A State-Level Analysis of Juvenile Justice Policies and Outcomes

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Abstract

The present study aims to understand what policies and practices are associated with juvenile arrests and incarceration. While the adult system has relatively uniform practices across states, the juvenile justice system has wide variation, particularly when it comes to policies regarding the ages at which juveniles are tried as a minor and as an adult. This study uses bivariate and multivariate analyses in order to determine **what policies and practices are associated with higher levels of juvenile incarceration and arrests.** Understanding these differences can help inform future juvenile justice research and policy decisions in order to mitigate the harms associated with juvenile delinquency.

Background

Every year, approximately two million adolescents come in contact with the juvenile justice system (Puzzanchera 2009). In the United States today, nearly sixty thousand juveniles are held in juvenile correctional facilities or adult prisons (Sawyer 2019; ACLU 2021). Juvenile crime has been a concern for many Americans over the past several decades, especially following the increase in juvenile crime during the 1980s (Cook and Laub 1998). In contrast to the relatively uniform approach to juvenile justice when the juvenile court was created, today juvenile justice policies vary widely across states and many rights that are guaranteed to adults are not to juveniles (Levick 2016). **Without uniform expectations and policies in place to protect juveniles, there are many issues that may arise pertaining to inequality, injustice, and poor outcomes for youth.**

Methods

The research questions were investigated using a dataset created by pulling together state-level data from various sources, such as The Department of Justice, The Interstate Commission for Juveniles, and the nonprofit organizations The Sentencing Project and Human Rights for Kids.

Research question: What policies and practices are associated with juvenile arrests and incarceration?

Dependent variables:
- Juvenile incarceration rate
- Juvenile detention rate
- Juvenile arrest rate
- Ratio of arrests of Black and Hispanic youth compared to white youth

Methods

Independent variables:
- Age of criminal responsibility
- Minimum age of juvenile transfer
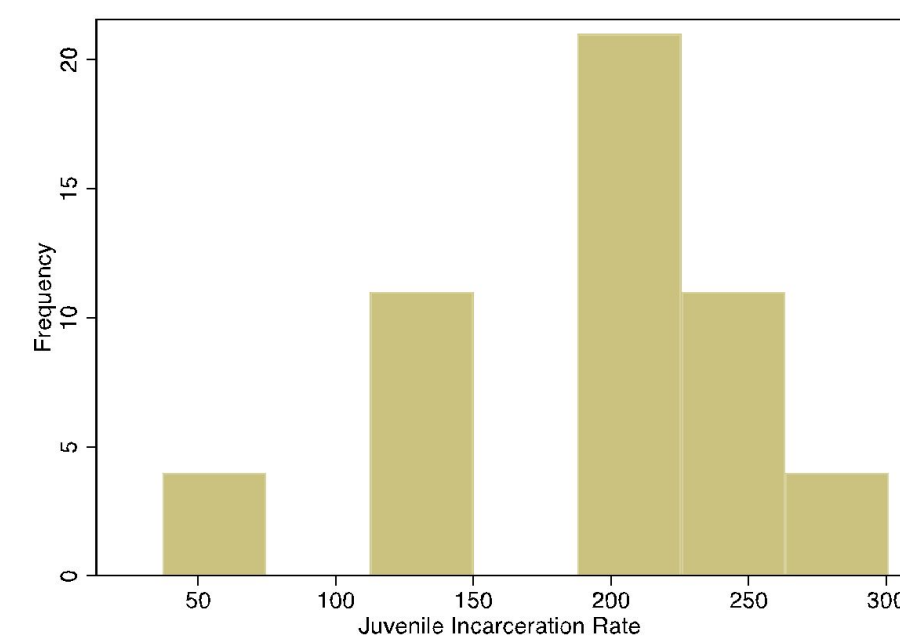- Minimum and maximum ages of juvenile court jurisdiction
- Human rights rating

