

Juvenile Court Cases in 1954

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Today juvenile delinquency is generally recognized as both a local problem and one that is nationwide. How communities are using one of their resources—juvenile courts—to deal with the problem is indicated in the statistics that the Children's Bureau collects from those courts. The report for the calendar year 1954 is summarized in the following article.

MOST juvenile court statutes define juvenile delinquency as the violation of a law or municipal ordinance by persons of juvenile court age or conduct so seriously antisocial that it interferes with the rights of others or threatens the welfare of the delinquent himself or of the community. This broad definition of delinquency includes such conduct as ungovernable behavior and running away—conduct labeled “delinquency” but not generally considered a violation of law when committed by an adult. Consequently, the acts that result in bringing a child before the court may range from trivial to serious misbehavior.

Juvenile court statistics taken by themselves cannot, of course, measure the full extent of delinquency. Such data, even when drawn from the most reliable of samples, must by their very nature ignore the many children who presented conduct problems similar to those that reached the courts but who were not apprehended or who were dealt with by the police, social agencies, or youth-serving agencies without having been referred to a court. The figures are significant, however, to the degree that they are able to show how frequently one important community resource—the juvenile court—is utilized in dealing with delinquency.

It is for this reason that the Children's Bureau asks the juvenile courts to submit data on delinquency, dependency, and neglect cases that will permit the collection of national

information on trends in juvenile court work.

The Courts Reporting

The number of courts that are able and willing to submit these data to the Children's Bureau varies each year. The courts reporting have not necessarily been representative of the country as a whole. In 1954 reports from 1,142 courts were submitted to the Children's Bureau. The reports of 937 courts included a full count of all types of cases—delinquency (alleged as well as adjudged), dependency, neglect, and special proceedings—disposed of both officially and unofficially.¹ Only “official” cases were reported by 205 of the courts. The reports from these courts are considered incomplete for the purposes of this article and are excluded from the analysis.

Data from the 937 courts submitting “complete” reports form the basis of this article. These courts, located in 34 States, have about 43 percent of the child population within their jurisdictions.

One hundred and nineteen of the courts making complete reports were “large” courts—serving areas with populations of 100,000 or more. The others were “small” courts and served areas with populations of less than 100,000. Since the large courts disposed of 78 percent of all the delinquency cases reported, they heavily influence the analysis of the data.

¹ Official cases are those adjudicated by the judge or referee after a petition, complaint, or other legal paper used to initiate court action has been filed. In unofficial cases, no petition or legal paper is filed and the case is adjusted by an officer of the court after initial conference or after social study and investigation.

Delinquency Cases

More than 230,000 juvenile delinquency cases were disposed of during 1954 by the 937 courts, and 56 percent of them were handled unofficially. No consistent pattern for handling the cases seems to be followed either among the States or, within a State, among the various jurisdictions. In Ohio, for example, the reporting courts disposed of 30 percent of all their delinquency cases officially; in the State of Washington, 52 percent of the cases were handled officially; and in Pennsylvania, 83 percent. One court in Washington (Yakima County) disposed of 9 percent of its delinquency cases officially, and another (Snohomish County)

Table 1.—Delinquency cases disposed of by juvenile courts: Number and proportion of child population, by size of court, 1954

| Size of court | Number of courts | Number of cases | Population aged 10-17 ¹ | Rate per 1,000 population aged 10-17 ¹ |
|---|------------------|-----------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Large courts, serving 100,000 or more population..... | 119 | 179,907 | 4,831,475 | 37.2 |
| Small courts serving populations of: | | | | |
| 50,000-99,999..... | 114 | 23,657 | 912,142 | 25.9 |
| 20,000-49,999..... | 290 | 20,860 | 1,208,641 | 17.3 |
| 10,000-19,999..... | 273 | 4,644 | 558,892 | 8.3 |
| 5,000-9,999..... | 94 | 890 | 108,147 | 8.2 |
| Under 5,000..... | 47 | 162 | 22,145 | 7.3 |

¹ Based on 1950 Census.

made official disposition in 83 percent of its cases. The procedure used appears to be determined largely by individual court practice, the philosophy of the judge, and the size of the staff.²

Boys outnumbered girls appearing in juvenile delinquency court cases in 1954 by about 5 to 1. One reason may

² For a discussion of policy considerations in the unofficial disposition of cases, see *Standards for Specialized Courts Dealing with Children* (Children's Bureau Publication No. 346), pages 43-45.

