



NATIONAL DISTRICT ATTORNEYS ASSOCIATION

What's Behind the Rise in Juvenile Carjackings? What Can We Do About It?

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Overview

Over the past eighteen months, there has been an alarming increase in violent crimes committed by both adults and juveniles across the country. Of particular concern has been the unprecedented rise in armed carjackings committed by young car thieves, some as young as 12 or 13. A review of the recent cases, along with conversations with law enforcement, prosecutors and other experts in the field, reveal that there has been a confluence of factors that are contributing to this rise. In this issue brief we offer an analysis of these factors along with recommendations as to effective responses.

While there are no national statistics on this recent rise in armed carjacking by juvenile offenders, according to recent news accounts, many state and local law enforcement groups have been able to track a rise in these criminal offenses. According to various departments, numbers for these specific crimes have exploded during the pandemic and show no signs of letting up.

In Minneapolis, for example, there were 405 carjackings last year — more than triple the number in 2019. The suspects arrested were often juveniles between the ages of 11 and 17. Other cities saw significant increases too, including New Orleans, LA, Kansas City, MO, Louisville, KY and Washington, D.C. In Chicago, there were 1,400 carjackings in 2020, with juveniles involved in nearly half of them. Chicago police say there have been 370 carjackings in the city of Chicago in the first two and a half months of 2021.

Factors Contributing to the Rise

A myriad factors are contributing to the rise in carjackings committed by juveniles, the most profound impact stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating impact it has had in schools and in juvenile justice systems across the country. The lockdowns caused many states to close schools and move to a virtual learning environment. The lack of day-to-day structure and oversight has resulted in youth spending less time in school settings and more time unsupervised time on the streets and on social media.

The impact of the pandemic on the juvenile justice system has been even more dramatic. The shutdown brought normal court processing to a standstill. Many prosecutors could not respond effectively to juvenile offending, even cases of serious crimes, and most community programming was discontinued. On top of that, many of the juvenile detention facilities released detainees because of fear of spreading the virus, allowing serious and violent offenders to return to the community with limited supervision or programming.

On top of the school and juvenile justice issues that the pandemic has created, the social unrest within the criminal justice system over the past year has also had an impact. According to police officials in Chicago, the spike in carjackings coincided with skyrocketing gun violence and unrest following the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minnesota. Experts have said that all these factors have contributed to the crime totals.

What Can Be Done?

Due to the violent and potentially deadly nature of these crimes, jurisdictions are prioritizing their resources on these cases. In some communities, leaders have created task forces in which local, state and federal enforcement agents share information and collaborate. Many have taken to the media to offer safety tips to residents and stress the importance of remaining on guard against these attacks.

According to George Mosee, former Juvenile Division Chief of the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office and currently the Chief Executive Officer of the Anti-Drug/Anti-Gang Network of Philadelphia, there are a wide range of responses that must be implemented simultaneously and in a comprehensive manner. First, there needs to be a clear message sent to the community that these crimes will not be tolerated. When these crimes are committed, prosecutors and law enforcement officials must address armed carjackings appropriately. Victims and the community demand that justice be swift and proportional.

Considering so many youth are involved in these cases, another important response is for the juvenile justice system to work proactively with schools to raise awareness about the legal ramifications of these crimes. Young people must understand that armed robberies, possession of weapons and other violent offenses will be handled swiftly and with serious consequences. While most offenses in juvenile court do not rise to this level of severity, these cases must be prioritized.

Yet another response to minimizing juvenile offenses is taking advantage of powerful awareness resources such as local advocates and victims groups. In Philadelphia, "Mothers In Charge" is a violence prevention, education, and intervention-based organization that is comprised of women who have lost family members to murder. They work with youth and young adults whose lives have been impacted by violence. In addition, Mothers In Charge collaborates with elected officials, community leaders and other community and faith-based organizations on legislation and solutions to support safe neighborhoods and communities for children and families.

The research around serious and violent juvenile offenders makes it clear that there are certain risk factors that increase the likelihood of this type of offending. Factors such as substance use, antisocial attitudes, and gang involvement along with lowered age at first offense, are all significant indicators.

Dr. Robert Anda, a renowned researcher on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), has noted that "what is predictable is preventable, so one of the most important immediate steps is prioritizing prevention and early identification. Schools and juvenile justice stakeholders must

work together to identify youth who are exhibiting signs of substance use, gang involvement, and anti-social attitudes. These factors put youth at increased risk for this type of offending, so identifying and offering services to address these issues before the behavior results in a carjacking is an important step towards addressing this very dangerous trend. Given the extensive research around evidence-based strategies to target those risk factors, it is imperative that front line stakeholders are educated and trained on these practices.

The field of juvenile justice has made tremendous strides over the past 25 years and until recently overall offending had dropped significantly. In fact, the U.S. Department of Justice recently published data from 2019 which shows juvenile arrests had dropped to their lowest in 40 years. Findings show that in 2019, law enforcement agencies made an estimated 696,620 arrests of youth under age 18—the lowest number since at least 1980. In addition, juvenile arrests overall fell 58 percent between 2010 and 2019, although patterns vary by demographic group and offense.

It is too soon to tell if the recent spike in juvenile offending is a temporary crisis in response to recent societal issues, primarily related to COVID restrictions and the social unrest in the wake of criminal justice events, or perhaps due to some larger underlying trend.

No matter what is fueling this dramatic rise, a key component of any response is rebuilding relationships between the police and youth in the communities they serve. NDAA is currently working with experienced prosecutors, law enforcement and other juvenile justice experts to address this issue through a continuum of responses that will enhance responses at every interception point.

Through funding from the Office on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) at the U.S. Department of Justice, NDAA is working to prioritize this work and is offering enhanced training and technical assistance to ensure that juvenile court prosecutors and their colleagues are equipped to respond swiftly and appropriately to the current spike in violent offending. Through this crisis, we hope to galvanize the sense of fairness and justice that is so critical to the juvenile justice system and to bring back a sense of community safety and better outcomes for youth.



The Rise of Carjackings Among Juveniles





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