



May 1996

## Juvenile Offenders: How Often Do They Become Violent Adult Offenders in Washington State?

The Washington Legislature in 1994 directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to study juvenile violence and other at-risk behaviors of youth.<sup>1</sup> The Institute was instructed to analyze trends in these behaviors and evaluate the cost-effectiveness of Washington's efforts to achieve measurable reductions in violence and at-risk behaviors. This research brief is part of the Institute's plan to provide the legislature and other interested persons with up-to-date findings on these topics.

**Background:** In February 1996, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy published a report describing the increase in juvenile violence in Washington State.<sup>2</sup> Using data from the Office of the Administrator for the Courts, the report concluded **that the overall rate of juvenile violence in Washington**—which includes the serious crimes of murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault—**had more than doubled in the last six years.**<sup>3</sup> For youths who turned 18 in 1988, 6.4 out of every thousand had at least one court conviction of a violent felony while they were juveniles. Out of every thousand youths who turned 18 in 1994, on the other hand, 13.5 had at least one conviction for a violent felony sometime before they turned 18.

**Research Questions:** The February report examined violent juvenile offenders in Washington before they turned 18 years old. This publication reports on what happened to these youth through the age of 25, and identifies the portion that were convicted as adults of felony offenses. The findings from this research will help the Institute evaluate the long-term costs and benefits of state-wide efforts to prevent juvenile violence. The information can also be used to inform state sentencing policy and improve forecasts of state and local resource needs in Washington's corrections system.

**Method:** To answer these research questions, the Institute combined two information sets maintained by different state agencies: 1) the Office of the Administrator for the Courts' data on juvenile offenders and 2) the Department of Corrections' (DOC) data on adult felony offenders. The DOC data include all individuals convicted of felonies and sentenced to state prison or local jail, as well as felons placed on community supervision under the jurisdiction of the state DOC.

<sup>1</sup> RCW 70.190.050.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Barnoski and Steve Aos, *Juvenile Violence in Washington State: First-Time and Repeat Offenders*, February 1996.

<sup>3</sup> As used in this report and the February 1996 report, "violence" is defined to be consistent with the FBI's Uniform Crime Index: it includes the four crimes of murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault.

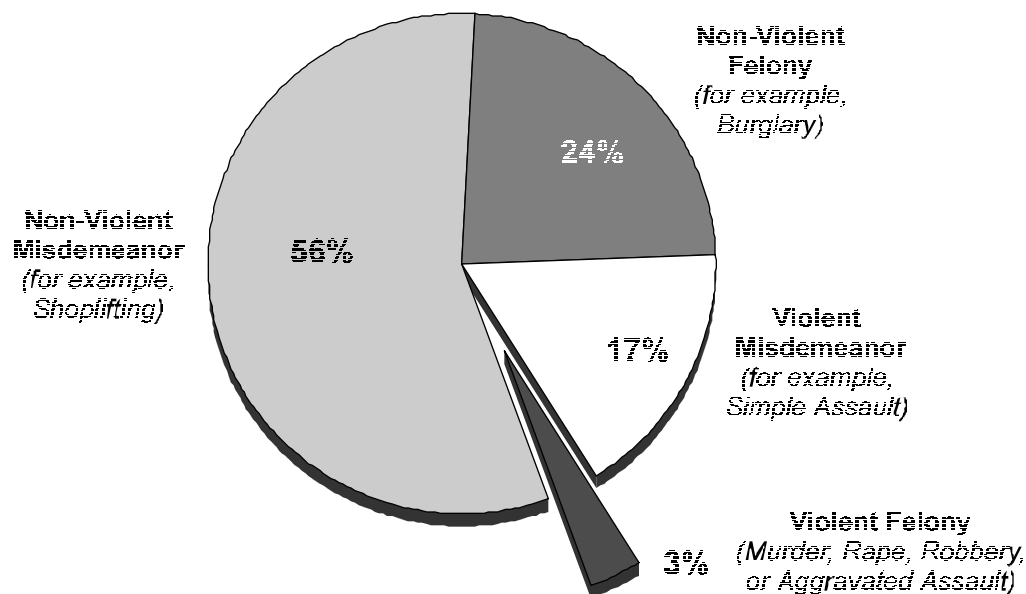
## ***The Members of the Class of 1988: Characteristics of Their Juvenile Court Convictions***

The Institute tracked 10,505 juvenile offenders in Washington who had at least one conviction in a juvenile court—sometime before they turned 18 years old in 1988. The “Class of 1988” was chosen for study because it is the earliest year for which the state has accurate records on the criminal history of juveniles in Washington.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1 provides information on the *most serious court conviction* received by these 10,505 juvenile offenders *before they turned 18*. For a majority, 56 percent, the most serious conviction was for a non-violent misdemeanor such as shoplifting. A smaller portion, 24 percent, had a conviction for a non-violent felony such as a burglary or auto theft. About 17 percent had, as their most serious conviction while a juvenile, a violent misdemeanor such as a simple assault, which could be a fist-fight.

