

## YOUTH OFFENDING IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA OFFICIAL CRIME STATISTICS

### Introduction

The extent and seriousness of youth offending are issues that generate considerable community debate within South Australia. However, the task of identifying how many young people actually commit offences is a difficult one. The main source of information is that provided by official crime statistics which identify the number of young people who are actually apprehended by police each year and the type of charges laid. These do not necessarily provide a comprehensive picture of the nature or level of youth crime in the community. For example, they do not include offences which were never reported to police or, if reported, were not cleared by way of an apprehension. Nor do they include young people who were 'caught' but because of the trivial nature of the offending, were given an informal police caution.

Official crime statistics are also influenced by changes to the criminal law or justice may rise if police conduct special operations to target this type of behaviour. In addition, the introduction of new diversionary strategies (such as that of informal cautioning introduced in 1994) may result in young offenders being dealt with informally, without an apprehension report being generated.

Overall then, how many and which young people get caught and are processed by the criminal justice system is influenced not only by the actual behaviour of individuals within this age group but also by how the system itself operates. This fact should be borne in mind when interpreting the following statistics<sup>1</sup> relating to young people apprehended in South Australia.

### Number of young persons apprehended by police in 1999

In 1999, 5,086 young people aged 10 to 17 years inclusive were apprehended by police. This means that of the 162,061 young people resident in South Australia in 1999, only 3.1% were charged by police with offending behaviour. The overwhelming majority of young people (96.9%) therefore had no contact with the formal justice system that year.

Of these 5,086 individuals, the majority (3,506 or 68.9%) were apprehended only once during the 12 month period. The remainder (1,580) were apprehended on at least two occasions, while a very small group (31 of the 5,086) were apprehended 10 times or more during the course of the year. Because of these multiple apprehensions, 8,753 separate apprehension reports involving juveniles were lodged in 1999, which gives an average of 1.7 apprehensions per individual.

In 1999, as in previous years, males were far more likely to be apprehended than were females, accounting for 79.5% of all young people apprehended in 1999 and 80.3% of all apprehension reports lodged. Stated differently, of the 83,053 males aged 10 to 17 years living in South Australia in 1999, 4.9% were the subject of at least one police apprehension that year, compared with only 1.3% of South Australia's 79,008 young female residents.

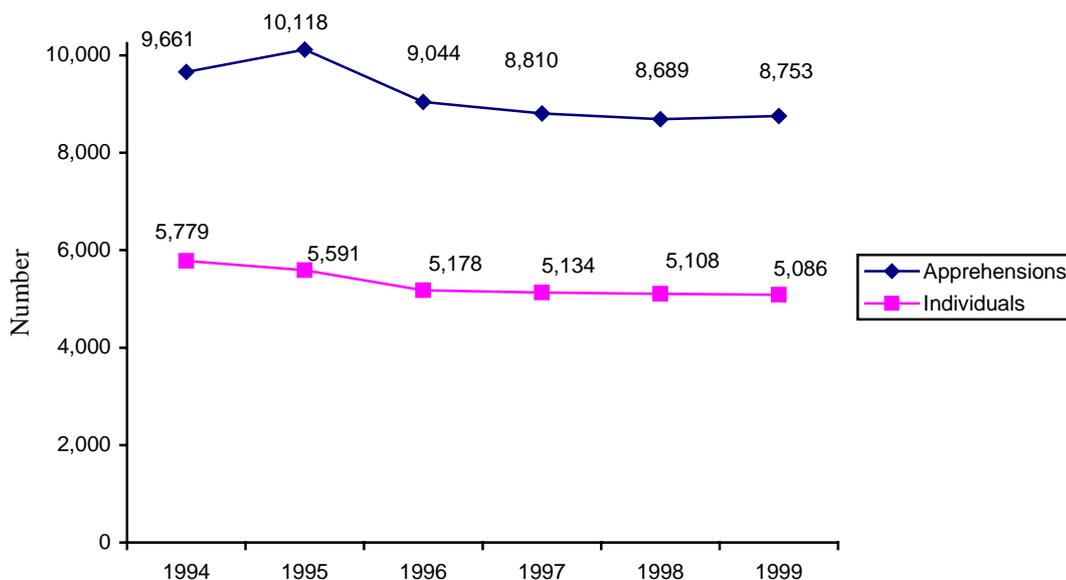
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<sup>1</sup> The following statistics have been extracted from *Crime and Justice in South Australia, 1999: Juvenile Justice*, Office of Crime Statistics, September 2000.

