

How the Processing of Juvenile Cases has Changed Based On COVID-19

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, juvenile delinquency rates have been decreasing across the United States, coming to an all-time low during 2020. In the juvenile justice system, current research has found that race and gender play large roles in the processing of juvenile cases, as well as urban and rural areas. In fact, research has found that the population of a county affects the number of cases the juvenile justice system will have, both in their county and across their state. In Michigan, rural counties have a much lower amount of juvenile cases than urban counties, as they are more likely to settle things outside of the system, unlike their more urban counterparts. The study conducted in this research looks to see how the COVID-19 pandemic, between 2019 to 2020 changed the processing of juvenile cases in Michigan. Using data from the OJJDP, results found that across both urban and rural regions there were fewer cases processed between the two years, and moreover the greatest statistical difference being between White and Black juveniles. These results are able to show the adaptability of the juvenile justice system to a health crisis, both in Michigan, but also in the United States.

Keywords: COVID-19, juvenile justice, urban, rural, gender, race

Introduction

Juvenile delinquency cases have long since been in decline in the United States. Over the past two decades, juvenile arrest rates have dropped more than 70%, and as of 2020 juvenile arrest rates are at an all time low (Hockenberry, 2019; Terry et al., 2021; OJJDP, 2022). Similarly, this decline can be seen by both urban and rural counties – especially rural ones. While rural counties make up close to 97% of the land area, their population only makes up about a fifth of the United States’ population (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). Increased use of community-based services such as rehabilitation centers have contributed to this significant decrease, as well as a movement to turn away from the more punitive measures that the juvenile system had adopted in the 1980s. Gender and race have also played large factors in juvenile case processing (Leiber, 2021; Terry et al., 2021). While boys are more likely to be involved in the juvenile system, girls are more likely to be charged, especially in rural areas. In both urban and rural areas, male juveniles are much more likely to be involved with the juvenile court than females. Similarly, White juveniles are much more likely to be involved in the court system than their minority (Black, Indigenous, and Asian) counterparts. White juveniles have a statistically higher amount of juvenile cases than minority groups, although Black, Indigenous, and Asian youth are often overrepresented in the system overall. Although differences in gender and race have been studied in relation to juvenile case counts, there is insufficient data on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected urban and rural counties, and how other multiple factors contributed to these differences on a statewide scale. This research will attempt to discover how the juvenile justice system processed cases before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the processing of juvenile cases for urban versus rural settings, and-examine how gender and race affected the processing of juvenile cases during COVID-19. Through a data

analysis of all juvenile cases in Michigan between 2019 and 2020, this thesis intends to answer the following questions and further recommend new points of study for future researchers.

Literature Review

Detention Rates

Over the past two decades, juvenile delinquency rates have been falling significantly. From 1996 to 2020, delinquency arrest rates have gone down almost 74%, and delinquency cases went down by 56% – male and female juvenile cases declining by the same amount (Hockenberry, 2019; OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book, 2019a; Terry et al., 2021; OJJDP, 2022). Detention rates of juveniles also saw a significant decrease as Thomas et al. (2022) points out. Similarly, the lowest delinquency arrest rate on record is from 2020, with only 1,269.8 juvenile arrests per 100,000 juveniles (ages 10-17) compared to 1996's arrest rate of 8,472.2 juveniles per 100,000 (OJJDP, 2022). Juvenile detention rates and overall crimes rates have also dropped significantly, partly due to an increase in community-based juvenile services such as rehabilitation and intervention programs, and an emphasis on keeping youth out of secure detention and instead holding them in the community (Buchanan, 2020; Hockenberry, 2019; Lockwood et al., 2023). In the state of Michigan, delinquency rates have also been down in all areas, steadily following general trend across the United States (Public Policy Associates, Incorporated, 2015).

