

Reducing Intergenerational Poverty

The Role of Crime and the Criminal Justice System in Intergenerational Poverty

At any given time over the past decade, about 10 million U.S. children lived in families with incomes below the poverty line. Their experiences with childhood poverty can compromise their health and welfare and also hinder their opportunities for economic mobility in adulthood. An intergenerational cycle of economic disadvantages weighs heavily not only on children and families experiencing poverty but also on the nation as a whole by reducing future national prosperity and burdening its educational, criminal justice, and health care systems.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine released a comprehensive report on intergenerational poverty—a situation in which children who grow up in families with incomes below or near the poverty line experience low-income status in adulthood—in the United States. The report, *Reducing Intergenerational Poverty*, examines the drivers of long-term, intergenerational poverty; identifies potential policies and programs to reduce it; and recommends actions to address gaps in data and research.

Public safety and the criminal justice system play a fundamental role in the cycle of intergenerational poverty in the United States, affecting the well-being, development, and mobility of children and families. Crime affects children in two primary ways—through victimization and involvement with the criminal justice system.

VICTIMIZATION AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

Low-income and younger people are far more likely than higher-income and older people to report being victims of crime in their neighborhoods and schools. Today, gun violence is the leading cause of death among American children, surpassing motor vehicle accidents and all other causes. Low-income, Black, and Native American youth are more likely to be exposed to gun violence.

Victimization and exposure to neighborhood violence are associated with factors that affect healthy child and adolescent development, including:

- Depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder;
- School dropout, reduced performance on standardized tests, and increased risk of criminal justice contact in young adulthood; and
- Negative impacts on sleep patterns, stress responses, impulse control, and attention.

These factors can reduce future educational attainment and earnings. In contrast, adolescents growing up in low-income families with lower exposure to neighborhood crime are more likely to experience increased intergenerational mobility.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT

Incarceration affects children in two ways: indirectly through adult involvement in the criminal justice system and directly through juvenile involvement in the system. Childhood poverty is a strong predictor of future incarceration, and children whose parents and caregivers have interacted with the criminal legal system are more likely to experience poverty.

Research also illustrates a link between family income and juvenile involvement in the criminal justice system. Juvenile detention and incarceration are associated with worse educational outcomes and increased involvement with the criminal justice system in adulthood, which has negative implications for earnings later in life. Juvenile incarceration has been found to harm mental and physical health, both of which are strong predictors of adult economic outcomes and future well-being. Although adding more police in high-crime areas reduces homicides, it is important to avoid aggressive policing tactics that have been shown to harm child development, as well as school attainment and performance.

Poor youth are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system for many reasons, including criminal justice policy and practices that target low-income communities and differences in youth behavior and familial needs. Research has found that lower school spending and quality, educational attainment, exposure to the environmental toxin lead, household income, and the development of socioemotional skills all play important roles in youth offending.

RACIAL DISPARITIES

Black and Native American children and families disproportionately face inadequate access to health care and well-funded, quality schools; greater exposure to crime, violence, and harm from the criminal justice system; housing insecurity and exposure to toxins; and lower family incomes, wealth, and neighborhood resources. Racial inequalities explain most of the dramatic differences in crime across racial groups. These same disadvantages also contribute to racial disparities in criminal justice contacts, further compounding inequality.

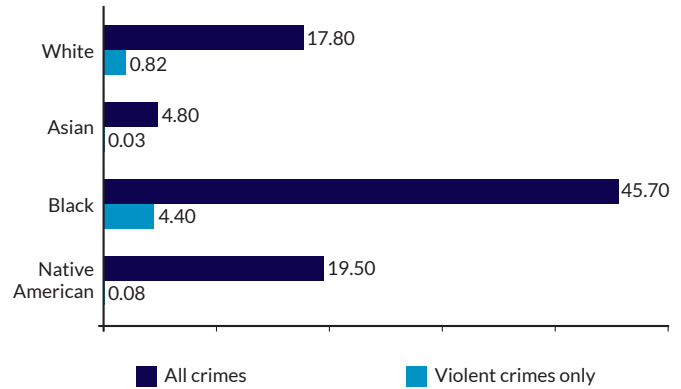


FIGURE 1 Juvenile overall and violent crime arrest rates (per 1,000) in 2018, by race/ethnicity.

There are racial disparities in both the commission of violent crime and victimization as well as in arrests, charging, convictions, sentencing, incarceration, and community supervision. Black and Native American youth are much more likely to be arrested and detained. An analysis of juvenile incarceration in 2018 shows that the rate of confinement for Black and Native American youth is higher than the rates of confinement for White, Latino, and Asian youth combined. Disproportionate punishment in the juvenile justice system reduces educational attainment and increases future criminal activity, both of which are directly linked to lower employment and earnings.

Community violence poses a significant risk to health and well-being for Black, Native American, and low-income communities. Black and Native American youth are more likely to be victims of crime and to witness more community-level violence than White youth.

PROMISING INTERVENTIONS

While juvenile crime and confinement have fallen by two-thirds over the past 30 years, with dramatic declines across racial and ethnic groups, youth are still incarcerated in the United States at rates far higher than in all other developed democratic countries and many developing countries.

A diverse array of interventions to address violence and victimization show promise, as do interventions addressing the ways the criminal justice system affects youth outcomes and intergenerational mobility. The committee identified a number of program or policy ideas to reduce crime, violence, and juvenile confinement.

NOTE: The program or policy’s impact on intergenerational poverty is supported by random-assignment evaluation evidence that has been replicated across several sites or by compelling quasi-experimental evidence based on national or multi-state data or a scaled-up program.

CRIME AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM	
Juvenile incarceration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Juvenile confinement should only be used for youth who pose a serious and immediate threat to public safety
Child investment strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve school quality and reduce lead exposure in ways identified in the education and health categories
Strengthen communities to reduce violent crime and victimization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scale up programs that abate vacant lots and abandoned homes Increase grants to community-based organizations
Policing strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand funding for policing in high-crime neighborhoods Expand use of effective strategies like community policing
Gun safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve gun safety in ways that pass constitutional review Promote child access prevention laws and restrictions on right-to-carry laws, limit access to guns by domestic abusers Promote sentencing add-ons for violence involving firearms

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This Consensus Study Report Highlights was prepared by the National Academies’ Board on Children, Youth, and Families and Committee on National Statistics based on the report *Reducing Intergenerational Poverty* (2024).

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