



# Judging by the Data

Offenders in Minnesota's Juvenile Courts

---

JUNE 1998

**MINNESOTA PLANNING** develops long-range plans for the state, stimulates public participation in Minnesota's future and coordinates activities among state agencies, the Minnesota Legislature and other units of government.

*Judging by the Data: Offenders in Minnesota's Juvenile Courts* was prepared for Minnesota's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee by Debra Hagel of the Criminal Justice Center at Minnesota Planning, with assistance from staff members LaLonnie Erickson, Patricia Larson, Ray Lewis and Susan Roth. Additional help in understanding the data structures and relationships in the Minnesota Supreme Court's State Judicial Information System database came from Sharon Krmpotich, a research analyst with the Supreme Court.

Funding for *Judging by the Data: Offenders in Minnesota's Juvenile Courts* was provided by a grant from the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, Minnesota Department of Economic Security and the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Upon request, *Judging by the Data: Offenders in Minnesota's Juvenile Courts* will be made available in an alternate format, such as Braille, large print or audio tape. For TTY, contact Minnesota Relay Service at 800-627-3529 and ask for Minnesota Planning.

June 1998

For paper copies of *Judging by the Data: Offenders in Minnesota's Juvenile Courts*, contact the Minnesota Department of Economic Security. An electronic copy is available at Minnesota Planning's World Wide Web site:

**MINNESOTA PLANNING**



658 Cedar St.  
St. Paul, MN 55155  
Criminal Justice Center: 651-296-4852  
[www.mnplan.state.mn.us](http://www.mnplan.state.mn.us)

# Judging by the Data: Offenders in Minnesota's Juvenile Courts

Picturing youth in the courts .....	1
Focusing on age.....	2
Focusing on sex .....	3
Focusing on judicial districts.....	7
Considering data limitations.....	8

# Glossary

**Disposition** — the conclusion of a juvenile case by the court and the subsequent consequence, whether it be a dismissal or a finding of delinquency resulting in a court-ordered consequence; comparable to a sentence for adults

**Felony** — an offense for which a sentence of incarceration of more than one year may be imposed

**Gross misdemeanor** — an offense for which a fine of up to \$3,000 may be imposed

**Juvenile delinquent** — any 10- to 17-year-old who has been adjudicated delinquent for committing a misdemeanor, gross misdemeanor or felony

**Misdemeanor** — an offense for which a sentence of incarceration of up to 90 days or a fine of up to \$700 or both may be imposed

**Part 2 crimes** — as defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the offenses of assaults other than aggravated assaults, forgery or counterfeiting, fraud, embezzlement, stolen property, vandalism, weapons offenses, prostitution, other sex offenses, narcotics offenses, gambling offenses, offenses against children or family, driving under the influence, violations of liquor laws, disorderly conduct, vagrancy and other offenses (except traffic)

**Petition** — the formal charge against a juvenile who has allegedly committed an offense. For the purposes of this report, petition also refers to tab charges and citations, which are commonly called tickets or complaints.

**Petty misdemeanor** — an offense that is prohibited by statute but does not constitute a crime and for which a fine of up to \$200 may be imposed

**Property crimes** — as defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Part 1 offenses of burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson

**Status offense** — behavior that is considered unlawful for children, even though the same behavior by an adult is legal. The most common status offenses are curfew violations, truancy and running away from home. Juveniles who violate alcohol and tobacco laws or other local ordinances that apply only to youth are referred to as "juvenile petty offenders."

**Stayed disposition** — a consequence, usually out-of-home placement, that a juvenile does not need to complete as long as the youth completes the other consequences of the disposition

**Violent crimes** — as defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Part 1 offenses of murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault

# Picturing youth in the courts

Youth enter the juvenile court system for three reasons: they are children in need of protection or services; they have been charged with committing a status offense, such as being truant; or they have been charged with committing a felony, gross misdemeanor or misdemeanor. Information about these youth and what happens to them in the system is essential for criminal justice professionals and policy-makers to make informed, effective decisions.

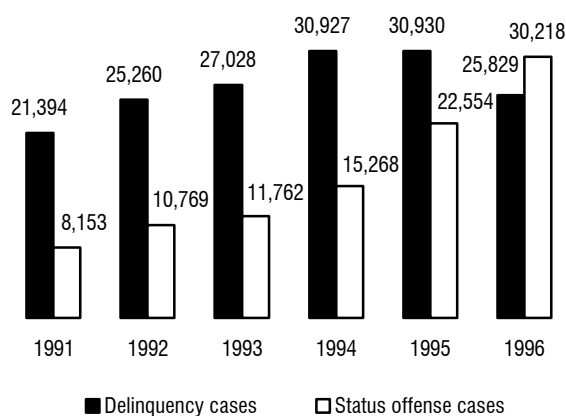
*Judging by the Data: Offenders in Minnesota's Juvenile Courts* presents a snapshot of Minnesota youth charged with crimes other than status offenses. It examines offenses, dispositions and length of time cases are in the juvenile court in terms of age and sex of offenders, as well as by judicial district.