The Urban/Rural Divide

In the United States today rural communities comprise almost 97% of the total land area, and are occupied by 19.3% of the population (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). As the authors point out, there has been a large decrease in the rural population since 1910 where almost half of the United States population lived in rural areas. This plays an important role in the outcome of crime and

justice both for adults and juveniles – especially in rural counties. Rural county examination and crime is generally not studied as much as urban crime, with most results coming from densely populated areas (Terry et al., 2021). Moreover rural communities tend to have less access to outside sources, smaller police forces, fewer policies in place, and are more isolated than urban areas – both by space and population – making them more vulnerable to delinquency and *tolerating* that delinquency (Sampson, et al., 2018; Pupo & Zane, 2021; Terry et al., 2021). As it stands, rural courts tend to provide greater leniency in their court systems, and are often more informal. Additionally, higher population urban areas are argued by Feld (2017) to have weakened social unity and therefore rely on increased social control in courts, while rural communities generally stick to a more traditional view to the juvenile justice system, wrestling in more informal social control and residential stability. In rural areas, people are more likely to work out their grievances with one another than turn to the court – relying on the social ties in their community (Terry et al., 2021). This reliance on social ties within communities has been called “justice by geography,” as coined by Barry C. Feld (1991). Looking at both urban and rural counties, he found that population stability played a large part in delinquency rates. Urban areas have much more mobility, which he hypothesized equal weaker social control. Feld finds that even if people in rural areas are poorer, they are more likely to be residentially stable, with suburban counties being even more so. Additionally, he found that urban families are more likely to refer to the juvenile court than rural families, and that a larger number of juveniles are petitioned to juvenile courts in urban areas, filing a much larger number of petitions (Feld, 1991). In all urban counties are much more likely to have more delinquency rates than that of rural counties.

During and subsequently through the COVID-19 pandemic, these informal ways to solve crime between people only increased with even less access to resources and services for crime and delinquency (Hansen & Lory, 2020; Terry et al., 2021). Similarly, it has been found that rural communities are more likely to have the “everybody knows everyone’s business” idea, keeping in account reputations in these communities when turning towards crime and reporting (Terry et al., 2021). Pupo & Zane (2021) conducted a study on punishments in courts comparing rural to urban areas, theorizing that odds of detention, petition, adjudication, and placement will be higher in urban juvenile courts than that of rural juvenile courts. Using data from all juvenile court dispositions in Florida during 2017, they found that pre-adjudication was much higher in rural areas than urban, although detention, petitions, and placement generally stayed the same. Additionally an increase in isolation and stay-at-home orders has given the chance for juveniles to be more violent in rural settings compared to that of urban settings (Hansen & Lory, 2020).

Increased isolation and stay-at-home orders have impacted juveniles considerably. On average, almost 20% of youth ages 13-18 have a serious mental health disorder at one point in their lives (Kazdin, 2000; Chappell, & Maggard, S. R., 2021). Over the years, especially starting in the 1990s, mental health service available to the public saw a decline and communities turned to the juvenile justice system to in turn look after the mental health of juveniles (Kazdin, 2000; Grisso, 2008; Chappell, & Maggard, S. R., 2021). Additionally, office health policies causing staffing shortages, court closures, and reductions in treatment programs all left juveniles out of reach of proper assistance in the court systems which had a particularly hard impact on juveniles in rural counties (Lockwood et al., 2021; Terry et al., 2021). Among juveniles admitted into the court system between 2019 and 2020, there were dramatic variations across gender and rural and urban areas.

During the COVID-19 pandemic (2020), the risk of poor mental health outcomes among juveniles saw a significant increase, including increased risk of suicide (Cheng et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2022; Center for Disease Control, 2023). One of the biggest factors in the increase of mental health issues is the growing problem of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs are childhood adversities that are experienced by youth that are in the justice system. These experiences include abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, and unsafe family environments growing up in a household with substance abuse, mental health, and instability issues (Reid et al., 2022; Center for Disease Control, 2023). In recent years Reid et al. (2022) found that with the onset of the pandemic, stressors on juveniles have increased, resulting in more antisocial behavior and psychological distress – or in other words: more chances for juveniles to have adverse childhood experiences. Suicide among youth during the COVID-19 pandemic has also increased. Stemming from increases in depression among young and a decrease in parental educational involvement (being little to none), and contribute to more chances of adverse childhood experiences (Cheng et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2022).