A relatively small number—354 individuals, or about 3 percent of the total—had one or more court convictions for a violent felony: that is, for a murder, rape, robbery, or aggravated assault (an assault where an individual intentionally inflicts great bodily harm on another, usually with a weapon).

*Figure 1*  
**The Class of 1988:  
The Most Serious Juvenile Court Conviction  
Of 18-Year Olds With a Juvenile Court Record**



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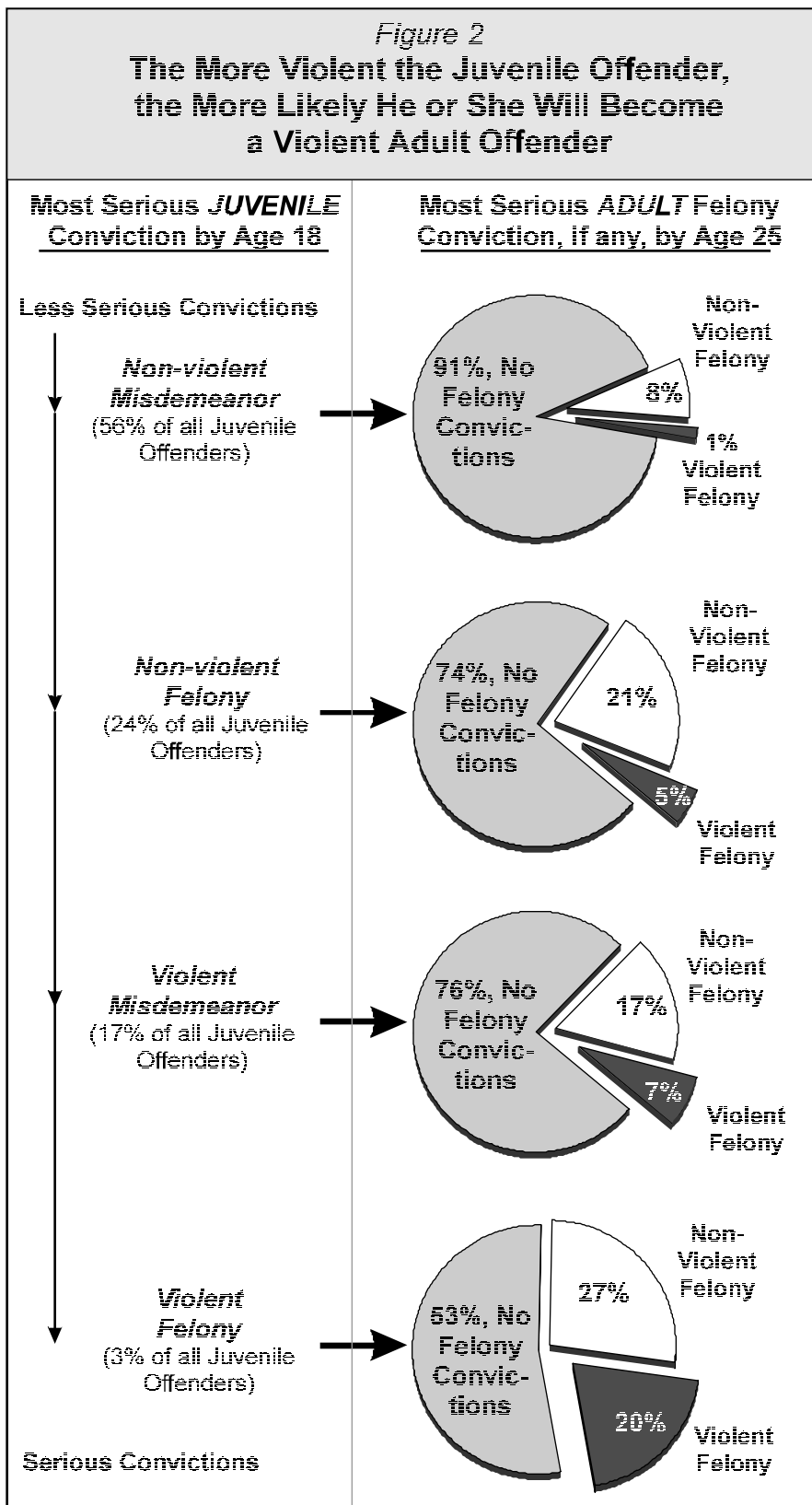
<sup>4</sup> In this report, juvenile offenders are defined as juveniles convicted of an offense in a Washington State juvenile court as recorded in the Office of the Administrator for the Courts' Juvenile Information System (JUVIS). Adult offenders are defined as individuals sentenced to confinement or supervision by the Washington State Department of Corrections as recorded in DOC's Offender Based Tracking System (OBTs). Any juvenile that was "declined" and convicted in adult court was counted in this study as an adult offender for that conviction.