This analysis is based on a database developed by Minnesota Planning from data obtained from the Minnesota Supreme Court's State Judicial Information System database, which collects information on all juvenile court cases that have courtroom activity. The cases reviewed involved youth who were age 10 to 17 at the time of an offense at the felony, gross misdemeanor or misdemeanor level. Age as used in this analysis, however, is based on the age at the filing of a petition; therefore, some juveniles were age 18 or older by the time their cases were filed with the court.

All cases reviewed for this analysis were filed between 1991 and 1996 and ended with a disposition — a finding of delinquency with a court-ordered consequence — within those years. The offense categories presented in this analysis reflect the offense for which a youth's case was disposed and are based on those in the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program: Part 1 violent crimes (murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault); Part 1 property crimes (burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft and arson); and Part 2 offenses (other assaults, forgery or counterfeiting, fraud, embezzlement, stolen property, vandalism, weapons offenses, prostitution, other sex offenses, narcotic offenses, gambling offenses, offenses against children or family, driving under the influence, liquor laws, disorderly conduct, other offenses [except traffic], and vagrancy).

*Judging by the Data* examines the severity of dispositions given to delinquent youth. For purposes of this report, dispositions are divided into four levels of severity. Severity is based on intrusiveness into a youth's life, with the most intrusive dispositions being those that remove juveniles from their homes. The most-severe level includes detention and out-of-home placement. Dispositions of second-level severity usually involve a stay of detention or out-of-home

**Drop in delinquency cases related to law change**



Note: A 1995 law turned certain misdemeanors into petty misdemeanors, which no longer are reported as delinquency cases but rather as status offenses.  
Source: Data from the Minnesota Supreme Court

## Juvenile justice system involves several steps

The juvenile justice system is a process involving several steps. While the steps may vary depending on the particular case, the system generally works as follows: The first step occurs when law enforcement officials refer a case either to a probation officer or to a county attorney, depending on the county's court intake procedures. After intake, if enough evidence exists to prosecute the case, the county attorney then files a petition with the juvenile court asking it to find the youth to be delinquent. This starts the formal court processing of the case.

The court then sets a date for the arraignment at which the youth appears before the court for the first time to answer the charges. If the youth admits to the charges, which happens in many cases, the court can impose the disposition or order a predisposition investigation and set a date for the disposition hearing. If the youth denies the charges, a trial date is set.

Most juvenile court trials are bench trials, that is, the judge is the sole fact finder. After the case is heard and if the petition is proven, the judge finds the youth to be delinquent and sets a date for the disposition hearing. If the petition is not proven, the judge dismisses the case.

placement that depends on offenders successfully completing the conditions of a less-severe disposition. Those of the third level involve out-patient treatment, assessment and supervised probation. The least-severe dispositions may include such actions as taking random drug tests or getting passing grades in school.

given dispositions at the third level of severity, including out-patient treatment and supervised probation. Of youth age 11, 53 percent received the least-severe dispositions and 36 percent the third most-severe. The number of 10- and 11-year-olds with the most-severe and second most-severe dispositions for all crimes was too small to report with confidence.

## Focusing on age

### Most youth were 16 or older when petition was filed

Of all juveniles in the cases analyzed, 57 percent were 16 years or older at the time of the filing of the petition. In a year-to-year breakout, the proportion of youth younger than and older than 16 never fluctuated more than 4 percentage points. The total number of youth age 16 or older, for example, was lowest in 1993 and 1994 at 56 percent and highest in 1996 at 60 percent.

Of 12-year-olds, 49 percent received the least-severe dispositions, while 34 percent were given third-level dispositions, and 13 percent had the most-severe dispositions. For 13- and 14-year-olds, in comparison, the proportion of those receiving the most-severe dispositions rose slightly, changing no more than 1 percentage point, while those with the least-severe fell gradually.

### Younger juveniles received less-severe dispositions

Within each filing year, analysis showed that the younger the juveniles, the less severe the dispositions. Sixty-five percent of 10-year-olds received the least-severe level of dispositions. Twenty-eight percent of these youth were

Among 15-year-olds, 22 percent had dispositions at the highest severity level, 33 percent at the third level and 41 percent at the lowest level. The distribution of dispositions by severity was similar for 16- and 17-year-olds, with no more than a 2-percentage point variance. By age 18, however, the distribution was more comparable to that for 12-year-olds: 51 percent of 18-year-olds received dispositions at the lowest level, 30 percent at the third level and 15 percent at the highest. Younger juveniles may have had a higher proportion of less-severe dispositions because the specific offenses in which they were involved may have been less serious. Dispositions at the second level of severity, which included a stay of detention or out-of-home placement dependent on offenders completing a less-severe disposition, did not account for more than 3 to 5 percent of the cases for youth age 12 to 18.