Chappell & Maggard (2021) found, using centralized data from a mid-Atlantic state between 2010-2015 (a total of 74,636 intake cases), and running it through the Youth Assessment Screening Instrument (YASI) in an attempt to examine youths' factors when courts decide to screen them that: youth with a history of abuse were more likely to be detained than any other outcome, youth with disabilities were treated harsher than those without, and more likely to be detained or diverted, and of those adjudicated, 24% of youth had a disability, 34% with mental health problems, 16% with histories of abuse, and 22% with indicated comorbidity (meaning two or more health problems presented). The youth faced the highest chances of ACEs and are those in rural settings, particularly girls (Terry, 2020; Terry et al., 2021). These additional

and often more isolated counties, with less resources and overall increased isolation can lend itself to changing delinquency patterns.

Race & Gender

Terry et al. (2021) conducted a study in an effort to see if COVID-19 affected rates of boys and girls in detention facilities, if rates of juveniles by urban and rural counties in juvenile detention varied, and if COVID-19 has affected the frequency in which girls and boys reside in juvenile detention facilities. Using a rural Midwestern state's data from the statewide Juvenile Intake and Assessment Centers (JIAC), the authors found that: boys have a higher chance of being detained and put into juvenile detention than girls and that rural communities often hold a different (and much lower) standard for girls in which they are much more likely to be involved with juvenile justice system (Terry, 2020; Terry et al., 2021). Girls are also much more susceptible to abuse in the juvenile system – especially those in rural areas. Rural communities are much more likely to protect their own, especially wealthier families. Those with generational wealth and high connections prefer to stay out of the court system, which leads to females having a higher chance of sexual and physical abuse that is not put through the court system (Terry, 2020; Terry et al., 2021). In general, girls are more likely than boys to receive harsher treatment in the juvenile justice system – particularly those in rural counties.

When looking at urban and rural delinquency rates, it's important to consider the role of race as well. As Leiber et al. (2021) discuss, youth of color who live in large homogenous populations (i.e. Black juveniles living with a large Black population) are more likely to be deemed delinquent than those living in areas with a lower Black population. Black juveniles are also more likely to be adjudicated in the juvenile justice system in places with a high Black population. The areas with the highest number of Black juveniles (and Black juvenile cases) are

urban areas (Housing Assistance Council, 2012; Feld, 2017). Furthermore, White juveniles are also much more likely to be involved in the court system, although statistically less likely to be adjudicated (Puzzanchera et al., 2023). Youth of color (particularly Black, Indigenous, and Asian youth) in general are more likely to face sentences in the juvenile system, even when their White counterparts have a significantly higher amount of cases overall (Thomas et al., 2022; Puzzanchera et al., 2023).

Current Study

The current study examines how COVID-19 has affected juveniles and the juvenile justice systems from 2019 to 2020. Current research has examined race, gender, and mental health in relation to juvenile justice policies and practices. Yet, research on how urban and rural counties have adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore how the processing of juvenile cases varies by gender, race, and geographic location has not been investigated fully. This study is important because it will show how the juvenile justice system adapts to not only the COVID-19 pandemic, but also how it will react to other health crises across the state of Michigan.

Examining the adaptability of the juvenile justice system allows researchers to see weaknesses in the current program, and where the state of Michigan lacked during the pandemic, allowing for further research on policy changes that will fill these gaps and strengthen the juvenile justice system in future health crises across the state.

