figure 3.3 shows, male juveniles accounted for 72% of the referrals to TJPC and females accounted for the remaining 28%, even though their distribution is 51% and 49%, respectively in the general population of juveniles in Texas (TJPC, 2004).

Figure 3.3
Distribution, by Gender, of Referrals to TJPC in 2004



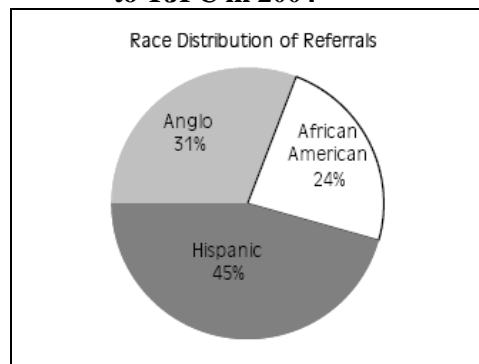
Source: Texas Juvenile Probation Commission
www.tipc.stat.tx.us/publications/reports/RPSTAT2004.pdf.

Race

Race is a very important variable in juvenile delinquency. When discussing juvenile delinquency race becomes a part of almost every other factor. Research has shown a relationship between race and social class, between race and drugs, between race and gangs, and between race and education, (which will be discussed in future chapters). Looking at race and juvenile delinquency in Texas is unique because of the large number of Hispanic juveniles.

Figure 3.4

Distribution, by Race, of Referrals to TJPC in 2004



Source: Texas Juvenile Probation Commission (2004)
www.tjpc.stat.tx.us/publications/reports/RPSTAT2004.pdf

According to the TJPC the juvenile population in Texas in 2004 was 41.8% White, 41.4% Hispanic, 13.4% African American, and 3.4% for Other. In 2004 107,794 juveniles were referred to TJPC. Figure 3.4 shows that nearly half (45%) of these juveniles were Hispanic. Of the remaining 55%, 31% were White and 24% were Black. The complexity of race and social class is explained in Chapter Four.

Summary

This chapter has provided a general description of juvenile offenders in Texas based on social and physical factors. While this description is useful, it may not be completely accurate because it is based on official data and not all juvenile offenders come to the attention of the juvenile justice system (either because they are not caught, or because they are dealt with outside of TYC or TJPC) and therefore their characteristics are not included in the official data.

The social factors that were used in this chapter to describe juvenile offenders were family, education, social class, gangs, and drugs. It was seen that a large number of juvenile offenders come from homes in which their parents were either never married, or were divorced or separated. An item to remember about education in Texas is the differences in drop out rates among ethnic/racial groups. It was shown that the drop out rates for African American and Hispanic students were twice and three times (respectively) as the drop out rate for White students. Social class has been shown to be inversely related to juvenile delinquency. Gangs are an extremely important factor in juvenile delinquency and will be discussed in more detail later.

Drug use is an important factor in delinquent behavior. Most juveniles committed to TYC reported using an illegal drug during their life.

The physical factors used in this chapter include age, gender, and race. These factors are also important in describing juvenile offenders. It was shown that juveniles between the ages of 15 and 16 made up the majority of referrals to TJPC in 2004 and that males make up a much larger proportion of referrals than females. Race is a very important factor in juvenile delinquency because it is so interrelated to other factors.

It is important to understand the characteristics of juveniles who are committing offenses for a couple of reasons. One reason is so that prevention and treatment programs can be more focused on the juveniles that are using them. Another reason that it is imperative to understand these characteristics is because offenders and victims often share the very same social and physical characteristics.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Why is important to know the characteristics of juveniles involved in the Texas juvenile Justice?
2. Why are males more prominent in the juvenile justice system than females?
3. What pattern evolves when studying illegal drug usage by students (Figure 3.1) regarding those boarder and non-boarder areas?

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