

1951

## How to Measure the Extent of Juvenile Delinquency

O. W. Wilson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc>

 Part of the [Criminal Law Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

O. W. Wilson, How to Measure the Extent of Juvenile Delinquency, 41 J. Crim. L. & Criminology 435 (1950-1951)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology by an authorized editor of Northwestern University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

## HOW TO MEASURE THE EXTENT OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

O. W. Wilson

The author was Chief of Police in Wichita, Kansas from 1928 to 1939. He has been Professor of Police Administration in the University of California at Berkeley since 1939. In the course of World War II and until 1947, he was Chief of Public Safety with the Military Government in Region III, Italy, and in Germany.—EDITOR.

Consideration of the problem of juvenile delinquency immediately raises the question, "How is the extent of delinquency to be measured?"<sup>1</sup> This question has been pondered an even greater length of time by those who have sought its answer in regard to general criminality. Some progress has been made in the latter field, and it would seem worthwhile, in seeking the answer in reference to the extent of juvenile delinquency, to consider the blind alleys that have already been explored in the search for a similar measure of general criminality.

Efforts in the latter field have produced an acceptable system for measuring the amount of crime. Although the system used is the best that has yet been developed anywhere in the world, it is not perfect. A study of it, however, may lead, quickly and directly, to a system for measuring the extent of juvenile delinquency, and thus avoid circuitous meanderings over paths long since abandoned in the search for an acceptable measure of general criminality.

The method used in this country for measuring variations in criminality is the *Uniform Crime Reporting* system developed by a committee of the International Association of Chiefs of Police under the able direction of Bruce Smith.<sup>2</sup> It is based on the preparation by local law enforcement agencies of uniform monthly crime reports, and annual reports that show the percentage of crimes that have been cleared by the arrest of the perpetrator. These reports are voluntarily submitted to the FBI where they are tabulated and published semi-annually with other information gleaned from fingerprint records also received from local and other agencies.<sup>3</sup>

Before proceeding, it may be well to consider whether the juvenile delinquency information being sought is of the same kind as that being provided in the field of general criminality by the system of *Uniform*

---

1. I. RICHARD PERLMAN, *The Meaning of Juvenile Delinquency Statistics*, FEDERAL PROBATION, 13, No. 3, September, 1949.

2. There is no intention to argue here the success of the system in accomplishing its purpose of measuring the amount of crime, beyond re-stating the fact that a better system has not yet been developed. For a detailed description of the system, see UNIFORM CRIME REPORTING, International Association of Chiefs of Police, Washington, D.C., 1929, 464 pp.

3. States should be urged to enact legislation requiring local law enforcement officials to submit prompt, accurate, and complete reports.

*Crime Reports.* Presumably the information desired is the extent of juvenile delinquency, however the term may be defined.<sup>4</sup> Should its extent be measured in terms of the numbers of juvenile offenders who have been dealt with by the police?—or by juvenile courts?—or made wards of juvenile courts?—or removed from their homes for purposes of correction? Or is the extent of juvenile delinquency best measured in terms of the number of juvenile offenses? The answers to these questions may be found through a review of the attempts to measure general criminality.

The total amount of crime serves as a measure of the extent of criminality. How else might it be measured? The blind alleys that have been explored include the number arrested, the number tried in criminal courts, the number convicted, and the number of inmates in penal institutions. Why go down these blind alleys once more? There is no better, more direct, more accurate measure of the extent of criminality of the people than in terms of the crimes that they commit.<sup>5</sup> Since this is true, it seems equally true that the best measure of the extent of juvenile delinquency is in terms of the delinquent acts.

Do *Uniform Crime Reports* accurately and completely measure the amount of crime? They do not report all crime, but only the Part I classes<sup>6</sup> selected on the basis of the likelihood of their "being known" to the police. The Part II offenses include those less likely to be known to the police, such as drunkenness, traffic violations, and many others considered less serious, as well as some more serious ones such as abortion, arson, and fraud. The Part II offenses are reported nationally only on the basis of arrests. The justification for this difference in treatment of Part I and Part II crimes seems apparent.