Methodology

The proposed study will draw on data from the National Juvenile Court Archive (NJCA) on juvenile caseloads from 2019 and 2020 (Puzzanchera et. al., 2021). Data analysis will be limited to cases from the state of Michigan that are broken down by county. An urban county is defined as "...any county containing a city of greater than 50,000 people or an area that has at

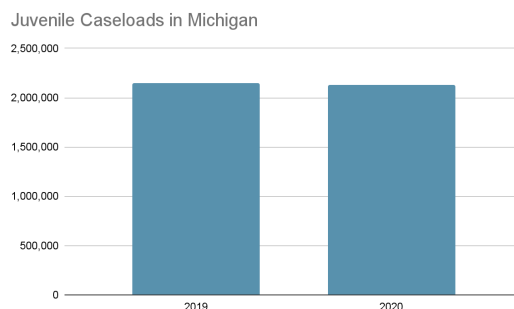
least 100,000 people and has a substantial commuting interchange with a city of greater than 50,000 people” (Michigan Department of Community Health, 2010). Based on this definition and classification by the State of Michigan, counties will be coded as either urban or rural for juvenile caseload comparison. In the State of Michigan currently, there are eighty-three counties, with twenty-three of these being classified as urban, and the other fifty rural (Michigan Department of Community Health, 2010).

The NJCA archive search criteria is split into three parts: population profiles, state comparisons and county comparisons. For the sake of this study, the two categories examined will be juvenile population profiles and county-by-county comparisons. Each part is given selection criteria before displaying statistics. For each table, the column variable can be selected by year, sex (male and female), race (White, Black, American Indian, Asian), ethnicity (Non-Hispanic or Hispanic), or age. Age can be set between a lower and upper age, and for the current study, the upper age range for juveniles will be set at seventeen. Additionally, each table generated can be either categorized by case count, row percent, or column percent to analyze the data both for population profiles and county-by-county comparisons.

Analyses will begin by first comparing pre-pandemic caseloads in Michigan reported in 2019, to pandemic caseloads reported in 2020. The second phase of analyses will compare pre-pandemic and pandemic juvenile caseloads by urban and rural setting. Finally, analyses aggregated at both the state and county level will examine pre-pandemic and pandemic caseloads by gender and race. T-tests will be administered for statistical differences.

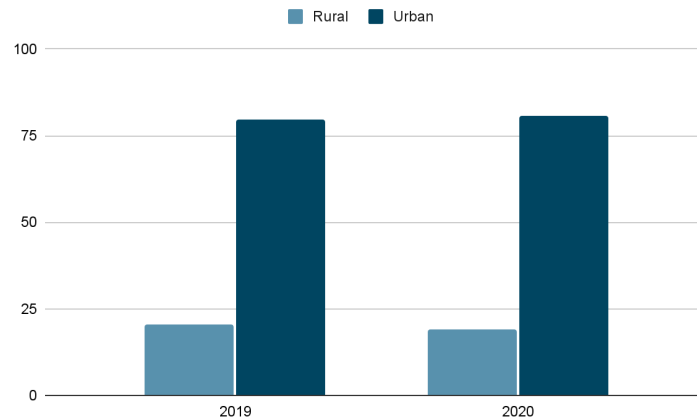
Results with Tables

Pre-pandemic to pandemic caseloads



From 2019 to 2020, the number of juvenile cases processed did see a slight decrease across the entire state of Michigan, and this follows a consistent trend across both urban and rural counties. In 2019, there were 2,144,307 youth cases processed in the juvenile justice system, while in 2020 the amount of juvenile cases processed dropped close to 20,000 cases == having the amount processed between the two years decrease down to 2,126,813 juvenile cases in Michigan. Although there was only a slight decrease in the juvenile cases processed between 2019 and 2020, gender and race within the system had large, significant differences between the two years, as well as a difference across the urban and rural divide – which stayed the same between the different types of counties in Michigan. The slight decrease in juvenile cases is not statistically significant in and of itself, but combined with other mitigating factors within and around the Michigan juvenile justice system, this difference becomes more prominent in the overall comparison of the two years.