## Longitudinal trends

The number of young people apprehended each year from 1994 to 1999 is depicted in Figure 1, together with the total number of apprehension reports lodged. As shown, over the six years following the introduction of the *Young Offenders Act* in 1994, the number of young people arrested or reported by police declined by 12.0%, from 5,779 to 5,086. Over the same period, apart from an initial increase in 1995, the number of apprehension reports lodged by police for this age group also declined, with the 8,753 apprehensions recorded in 1999 being 13.5% lower than the 10,118 lodged in 1995.

**Figure 1** Number of individual youths apprehended and number of police apprehension reports involving young people lodged per year, 1994 to 1999



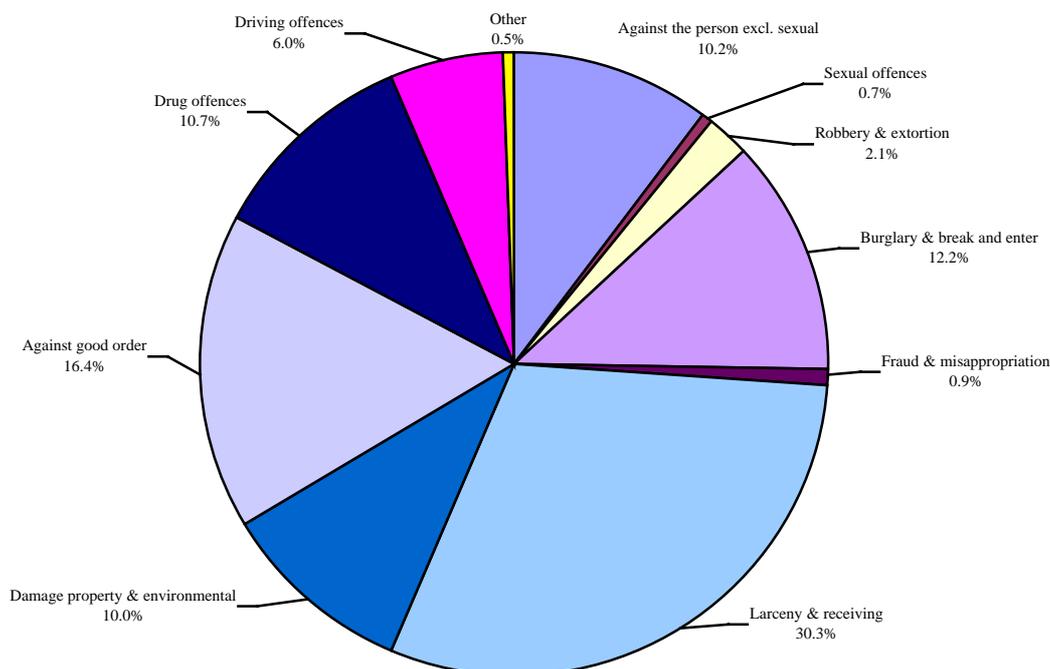
## Types of offences

To provide some insight into the types of offences for which young people are apprehended, Figure 2 details the most serious charge listed per apprehension report<sup>2</sup>.

As shown, in 1999 larceny and receiving was listed as the major offence in 30.3% of all juvenile apprehensions while good order offences accounted for 16.4%. These were followed by burglary, break and enter (12.2%), drug offences (10.7%), offences against the person, excluding sexual offences (10.2%) and damage property and environmental offences (10.0%). There were relatively few apprehension reports in which robbery and extortion (2.1%), fraud and misappropriation (0.9%) and sexual offences (0.7%) were listed as the most serious offence alleged.

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<sup>2</sup> If the same individual was apprehended more than once during the year, each apprehension was counted separately. However, only the most serious charge per report has been included. .

**Figure 2****Police apprehension reports: major offence alleged, 1999**

Of the larceny-related offences, the most prominent ones were larceny from shops (10.1% of all apprehensions) and larceny or illegal use of a vehicle (6.5%). For those apprehensions involving a drug offence, the main one was that of possess, use cannabis (6.2% of all apprehensions). Of those apprehensions involving an offence against the person, common assault was the most prominent (accounting for 6.5% of all apprehensions) while assault occasioning actual or grievous bodily harm was listed as the major charge in only 1.6% of apprehensions. There were only two apprehension reports in which the major offence was murder while only three reports involved attempted murder. Of the relatively small number of juvenile apprehension reports involving robbery or extortion as the major charge, the majority of these (149 out of 185) were unarmed, rather than armed, robberies.