**The number of adjudicated delinquent youth rose at all ages from 1991 to 1994**

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	Total
<b>Age</b>							
<b>10</b>	87	107	81	119	105	71	<b>570</b>
<b>11</b>	254	364	372	430	321	288	<b>2,029</b>
<b>12</b>	643	720	860	1,079	910	658	<b>4,870</b>
<b>13</b>	1,401	1,735	2,085	2,307	2,482	1,550	<b>11,560</b>
<b>14</b>	2,640	3,316	3,516	4,137	4,125	3,102	<b>20,836</b>
<b>15</b>	3,837	4,521	4,806	5,514	5,514	4,559	<b>28,751</b>
<b>16</b>	4,521	5,098	5,429	6,354	5,953	5,655	<b>33,010</b>
<b>17</b>	4,961	5,672	5,915	6,669	7,053	5,900	<b>36,170</b>
<b>18</b>	2,929	3,540	3,692	4,013	4,147	3,810	<b>22,131</b>
<b>19 and older</b>	67	120	160	186	113	123	<b>769</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>21,340</b>	<b>25,193</b>	<b>26,916</b>	<b>30,808</b>	<b>30,723</b>	<b>25,716</b>	<b>160,696</b>

The decline from 1995 to 1996 reflects a law change that turned certain misdemeanors into petty misdemeanors, which are not reported as delinquency cases but rather as status offenses.

Note: The age is the age recorded at the filing of the petition. Data included only cases filed between 1991 to 1996 and disposed within those years. Cases were excluded if a calculated age was a negative number, a birthdate was missing from the data, or the age was under 10, since only youth age 10 to 17 at the time of the offense may be adjudicated as delinquent. The total number of cases in 1996 will be slightly higher when some filed in that year are disposed in 1997 or a later year.

Source: Data from the Minnesota Supreme Court

Juveniles who were shown to be 19 years old and older at the time of the petition filing were excluded because there were too few of them to study with confidence.

## Majority of disposed cases involved property and Part 2 crimes

Because studying the type of offenses at the time cases were filed was not possible with the existing data, only offenses at the time of disposition were analyzed. The majority of disposed cases at all ages involved property and Part 2 offenses. For property crimes, 66 percent of 10-year-olds and 55 percent of 11-year-olds received the least-severe dispositions. Fifty-two percent of 12-year-olds received the least-severe dispositions, 34 percent the third most-severe and 12 percent the most-severe. Among 13-year-olds, 45 percent received the least-severe dispositions for committing property offenses, while 35 percent received the third most-severe and 16 percent the most-severe. These percentages changed little for youth older than 13. Within each age category from 14 to 18 of juveniles who received a disposition for a property crime, 40 to 49 percent were given the least-severe dispositions, 30 to 34 percent the third most-severe and 17 to 24 percent the most-severe.

Of 10-year-olds who received dispositions for a Part 2 crime, such as vandalism or disorderly conduct, 63 percent had the least-severe dispositions and 29 percent the third most-severe. In comparison, 53 percent of 11-year-olds in

this crime category were given the least-severe dispositions and 38 percent the third most-severe. Within each age category of 12 to 17, 42 to 48 percent had the least-severe dispositions, while 14 to 20 percent had the most-severe for Part 2 crimes. Of 18-year-olds, 53 percent received the least-severe dispositions for Part 2 crimes, a percentage comparable to that for 12-year-olds, while 31 percent were given the third-most severe.

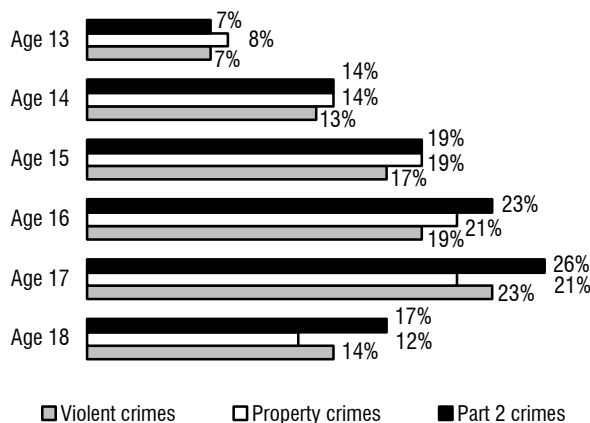
For each age, second-level dispositions ranged from 1 to 7 percent in the violent, property and part 2 crime categories. The number of 10- and 11-year-olds with the most-severe dispositions was too small to report with confidence. Youth age 19 and older were too few in number to include.

## Focusing on sex

### Most in system are males brought in by law enforcement officials

The vast majority — 96 percent — of all youth who entered the juvenile court system because of criminal activity between 1991 and 1996 were brought in by law enforcement officials, and most — 81 percent — were male. The other 4 percent of youth were referred by probation officers,

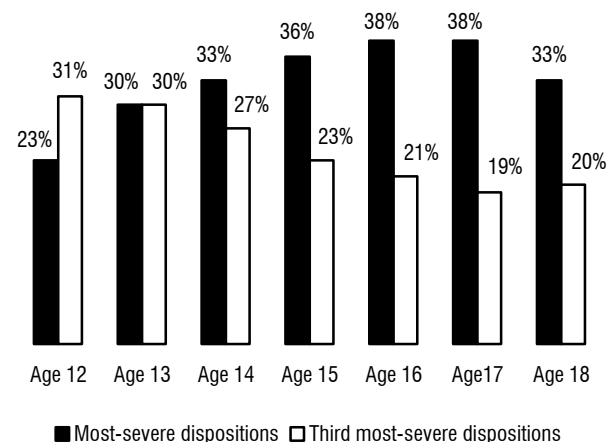
As youth age, property crimes fall and Part 2 crimes rise



