**Juvenile delinquency**

Juvenile delinquency is the legal term for behavior of children and adolescents that in adults would be judged criminal under law. In the United States, definitions and age limits of juveniles vary, the maximum age being set at 14 years in some states and as high as 21 years in others. The 16- to 20-year age group, considered adult in many places, has one of the highest incidences of serious crime. Theft is the most common offense by children; more serious property crimes and rape are most frequently committed in later youth. The causes of such behavior, like those of crime in general, are found in a complex of psychological, social, and economic factors. Clinical studies have uncovered emotional maladjustments, usually arising from disorganized family situations, in many delinquents.

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Other studies have suggested that there are persisting patterns of delinquency in poverty-level neighborhoods regardless of changing occupants; this "culture of poverty" argument has come into disrepute among many social scientists. The [gang](http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1E1-gang.html) , a source of much delinquency, has been a common path for adolescents, particularly in the inner cities. Not until the development, after 1899, of the juvenile court was judgment of youthful offenders effectively separated from that of adults. The system generally emphasizes informal procedure and correction rather than punishment. In some states, psychiatric clinics are attached, and there has been a tendency to handle cases in public welfare agencies outside the court. Juvenile correctional institutions have been separated from regular prisons since the early 19th cent., and although most are inadequate, some have developed intensive rehabilitation programs, providing vocational training and psychiatric treatment. The parole system, foster homes, child guidance clinics, and public juvenile protective agencies have contributed to the correction of delinquent and maladjusted children. Especially important for prevention is action by community groups to provide essential facilities for the well-being of children. On an international level, delinquency rates are highest in the more economically and technologically advanced countries.