



Commitment of Juveniles to Training Schools

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The study analyzes commitment rates to training schools, average length of stay and the facility utilization in the various states over the period 1979-1990. Based on a regression analysis of the data, we found that only the bed ratio, which is the number of beds per 100,000 eligible population, and average length of stay in training schools are significant in explaining the changes of commitment rate over the years. The paper focuses on the meaning of the variation between states on the commitment rate, the average length of stay and facility utilization might have in terms of correctional policy. There is also a discussion of our findings that the only significant variables in explaining commitment rate change were institutional variables that influence correctional policy.

Juvenile justice policies generally reflect the public's mood and concerns about juvenile crime and preferences for how society should respond to young offenders. Juvenile and criminal justice professionals and elected public officials are very sensitive to public sentiments on these issues and shape policies and practices accordingly. Changes in commitment rates over time are a reliable reflection of the public's shifting sentiments and the correctional policies and practices that follow.

Public outrage over the rising tide of juvenile crime and violence, as well as the extensive coverage this issue is receiving from the media, are currently affecting the "criminalization and adultification" (Feld, 1992) of the juvenile justice system. Increasing support for committing more juveniles to public and private youth correction facilities and at earlier stages in their delinquency careers is also evident.

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Neither the increased use of incarceration nor increased classifications of young offenders as adults are new or innovative ideas. Prior to the creation of the juvenile court, young people who committed crimes (including dependent, neglected, and mentally ill children) were tried in the criminal courts and often were committed to adult jails and prisons (Platt, 1977). During the late 1950s and 1960s, public training school populations increased dramatically as a strategy for responding to the problems of status offenders and delinquent youth (US President's Crime Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, 1968).

The impact of these punitive strategies and policies has never been carefully examined. In the absence of compelling hard data, the costs and effectiveness of these approaches remain questionable and are likely to be debated well into the next century (Center for the Study of Youth Policy, 1987).

This paper focuses on youth incarceration in public training schools during the decade of the 1980s and explores selected factors that are likely to account for commitment to these institutions. Policy makers and juvenile justice officials typically assert that what drives admissions to training schools is increased rates of serious and violent crimes committed by juveniles. The average person in the street also believes that these institutions are populated by such offenders. The current study endeavored to identify the differences between states in trends of committing juveniles to training schools, and explored which structural, criminal, and institutional variables predict these commitment trends. The findings will inform the debate on the increased reliance on incarceration of juveniles as a crime control policy.

Theoretical Perspectives

The traditional and quite commonly accepted explanation for the incarceration of children suggests that rates of incarceration and commitment of children to training schools reflects the crime rate in a particular society. Crime itself has been traditionally associated with poverty, low educational levels, unemployment, ethnicity and other factors. Thus in theory, fluctuations in commitment rates to training schools would reflect changes crime rates, as well as changes in structural variables such as poverty levels, unemployment rates, educational levels, and ethnic composition.

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