Note: Analysis was based on ages 10 to 18 at the time the petition was filed. It excludes cases involving youth age 19 and older. Youth age 10 accounted for less than 1 percent of each crime type; those age 11 made up 2 percent of violent and 1 percent of both property and Part 2 offenses; and those age 12 accounted for 4 percent of violent and 3 percent of both property and Part 2 offenses. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Data from the Minnesota Supreme Court

Older offenders tend to get more severe dispositions for violent crimes



Note: In each age group the second most severe dispositions — a stay of detention or out-of-home placement — accounted for 3 to 6 percent, and the least severe dispositions — such as getting good grades — accounted for 36 to 43 percent. Youth younger than 12 and those 19 and older were excluded from this analysis because their numbers were too small to study with confidence.

Source: Data from the Minnesota Supreme Court

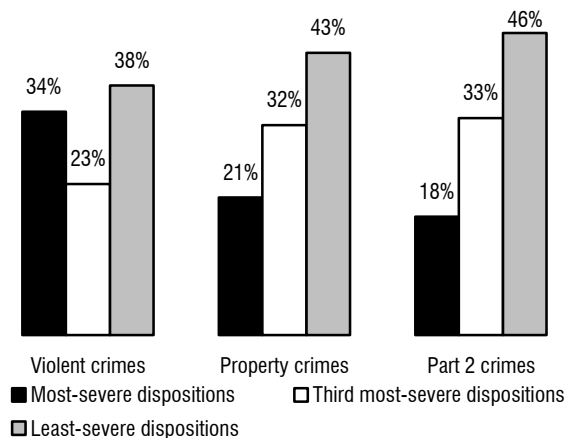
parents, welfare agencies, citizens, schools and others, which may include medical professionals. While welfare agencies referred only 218 juveniles, this total was composed of almost equal portions of males and females — 53 percent and 47 percent, respectively. These agencies were the only referral source from which such a balance resulted; the data, however, does not allow insight into why this occurred.

## Males outnumber females in all offenses but one

While the overall ratio of males to females in the juvenile court system is about 4 to 1, this spread does not hold across all offenses. Females accounted for the majority of prostitution offenses, with 79 percent of the 34 dispositions for this crime. They also made up more than one-third in three types of offenses: 40 percent in both fraud, and forgery and counterfeiting, and 34 percent in offenses against children and family.

Excluding the category of “other offenses (except traffic),” which was 11 percent for both sexes, the three most prevalent offenses for females were larceny, with 36 percent; other assaults, with 15 percent; and disorderly conduct, with 9 percent. A total of 16,108 cases involving females were disposed for these offenses. The top three offenses for males also included larceny and other assaults, with 26 and 11 percent, respectively; the third was vandalism, with 9 percent. Of the dispositions for these crimes, 50,776 involved males.

### Least severe dispositions given most often for all offenses



Note: Percentages do not round to 100 because the data for second most - severe dispositions a stay of detention or out-of-home placement was not included. Such dispositions accounted for 4 percent in each offense category. Source: Data from the Minnesota Supreme Court

## Males more likely to get severe dispositions

Although males accounted for 81 percent of all disposed petitions, they had 87 percent of the most-severe dispositions, which are detention and out-of-home placement. This may have been due to the level of offense severity: 88 percent of all disposed cases of violent crimes involved males.

Thirty-six percent of all violent crime cases that involved males — compared to 27 percent involving females — resulted in the most-severe dispositions. Of property offense cases, 23 percent of all cases involving males and 12 percent involving females had the most-severe dispositions. These differences in disposition severity by sex may reflect the seriousness of the offense. Slightly more than 1 percent of all cases of males involved the most violent crimes of murder and rape, while these two crimes accounted for only two-tenths of a percent of all cases of females. The proportions of cases in each disposition level for males with Part 2 offenses were similar to those for females with those offenses.

## Males more apt than females to have an attorney

The analysis reveals some interesting correlations between the severity of the disposition and the presence of an attorney. Juveniles have had the right to be represented by an attorney in juvenile court since 1967. In 1995, the Minnesota Legislature mandated such attorney representation or presence in cases involving felony, gross misdemeanor or certain misdemeanor offenses.

The level of severity of the disposition most likely reflected the seriousness of the crime, which may have been a factor in whether an attorney was present. It is important to note that the data did not include the time spent in detention or out-of-home placement, which also could be an indicator of the seriousness of the crime. Recording such information would allow for developing a more complete picture of the dispositions.

In 1996 — the first full year following the enactment of the legislative mandate — 26 percent of all felony cases, 29 percent of all gross misdemeanor cases and 45 percent of all misdemeanor cases involved youth who did not have an attorney. Some of the misdemeanor cases, however, may have included offenses for which the 1995 law does not require legal representation. In addition, data collection practices may account for why some juveniles appeared in

the data to not be represented by an attorney. An attorney may in fact have been present but not formally assigned to the youth and thus not recorded by the court.