Since *Uniform Crime Reports* do not include all crimes, a question may be raised as to whether they provide a fair index of the crime total. The answer cannot be given categorically. Some contend that Part I crimes are committed by criminal failures, that the successful criminal commits "white collar" crimes which are more important than the Part I offenses, and that, in consequence, Part I crime is not a fair index of the total amount of crime. The problem of the juvenile delinquent, however, does not revolve about his participation in "white collar" crimes. In terms of offenses that are repugnant to the general public, that are of

4. Since it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to agree on a definition of criminality, why get exercised over the definition of it in its junior stage?

5. The validity of this conclusion is so generally accepted that it seems unnecessary to discuss the extraneous influences that cause sharp variations in the numbers noted above. The extraneous influences include changes in law, policy, procedure, and public sentiment.

6. Part I crimes consist of homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, and auto theft.

first concern to the police and the criminal courts, that fill our penitentiaries, and that result in juvenile difficulties, Part I crimes seem to be of immediate concern. Most persons think of criminality in terms of Part I crimes. It will be considered in the same light here.

From a practical point of view it seems, therefore, that the extent of Part I crime may be taken as an index of the amount of crime that is of immediate concern to all agencies in the administration of criminal justice. Further, the present impossibility of measuring accurately the amount of other crime makes the acceptance of this index a necessity.<sup>7</sup>

Part I crime, then, is the best available measure of the extent of general criminality. Since this is true, it seems obvious that Part I crime committed by juveniles is the best available measure of the extent of juvenile delinquency.

Since Part I crimes are being reported and serve as a measure of general criminality, if it were possible to segregate those committed by juveniles, an equally valid measure of juvenile delinquency would be available. The problem is to ascertain which of all Part I crimes are committed by juveniles. This cannot be done specifically, but a juvenile crime index can be used which will serve the same end, i.e., provide a measure of the extent and changes in frequency of juvenile crime.

Although Part I crimes committed by juveniles may be either more difficult or less difficult to clear by arrest than Part I crimes committed by adults, it seems fair to assume that any variation in difficulty within a community will remain fairly constant. It is possible, therefore, to measure variations in frequency of juvenile crime by using an index derived by applying to the number of all crimes in each Part I class the percentage of "cleared by arrest" cases in that class that were cleared by the arrest of juvenile perpetrators. For example, if 40% of all "cleared by arrest" auto thefts were cleared by the arrest of juveniles, then the juvenile auto theft rate index would be 40% of all auto thefts in that community during that period.<sup>8</sup>

It is proposed that the system of *Uniform Crime Reports* be expanded to include annually the juvenile crime rate index in the community for each Part I crime. This should be divided into two parts: for offenses committed by persons 15 to 17 and 18 to 20 years of age, inclusive.

If this procedure were applied to each year group,<sup>9</sup> from 15 or 16

7. Perhaps there will be developed, one day, a more complete and accurate index of the total amount of crime. But the problems of juvenile delinquency and criminality are immediate and urgent; tools presently available must, therefore, be used in their solution.

8. O. W. WILSON, *POLICE RECORDS*, Public Administration Service, Chicago, 1942, p. 222.

9. A juvenile crime rate index for each year group would be feasible only in the large city.

years onward, it is believed that the peak of criminality (as measured in Part I crimes) would be found near 17 years of age with annual decreases in the percentage of total Part I crimes committed by any one year group until the individual is prevented from further criminality by old age or the grave.<sup>10</sup>

Since *Uniform Crime Reports* provide the best available measure of criminality, the adoption of this proposal would provide an approximately equally accurate measure of the extent of juvenile delinquency. If *Uniform Crime Reports* do not measure the extent of general criminality, then attention should be given to this general problem before proceeding further with the more specific one of measuring the extent of juvenile delinquency.

10. A SURVEY OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY IN SEDGWICK COUNTY, KANSAS, (p. 33) makes an interesting tabulation of age groups 16 to 24, inclusive, of all persons charged with Part I crimes who were dealt with by the police, the sheriff, and the juvenile court, over a 10-year period, 1927-37, inclusive. Nineteen and a half percent of this age group were 16 years of age. The percentages for each age group were as follows:

16 years—	19.49	21 years—	8.68
17	15.38	22	7.67
18	14.17	23	8.38
19	11.99	24	4.84
20	8.86		<hr/>
			99.96

The above cited survey was conducted under the auspices of The Works Progress Administration and published by Juvenile Court, Sedgwick County, Kansas, 1938.