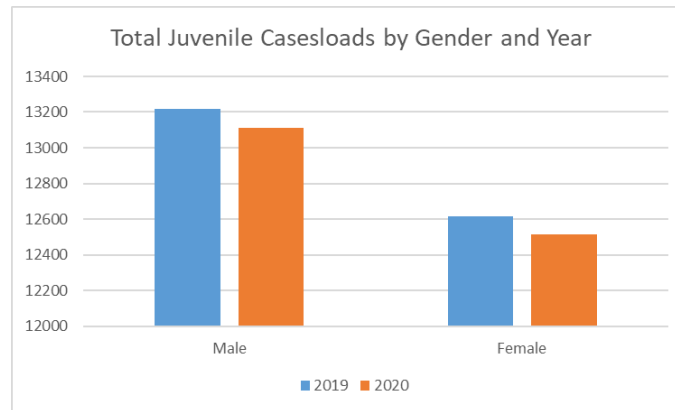
Pre-pandemic to pandemic caseloads: Urban and Rural Settings



Between 2019 and 2020, the total number of juvenile cases varied very little by urban and rural counties. In 2019, the urban counties comprised 79.5% of the population, and rural counties 20.5%. In 2020, the numbers were almost exactly the same. Urban counties made 79.4% of the juvenile population, and rural counties made up the other 20.4%. In both years, urban counties made up the significant portion of the juvenile population, with rural counties combined only making up a fifth of the juvenile population. Of these urban counties, Oakland County and Wayne County comprised 31.3% of the juvenile population, having 12.1% of the juveniles and 19.2%, respectively. It should be noted that Wayne county houses Detroit, the largest city in Michigan with a population of 3.571 million in 2019 and 3.548 million people in 2020. In total, the twenty-three urban counties in Michigan are much more likely to contribute to the juvenile population than the fifty rural counties.

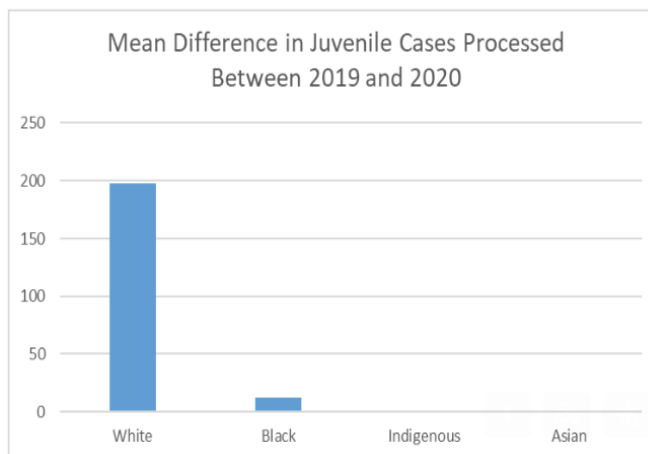
Gender

From 2019 to 2020, there were fewer cases processed overall at a statistically significant amount ($t=3.22$, $p < 0.001$), with these changes being seen across boys ($t=3.22$, $p < .001$) and girls ($t=3.21$, $p < .01$) in both urban and rural counties in Michigan. Males were much more likely to be involved in the juvenile system than girls across both years ($t=4.30$, $p < .001$; $t=4.29$, $p < .001$) with this difference being the same in both urban and rural areas.



Race

Similarly, race among juvenile cases brought about interesting results. When compared to 2019, the number of juvenile caseloads processed for White juveniles decreased significantly ($t=3.53$, $p < 0.001$). Among minority groups (Black, Asian, and Indigenous juveniles) however, caseloads remained unchanged. Tests of the mean difference in the decrease in juvenile caseloads among White versus Black juvenile caseloads from 2019 to 2020 ($t=5.53$, $p < 0.001$) were statistically significant and consistent across urban and rural counties. That is, the mean of White caseloads across counties decreased by nearly 200 cases from 2019 to 2020, while the mean of Black caseloads across counties decreased by less than 13. This is particularly notable given Black youths overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system. Similar results were observed for Indigenous and Asian caseloads.