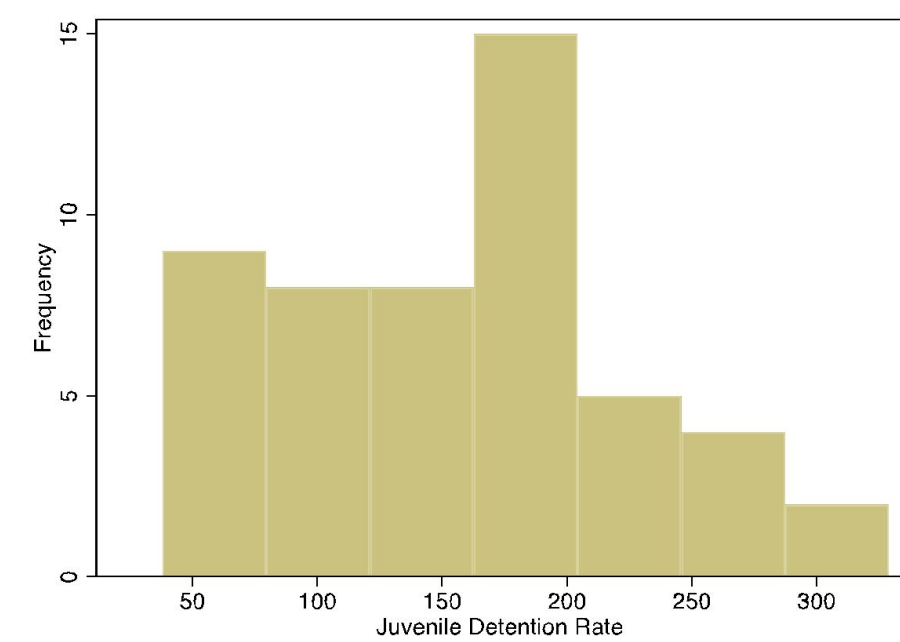**Controls:**
- Violent crime rate
- Political affiliation

Results

Univariate Results

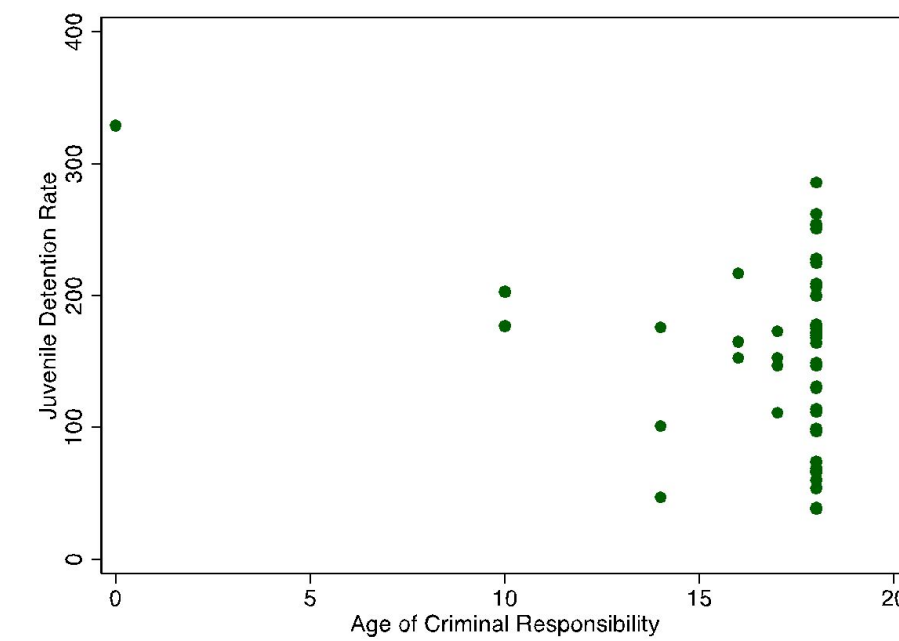**Juvenile Incarceration Rate in 2018.**

Juvenile Detention Rate in 2018.