In the 1991-1996 data, 56 percent of all male offenders and 49 percent of all females had an attorney present at some point in the courtroom. Males were more likely to have an attorney than were females across offense categories, with the greatest disparity occurring in property crimes. For those offenses, 55 percent of all males had an attorney present at some point in the court process while an equal percent of females were without such representation.

For some crimes, youth who had attorneys present tended to receive the most-severe dispositions. Youth whose dispositions were for property crimes and who had an attorney present received the most-severe dispositions of detention or out-of-home placement: 28 percent of males with an attorney compared to 16 percent without and 17 percent of females with compared to 7 percent without. In violent crime cases involving males, the presence or absence of an attorney made little difference in disposition severity. A similar pattern was found for females. Why these disparities across offense categories occurred cannot be deduced from the data.

With Part 2 offenses, the most-severe dispositions were given to 23 percent of the males who had an attorney present compared to 13 percent who did not. The same trend held for females, with 18 percent with an attorney getting

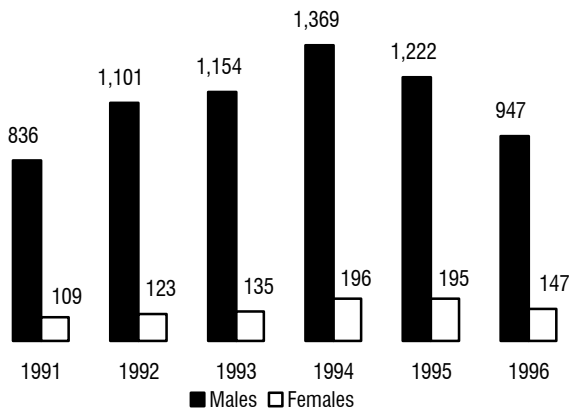
the most-severe dispositions compared to 10 percent who were not represented in the courtroom.

## Time spent in court system similar for both sexes

For the purposes of this report, the time juveniles spend in the court system begins the day a petition is filed against them and ends when a disposition is entered. In actuality, a youth's time in the system may not end until the conditions of the disposition are completed. Minnesota's juvenile court rules require a juvenile who is not in detention to receive a disposition within 125 days, with a possible extension of 30 days for the court to enter a disposition. A juvenile who is in detention must receive a disposition within 53 days (weekends and holidays are excluded from the three-day period before which the detention hearing must be held), with an additional 15 days possible.

The majority of juveniles — 79 percent — received dispositions within two months, and 95 percent within five months. The proportion of males to females in these groupings reflects the overall system involvement ratio of about 4 to 1. A notable change occurs with juveniles who did not receive a disposition within one year. Of these youth, who made up only 1 percent of the total, the ratio of males to females was almost 3 to 1.

**Number of violent offenses declined for both sexes**

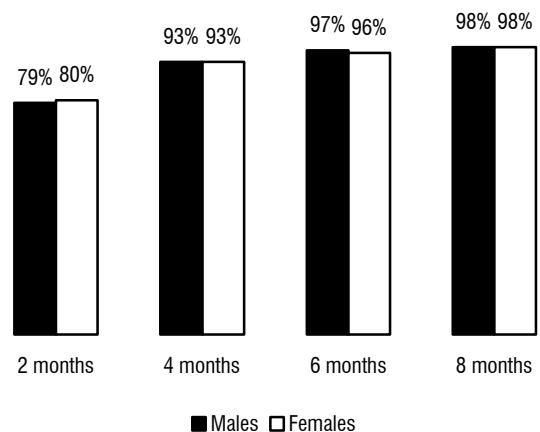


The number of dispositions for violent offenses dropped almost 31 percent for males and 25 percent for females between 1994 and 1996.

Note: The total number of cases in 1996 will be slightly higher when some filed in that year are disposed in 1997 or a later year.