Discussion and Recommendations

From the overall data in this study, I found that there was a change from 2019 to 2020 in the processing of juvenile cases within Michigan. Between the two years, there were statistically significant differences between both male and female juveniles and White juveniles. While the caseloads did not vary by region as expected, there still was a significant change in data. Between the two years, COVID-19 decreased the population of youth in the juvenile system, following the recent downward trend across the United States in the last twenty years, concluding with the all-time low in 2020 compared to the recent high in 1996 (OJJDP, 2022). Even with a decrease in cases, statistical differences stayed the same across urban and rural counties between the two years, showing that the policies and practices within Michigan counties did not particularly change much over the two years in regards to the juvenile justice system. That being said, the mean difference in gender and race showed a different story.

From 2019 to 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were statistically significant differences between male and female juvenile caseloads. The higher amount of male juvenile cases processed in Michigan coincides with what other researchers have been saying – boys are more likely than girls to be put into the juvenile system (Terry et al., 2021; Puzzanchera et al.,

2023). Between urban and rural counties, the mean difference between genders ended up being significant. The mean variation by gender in the COVID-19 pandemic from 2019 to 2020, across counties in Michigan makes for an interesting comparison. Moreover with the significant divide between boys and girls, race also seemed to vary between the two years, with a statistically significant change itself.

From 2019 to 2020, the study found that there was also a significant change between race of juveniles across urban and rural counties in both years. Racial disparities were statistically significant between White juveniles and minorities (Black, Indigenous, Asian). This also falls in line with previous research – White juveniles are much more likely to be involved in the court system than other minorities (Puzzanchera et al., 2023).

Recommendations for Future Areas of Research

The current study examines juvenile populations in urban and rural settings during COVID-19 in Michigan. Through the National Juvenile Court Archive (NJCA) data in the state of Michigan was examined by general population, gender, race, and county setting. However, the current study only examines one midwestern state from 2019 to 2020, and does not take into account other states, and their populations. Additionally, county-by-county rural and urban statistics could change based on location and population size, affecting results by county and gender and race. Moreover, specific crimes were not examined in relation to changes from 2019 to 2020, and how variations in urban and rural counties as well as other specific factors could affect crime and juvenile cases within Michigan. Urban, rural, and state health policies are another factor which was not studied in relation with juvenile populations from 2019 to 2020. Future research should focus on how specific juvenile crimes vary by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as variations based on state population, location and health policies.

Conclusion

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, much has been expected to change from 2019 to 2020, with the introduction of stay-at-home orders, more isolation of the general population, and various other safety measures. The juvenile justice system is not immune to these changes, as seen in Michigan. While the expected change in the amount of juvenile cases is common, studies haven't touched on how this varied by the urban and rural counties across the state. Looking at all juvenile cases processed from 2019 to 2020 in Michigan, this thesis set out to do just that. Drawing data from the National Juvenile Court Archive (NJCA) on all juvenile cases processed between the two years, cases were compared by population, rural and urban counties, and other important factors – gender and race. The study found that although the juvenile population didn't decrease much between the two years, there was a significant difference in both gender and race of juveniles from 2019 to 2020. Across both urban and rural counties, boys had a statistically significant higher chance of having juvenile cases than their female counterparts, agreeing with previous research that has found that males are much more likely than females to be found in the juvenile justice system not just in Michigan, but across the United States. Similarly, between the races of juveniles who had cases processed there were statistically significant racial disparities between White and minority juveniles in both 2019 and 2020, which is consistent across both years. The largest difference was between White and Black juveniles in the court system, with the mean number of cases jumping almost two hundred cases overall across counties. Asian and Indigenous youth made up a significantly small amount of all cases across Michigan, only accounting for close to 4% of all juveniles involved in the court system, making the stark contrast between White and Black juveniles even more notably large.

Future research should focus on specific types of crime between urban and rural counties during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as policies set into place from 2019 to 2020 in Michigan which may have affected the outcome of juvenile cases. This study showed how the juvenile justice system adapted to a health crisis (in this case pandemic), and where changes in the system were most likely to occur. Examining this data can help lawmakers adapt and be able to respond to other health concerns more effectively, and bring to light where policy changes can be made in an effort to evolve the juvenile justice system not just in Michigan, but across the United States for the better.

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