* Program Analysis Branch, Division of Research, Children's Bureau. More detailed statistics appear in the Children's Bureau report, *Juvenile Court Statistics, 1954* (Statistical Series, No. 31), 1956.

be that, in general, boys are allowed greater freedom than girls and as a result are more likely to become involved in infractions of the law. Another possible reason is that boys are outwardly more aggressive, and this aggressiveness sometimes results in overt delinquent acts. Boys also tend to associate more in groups, and their delinquent behavior may be an outgrowth of misdirected gang activities.

The large urban areas had more delinquency cases per 1,000 population aged 10-17 than did the less populated areas, as shown in table 1. The 1954 data show that the rate for the courts serving areas of 100,000 or more population was more than double the rate for the courts serving less heavily populated areas.

Changes, 1954 from 1953.—Reports on delinquency cases were received from 631 courts for both 1954 and 1953. According to these reports, the number disposed of was 8 percent

greater in 1954 than in 1953. Both the small and large courts had about the same percentage increase, even though there were fewer delinquency cases per 1,000 child population handled by the small courts than by the large courts.

In the small courts the rise was more marked for cases disposed of officially (8 percent) than for those disposed of unofficially (5 percent). The large courts, in contrast, reported disposing of more cases unofficially (10 percent) than officially (7 percent).

Juvenile delinquency cases in which girls were involved increased almost as much (6 percent) as those for boys (8 percent). Among the girls' cases, those handled officially by the large courts showed the greatest increase—9 percent. The sharpest rise among the boys' cases was in those handled unofficially by the large courts, which went up 11 percent.

These changes from 1953 to 1954

Table 2.—Trend in juvenile delinquency cases and in number of children aged 10-17, 1940-54

[1940 = 100]

| Year | Juvenile delinquency cases ¹ | Child population aged 10-17 ² |
|-----------|---|--|
| 1940..... | 100 | 100 |
| 1941..... | 112 | 99 |
| 1942..... | 125 | 97 |
| 1943..... | 172 | 96 |
| 1944..... | 165 | 93 |
| 1945..... | 172 | 92 |
| 1946..... | 148 | 91 |
| 1947..... | 131 | 91 |
| 1948..... | 127 | 90 |
| 1949..... | 136 | 91 |
| 1950..... | 140 | 91 |
| 1951..... | 149 | 93 |
| 1952..... | 166 | 95 |
| 1953..... | 187 | 99 |
| 1954..... | 198 | 102 |

¹ Data for 1951-54 based on cases disposed of by 383 courts serving about 21 percent of the child population; trend for previous years estimated.

² Trend based on data from the Bureau of the Census (*Current Population Reports*, Series P-25, Nos. 98 and 121).