Source: Data from the Minnesota Supreme Court

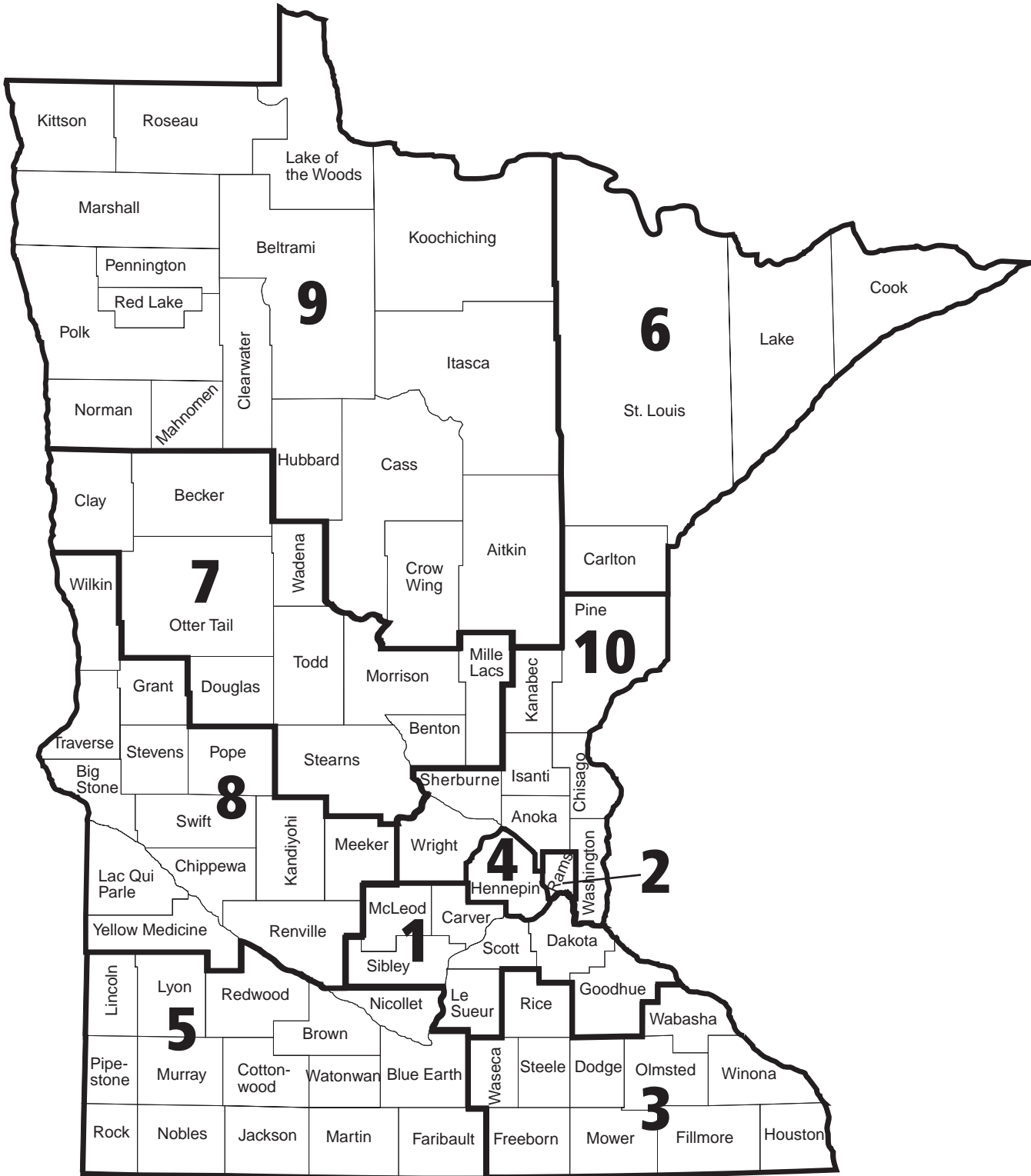
**Almost 80 percent of both sexes have a disposition within two months**



Note: Time begins the day a petition is filed and ends when a disposition is entered.

Source: Data from the Minnesota Supreme Court

# Minnesota's 10 judicial districts



# Focusing on judicial districts

## Law enforcement officials refer most cases in all districts

In each of Minnesota’s 10 judicial districts, the majority of youth were referred by law enforcement officials. Except in the 2nd and 10th Judicial Districts, law enforcement officials referred from 96 percent to almost 100 percent of all cases. This proportion was 90 percent in the 2nd Judicial District, with 4 percent coming from probation officers and 5 percent from “other” — a designation that includes any referral source that was not a law enforcement officer, welfare agency, school, probation officer, parent or citizen. In the 10th Judicial District, law enforcement officials referred 86 percent of all cases, while 13 percent came through “other” referral sources.

Within each judicial district, the proportion of males and females varied little, with males accounting for 77 to 83 percent of the cases. For each type of referral source — such as law enforcement or probation officer — the percentages of males and females stayed within 6 percent of the overall percentages for each judicial district except the 2nd; for that district, of the 690 juveniles referred by probation officers, 64 percent were male and 36 percent were female, while the overall ratio for the district was 80 percent male and 20 percent female. Why this occurred cannot be ascertained from the data. A referral source was included in this analysis only if the total number of petitions from that source was at least 200 in each district.

## 10th Judicial District ranks highest in attorney presence

In each judicial district, an attorney was present at some point in the court process for about half of all juvenile cases analyzed for this report. An attorney was present in 41 to 50 percent of all juvenile cases in the 2nd, 5th, 7th, 8th and 9th Judicial Districts; in 51 to 60 percent of all cases in the 1st, 3rd, 4th and 6th Judicial Districts; and in three-fourths of all cases in the 10th Judicial District.

In the 2nd, 5th, 7th and 8th Judicial Districts, 37 to 39 percent of all females had an attorney. In the 1st, 3rd, 4th, 6th and 9th Judicial Districts, this proportion was 43 to 55 percent, while in the 10th, it was 74 percent. The proportion of all females who were represented by an attorney in the

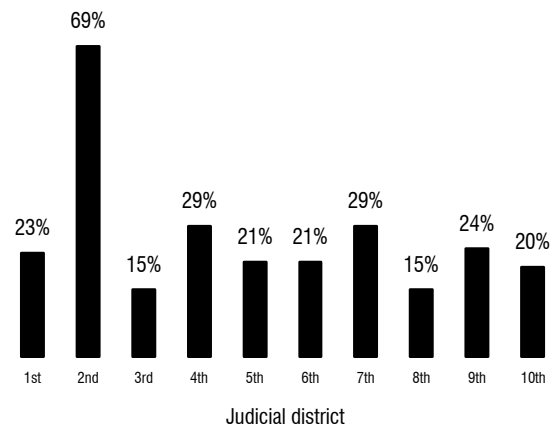
2nd, 4th and 10th Judicial Districts was 1 to 3 percentage points smaller than that of all males who had representation. In all other districts, the share of all females with an attorney was 6 to 12 points smaller than that of all males who were represented.