The ju~~venile~~ ... ~~incarceration~~ ate had a moderate degree of variation across states (mean = 185.020, SD = 72.880; mean = 156.549, SD = 68.953). Both of these variables had a relatively normal distribution.
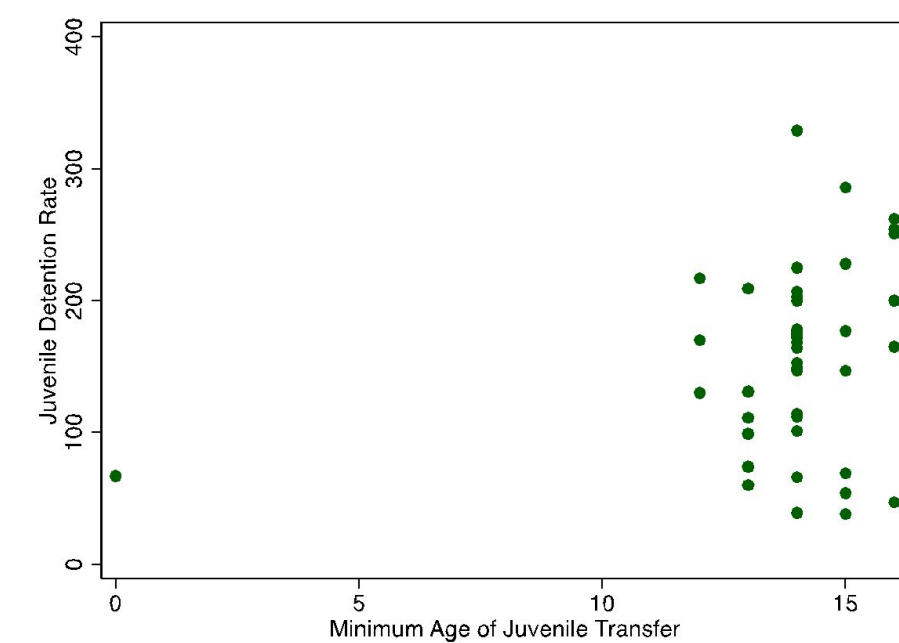
Results

Bivariate Results

Age of Criminal Responsibility and Juvenile Detention Rate.
There was a significant positive association with the age of criminal responsibility (*r*: -.333, p-value: .024) .

Minimum age of juvenile transfer and juvenile detention rate.
There was a significant association between the minimum age at which a juvenile can be transferred to an adult court and the juvenile detention rate (*r*: .252, p-value: .095).

Multivariate Results

The featured QR code can be used to view the regression table, which shows the relationships between independent and dependent variables when accounting for the two control variables.

Discussion

Key takeaways:

- There is evidence to suggest that a lower age of criminal responsibility is associated with higher levels of juvenile arrests and incarceration.

- While bivariate analyses only indicated a significant effect with the juvenile detention outcome variable, adding the control variables to the regression models indicated a significant effect for both the juvenile detention rate and the juvenile incarceration rate

- There was some evidence in favor of punitive policies leading to lower levels of juvenile delinquency. The strongest example was the relationship between the minimum age of juvenile transfer and the juvenile detention rate. However, the effect did not hold true when accounting for the two control variables.

Conclusion

Addressing juvenile crime is a complex issue that has been a source of controversy for decades. The juvenile justice system has evolved from taking a primarily rehabilitative approach, to applying similar punitive sentences as adult courts. Recently researchers, activists, and justice partners have advocated for better treatment of system-involved youth. It is crucial that researchers continue to investigate how juvenile justice practices and policies may impact outcomes for juveniles. **Reform must begin with facts and findings that emerge from quantitative analysis of the system, and research should play an integral role in determining better policies for a better future for youth in this country.**

References

This QR code can be used to access the research questions, correlation matrix, regression models, and full list of references.