In broad terms, the offence profiles for males and females were relatively similar, with larceny and receiving accounting for the highest proportion of both groups while sexual offences, robbery and extortion, fraud and misappropriation and other offences accounted for the lowest proportions. Nevertheless, some differences were apparent. For example, while larceny and receiving offences were the most dominant for both males and females, this offence group featured in a higher proportion of female than male apprehensions. Within this charge group, larceny from shops constituted the major allegation in just under one fifth (19.8%) of all female apprehensions compared with 7.7% for males. Offences against the person, excluding sexual offences were also more prominent for females than males (15.9% compared with 8.9% respectively). Conversely, a lower proportion of female than male apprehension reports listed drug offences (7.1% compared with 11.6% respectively) and burglary, break and enter offences (8.3% compared with 13.1% respectively) as the major charge.

**Type of action taken**

Once a young person has been apprehended by police, there are three options available. If the offences involved are relatively minor, the individual may receive a formal police caution or be diverted to a family conference. For more serious matters, or if the youth is a serious repeat offender, the case will be referred to the Youth Court. Of the 8,106 apprehensions lodged in 1999 where relevant information was available, 34.2% resulted in a referral to a formal caution, while a further 17.3% were diverted to a family conference.

Youth Court referrals accounted for 46.1%, while police withdrew 2.4% of the allegations<sup>3</sup>. These results were very similar to those recorded in the four preceding years.

As in previous years, the level of Youth Court referrals varied according to the nature of the major offence alleged. For example, over eight in ten apprehensions involving robbery and extortion were ultimately referred to court, as were over one half of all the cases involving either offences against the person, sexual offences or burglary, break and enter. In contrast, for those apprehensions where the major allegation was a drug offence only approximately one in three cases (29.4%) were directed to court.

### **Aboriginal involvement in the juvenile justice system**

Overall, the information presented above is relatively positive. It illustrates that relatively few young people are apprehended by police each year, and those who are apprehended are generally charged with the less serious types of offences. However, Indigenous youths continue to be over-represented in the juvenile justice system. Of those juvenile apprehension reports lodged in 1999 where information on racial appearance was recorded<sup>4</sup>, 16.8% involved young persons identified by police as Aboriginal. However, this group accounts for only 2.3% of South Australia's youth population aged 10 to 17 years inclusive.

As in previous years, the level of over-representation was more pronounced for Indigenous young women. In 1999, Indigenous young women accounted for over one quarter (28.4%) of all female apprehensions whereas Indigenous young men represented only 14.0% of all juvenile male apprehensions.

### **Summary**

- In 1999, only 3.1% of the juvenile population aged 10 to 17 years inclusive in South Australia were the subject of a police apprehension report.
- Of those who were apprehended, the majority were apprehended only once.
- Both the number of individual juveniles apprehended and the number of juvenile apprehension reports lodged have decreased over the past four years or so.
- The most common offence charged against juveniles was larceny and receiving, followed by good order offences and burglary, break and enter.
- Just under one half of all apprehension reports resulted in referral to the Youth Court, while the remainder were diverted to either a formal police caution or a family conference.
- Aboriginal youths continue to be over-represented at the point of entry into the juvenile justice system. The level of over-representation is more pronounced for Indigenous young women than for Indigenous young males.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that these data reflect the final referral, rather than the first. For example, if a case was initially referred to the Youth Court, but the court chose to send it back to a family conference, the referral would be listed as 'family conference'. Similarly, if an apprehension report was initially referred to a family conference but was later redirected to the Youth Court (either because the youth could not be located, did not attend the conference or requested that the matter be dealt with in court), the referral would be counted as 'Youth Court'.

<sup>4</sup> The classification of a youth as Indigenous or non-Indigenous is determined by police and records the opinion of the apprehending officer as to the physical appearance of the young person. It is therefore not necessarily an accurate reflection of whether the young people themselves identify as Indigenous or not. However, no other data relating to Indigenous status are available.