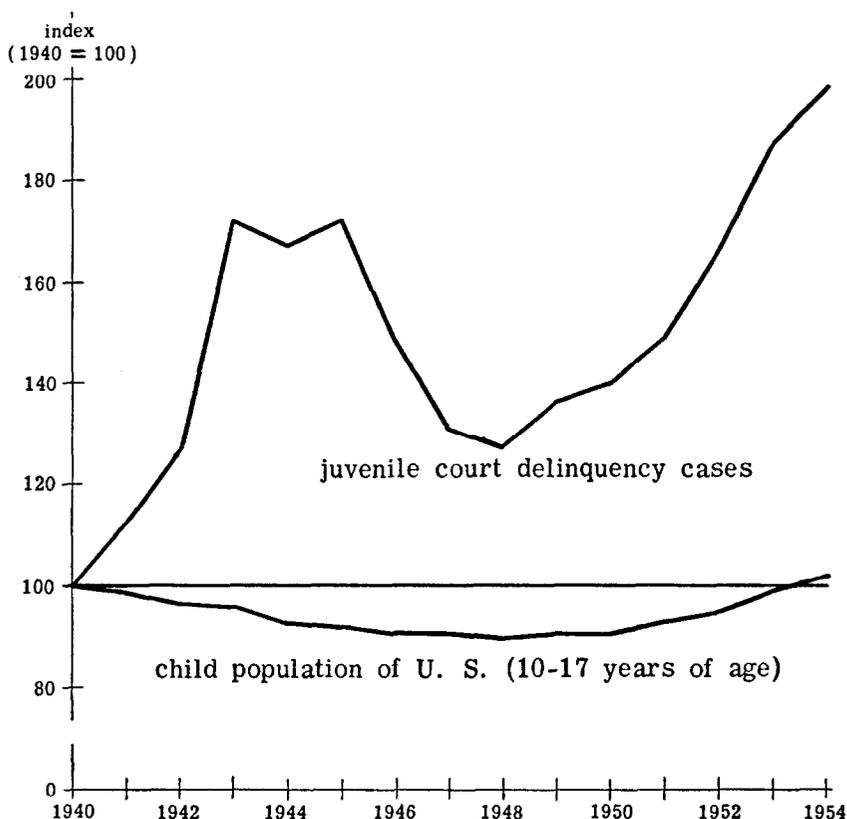
represent the combined increase for each group of courts and do not show individual variations. Thus, although the overall increase in the number of delinquency cases for the group of 96 large courts was 8 percent, 34 of these courts handled fewer cases in 1954 than in 1953.

Trends, 1940-54.—Comparable statistical data have been supplied to the Children's Bureau by 383 courts over a number of years; these courts include, within their jurisdictions, 21 percent of all children in the United States. It is believed that their reports therefore provide a fair indication of the general trend—though not the exact extent of change—in the number of delinquency cases.

The general trend during the years 1940-54 has been upward (chart 1 and table 2). There was a sharp rise during the war years, followed by fairly substantial declines in 1946, 1947, and 1948. The trend was reversed, however, in 1949, and it has been consistently upward each year since then. By 1954 the level was 56 percent higher than it had been in 1948, and it exceeded the previous high reached in 1945.

The growth in the number of juvenile delinquency cases cannot be explained in terms of population growth alone. While the number of court cases rose 56 percent between 1948 and 1954, the child population aged 10-17 increased only 13 percent.

Chart 1.—Trend in juvenile court delinquency cases, 1940-54¹



¹ Juvenile court data for 1951-54 based on cases disposed of by 383 courts serving about 21 percent of the child population, with trend for previous years esti-

imated; population trend based on data from the Bureau of the Census (*Current Population Reports*, Series P-25, Nos. 98 and 121).

Dependency and Neglect Cases

Actions involving dependent and neglected children are under the jurisdiction of most juvenile courts by statute, on the principle that the State has a responsibility for their protection. Unlike the delinquent child, who is brought to the court's

Table 3.—Dependency and neglect cases disposed of by juvenile courts: Number and proportion of child population, by size of court, 1954

| Size of court | Number of courts | Number of cases | Population under age 18 ¹ | Rate per 1,000 population under age 18 |
|---|------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| Large courts, serving 100,000 or more population..... | 119 | 47, 411 | 13, 660, 868 | 3. 5 |
| Small courts serving populations of: | | | | |
| 50,000-99,999..... | 114 | 5, 444 | 2, 440, 492 | 2. 2 |
| 20,000-49,999..... | 200 | 4, 838 | 3, 123, 968 | 1. 5 |
| 10,000-19,999..... | 273 | 1, 180 | 1, 397, 646 | 0. 8 |
| 5,000-9,999..... | 94 | 265 | 264, 113 | 1. 0 |
| Under 5,000..... | 47 | 25 | 56, 041 | 0. 4 |

¹ Based on 1950 Census.

attention because of his antisocial behavior, the dependent or neglected child is usually referred to the court because he is suffering from some form of neglect or is receiving inadequate care from his parents or guardian. The reason may be the parent's death, absence from the home, or physical or mental incapacity; abandonment or desertion; abuse or cruel treatment; or improper home conditions or an inadequate home.