Data from 1996 was analyzed separately to study the impact of the 1995 Minnesota statute that mandated attorney representation in juvenile cases involving certain offenses. Of all cases filed and disposed within 1996, the 10th Judicial District had the lowest proportion — 12 percent — of cases recorded as not having an attorney present, while the 3rd and 6th Judicial Districts had 27 and 29 percent, respectively. The proportions were 37 to 46 percent in the 1st, 4th, 5th, 7th, 8th and 9th Judicial Districts. The 2nd Judicial District registered 84 percent, but district officials believe this is the result of a misinterpretation in data entry of what constituted attorney presence. The proportion of cases with attorney representation for males and females never varied more than 6 percentage points from each judicial district’s overall proportions of the sexes.

## Males rank high in violent crimes

Within each judicial district, the proportion of male and female cases disposed with property and Part 2 offenses varied no more than 2 percent from each district’s overall proportions of the sexes. The percent of male cases disposed as violent crimes, however, was 6 to 12 points higher than

## Most judicial districts dismiss less than one-third of all cases



The number of petitions resulting in dismissed dispositions was at least 40 percent higher in the 2nd Judicial District than in any other district. This disparity occurred because of data entry problems that were resolved in 1995; since then, the number of dismissed cases has been decreasing.

Source: Data from the Minnesota Supreme Court

the overall percent of males within each district. In a study of offense categories in each judicial district, the proportions for all males by offense varied no more than 7 percentage points from those of females with each offense type.

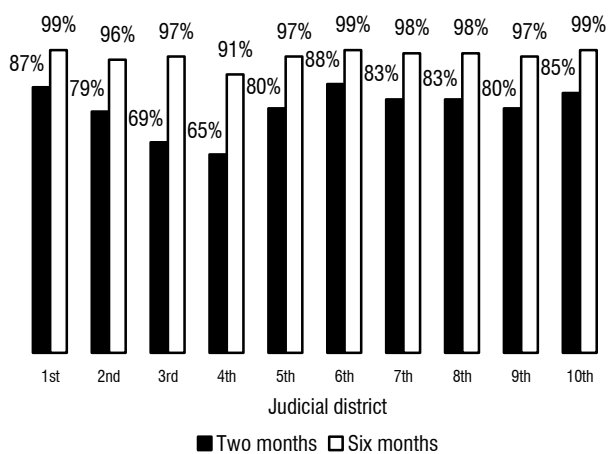
## Dispositions vary little between districts

For each judicial district, the proportions of males and females within each severity level of dispositions tended to be similar to their overall proportions. In the 1st, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 8th and 9th Judicial Districts, the share of males receiving the most-severe dispositions was 6 to 9 percentage points higher than their overall proportion in each district. Males in the 6th, 7th and 10th Judicial Districts received a slightly larger — 3 to 5 points — share of the most-severe dispositions, compared to their overall proportions.

In the 1st, 5th, 7th, 8th and 9th Judicial Districts, males also were more likely to receive the second most-severe dispositions, their share being 7 to 9 percentage points higher than the overall proportions of males for each of these districts. The proportions of males and females receiving the third most-severe and least-severe dispositions exceeded their overall proportions in each district by no more than 3 percent.

The 2nd Judicial District was not included in the analysis of dispositions by individual district because of a disposition miscoding related to dismissed cases, which occurred between 1992 and 1996.

### Most juveniles receive a disposition within six months



In almost all judicial districts, 80 percent of petitions were disposed within two months. By six months, more than 90 percent were disposed.

Source: Data from the Minnesota Supreme Court

## Males and females travel through the system quickly

In most judicial districts, 97 to 99 percent of all males and females were through the juvenile court system within six months. The 2nd Judicial District varied slightly from this pattern, with 94 percent of all female cases being disposed within six months. The 4th Judicial District also showed a minor difference, with 91 percent of all male and 90 percent of all female cases being disposed within six months.

## Considering data limitations

### Data limitations affect interpretation

The database used in this analysis was developed by Minnesota Planning from data obtained from the Minnesota Supreme Court's State Judicial Information System database, which collects information on all juvenile cases that have courtroom activity. The data covered Minnesota's 87 counties. All petitions filed against juveniles within each calendar year 1991 through 1996 were included in this analysis, but only those for which there were dispositions within those years were analyzed. Data accuracy and completeness, among other limitations, must be considered in interpreting the results of this analysis.

There is no way to know the amount of data entry error that may have occurred in courtroom recording of case activity. Due to the randomness of erroneous entry and the law of averages, however, the percentages and trends reported should be similar to actual activity in the courts.