Dependency and neglect cases made up 19 percent (59,000) of the total reported by the 937 courts in 1954. Sixty-one percent were handled officially, in contrast to only 44 percent of the delinquency cases. The difference may result from the fact that the courts more often see the dependency and neglect cases as requiring a change in the legal relationship between parent and child.

The number of cases was only 1 percent greater in 1954 than in 1953. More cases were reported from the large urban areas than from the less populated areas, but the increase

from 1953 was greater in the courts serving the areas with less heavily concentrated populations (table 3). These small courts had their sharpest increase (28 percent) in the number of cases that they disposed of unofficially. Rates of dependency and neglect cases, like the rates of juvenile delinquency cases, are higher in urban areas than in the other areas.

Special Proceedings

Children are referred to juvenile courts for reasons other than delinquency and dependency or neglect. These other cases, which are generally termed "special proceedings," concern adoption, commitment of a mentally defective child, the use of a child as a material witness, application for consent to marry or to enlist in the Armed Forces, determination of the custody or guardianship of a child, and permission to a hospital to operate on a child. Of all cases reported by the 937 juvenile courts in 1954, only 15,557 or 5 percent were special proceedings cases. This type of case showed a 2-percent increase from 1953.

Some Limitations

The age of children and the type of case over which courts have jurisdiction are established by State law and often vary from State to State and sometimes from court to court within a State.

Variations in the organization and scope of other community services for children also have a great influence on the number of cases reported by the courts. In some communities the juvenile court is the only agency available to provide services to children. Other communities have, within the police department, a juvenile division that adjusts many cases or refers them to other community agencies rather than to the juvenile court. Still others have well-established programs of social services for children; the juvenile court is but one of many agencies that deal with children, and often it is used only when its authority as a judicial agency is needed. Community or parental attitudes toward a child's behavior are also important factors in determining

whether a child is brought to the attention of the court, and these attitudes also vary from place to place.

Because of these and other limitations, juvenile court statistics cannot be used alone to determine the full extent of delinquency or dependency and neglect, and they may be actually misleading when used to make comparisons between one community and another.

Improvement in Juvenile Court Statistics

The Children's Bureau is now modifying its reporting procedure and is requesting data for 1955 from a national sample of about 500 courts. The sample, which has been designed with technical assistance from the Bureau of the Census, is representative of the country as a whole; it has been selected according to such factors as the geographic location of the areas served by the courts and their population density, economy, and racial composition. The data thus collected will provide national estimates with a known and greater degree of reliability.

Table 4.—Trend in dependency and neglect cases and in number of children under age 18, 1946-54

[1946 = 100]

| Year | Dependency and neglect cases ¹ | Child population under age 18 ² |
|-----------|---|--|
| 1946..... | 100 | 100 |
| 1947..... | 103 | 104 |
| 1948..... | 102 | 107 |
| 1949..... | 97 | 110 |
| 1950..... | 92 | 113 |
| 1951..... | 96 | 116 |
| 1952..... | 97 | 120 |
| 1953..... | 102 | 125 |
| 1954..... | 102 | 129 |

¹ Data for 1951-54 based on cases disposed of by 382 courts serving about 20 percent of the child population; trend for previous years estimated.

² Trend based on data from the Bureau of the Census (*Current Population Reports*, Series P-25, Nos. 98 and 121).

When the plan is fully established, it will provide an efficient mechanism for collecting reliable information not only on trends in juvenile court cases but also on other phases of juvenile court work, including costs, reasons for referrals of children to the court, types of services rendered, and disposition of cases.