A comparison of Minnesota and national data was not possible. Most national studies of juvenile court data are based on the year a disposition is given, while for this study data was based on the year a disposed case was filed. This difference did not allow a good comparison.

The analysis included cases that were dismissed — 19 percent of all cases. While some of these cases involved youth who were found not to have committed the offense, others may have been dismissed for a variety of reasons. It is not possible in the data to distinguish causes for which cases were dismissed; therefore, including dismissed cases may have increased the proportions of offenses and disposition types.

Any petition that was lacking information needed to complete a particular analysis was not included in that study. Petitions were missing in all areas of analysis.

Analysis by year is based on the year in which the petition was filed, rather than disposed. Some petitions filed in a given calendar year may not be disposed until the following year or later. The number of disposed petitions in 1996 does not include petitions that were disposed in 1997 or later.

The ages of the juveniles in this analysis were calculated by subtracting the birth date from the petition filing date. The ages may be inaccurate if either or both of these dates were entered incorrectly into the database.

Tracking the number of petitions and types of offenses across counties for any one juvenile is not feasible because each county assigns its own unique identification number to each youth who enters its courts. Thus, a juvenile with a petition in one county will be counted as an entirely new individual in another county and receive a different identification number. In addition, because of a misspelled name, among other reasons, a youth may have more than one identifier in the same county. A Minnesota Planning study using an earlier database estimated that this occurs with about one-fifth of the individuals in the data.

It is important to note that the total number of petitions will not equal the total number of juveniles or offenses. One juvenile may account for two or more petitions. Similarly, if an offense was committed by two or more juveniles, each juvenile involved in the offense would account for a separate and unrelated petition.

The offenses analyzed in this report are based on the most severe of the offenses in a petition for which a juvenile received a disposition. A small number of felony, gross misdemeanor and misdemeanor offenses were not included in the analysis because all offenses were put into federally reported categories and some offenses are reported at the state but not the federal level.

The analysis in this report is based on the most-severe disposition of a petition. The Supreme Court database documents up to 93 different types of dispositions that a juvenile can receive. If a juvenile receives more than one type of disposition from the court at one time, up to four types will be recorded in the data file. However, these dispositions are not recorded by severity ranking, meaning that the most-severe disposition will not be listed first. Through reprogramming, the four disposition fields were ranked according to severity, so that the most-severe disposition the juvenile received would be listed first, the next most-severe second and so on. The 93 different disposition types were grouped solely for the purpose of this

analysis into four general categories, in severity order: detention or out-of-home placement; detention or out-of-home placement with a stay of imposition or execution; out-patient treatment, assessment, evaluation or supervised probation; and all other types, including those that impose requirements on parents or legal guardians. Each category does not contain the same number of disposition types, thus a category with 62 disposition types may have a higher number of cases than one containing only four types.

Finally, the data entry phrase used to describe one of the dispositions was misinterpreted. It was discovered that this disposition, “DSM [dismissed] probation completed,” originally was determined to have a severity level of 3 but should have been ranked at the lowest level of 4. This action may have resulted in an increase of level 3 dispositions by no more than 0.7 percent and a decrease in level 4 dispositions by no more than 0.5 percent.

## **Suggestions for solving data problems**

The analysis of juvenile court system data conducted for *Judging by the Data* revealed some problems with the collection and entry of this data into electronic databases. These coding and software issues limit how the data can be analyzed and used.

Minnesota courts collect data using a software program that was based on information needs determined in the 1980s. Although attempts have been made since then to expand the data collected, the many changes in the juvenile justice system mean that information that would be useful to court officials and the public — for example, the amount of time a juvenile is ordered to spend in out-of-home placement — is not being gathered. In addition, the program has a screen design that fosters data entry errors.

These problems could be eliminated by redesigning the software with input from court officials who work with and analyze the data and by creating a less complicated screen design. Though this would be a costly undertaking because of the amount of training, programming and other expenses required, it would benefit the state as a whole since the software is used in both juvenile and adult courts.

A related issue is the redesign of the software program used by the Minnesota Supreme Court to collect and compile data from all courts in the state. This effort, which is underway, would be enhanced by ensuring that juvenile justice system officials work together in its design to create a system that encompasses the needs of all who access the data. A third problem centers on the use of a county-specific identifier, which is the only way to track a youth through the

court system. Because of this, it is impossible to know about all petitions filed against a particular youth throughout the state. Youth who are given an identification number when they appear in court in one county will receive yet another number if they appear in court in another county. Abbreviation of or typographical errors in the name or birth date also can result in a juvenile having more than one identification number in the same county. One solution would be to have law enforcement and court officials use fingerprinting as a unique identifier. Law enforcement agencies fingerprint youth charged with felony and gross misdemeanor offenses; courts, however, do not use

fingerprinting in part because their database is based on the activity surrounding a particular case rather than on the juvenile, who may have more than one case in process in the court system. The sharing by law enforcement agencies and courtrooms through linked computers of data from their databases would be the most productive way of achieving this solution. Using fingerprints as a unique identifier would allow evaluation of the effectiveness of the various dispositions in treating and rehabilitating delinquent youth — the philosophy on which Minnesota built its first juvenile court in 1905.