## The Class of 1988: How Many Juvenile Offenders Became Violent Adult Offenders?

By 1995, the members of the Class of 1988 were 25 years old. Thus, this group of juvenile offenders had a total of eight years (from 1988 to 1995) in which they might have been convicted for felony crimes as adults. An adult felony conviction can result in a sentence to state prison or local jail as well as community supervision administered by the state.

Figure 2 reveals a clear pattern: **the more violent a juvenile offender is, the greater the chance that he or she will, as an adult, be convicted for a violent felony.**

- Of those 18-year-old juvenile offenders in 1988 with a non-violent misdemeanor (for example, a shoplifting offense), **1 percent** were subsequently convicted for a violent felony by the time they were 25 years old.
- On the other hand, of those juveniles with one or more convictions for a violent felony as a juvenile (a murder, rape, robbery, or aggravated assault), **20 percent** were subsequently sentenced for a violent felony as an adult.



## **Adult Violent Crime: Can it Be Reduced by Lowering Juvenile Violent Crime?**

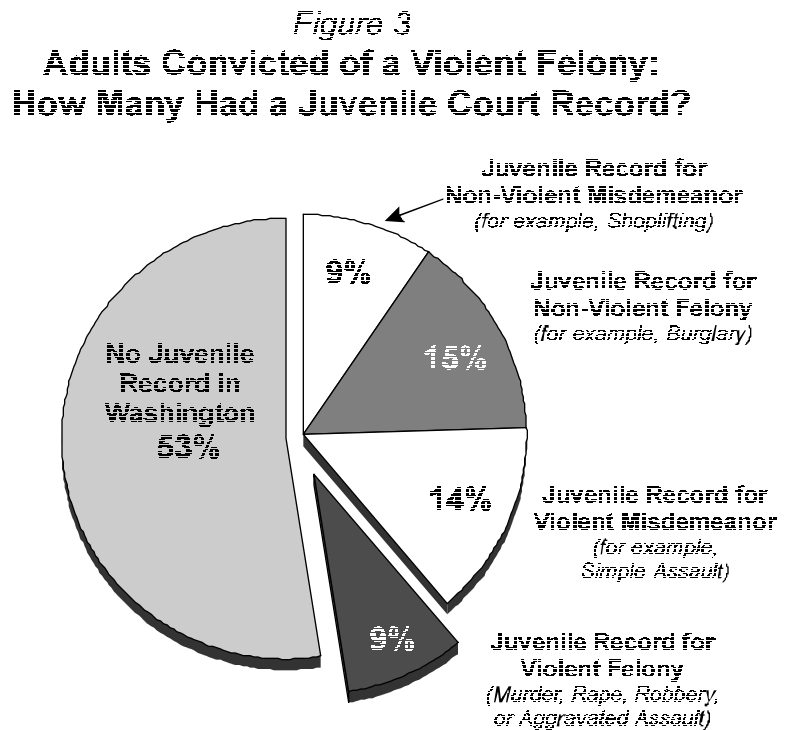
The analysis presented thus far confirms an intuitive relationship: **violent juveniles have a much greater chance of becoming violent adults, than do non-violent juveniles.** For example, a youth convicted of a violent felony—a murder, rape, robbery, or aggravated assault—is 20 times more likely to be convicted as an adult for a violent felony, than is a youth convicted of shoplifting.

Does this finding mean that *adult violent crime* in Washington can be reduced substantially by focusing public policy and programs on violent *juvenile* offenders? If, for example, a prevention program in Washington can reduce juvenile violence by 10 percent, then will the amount of adult violence in the future also be diminished substantially?

The answer, unfortunately, is no. To understand this, the familiar juvenile-to-adult pathway must be examined in reverse: instead of asking how many violent juveniles become violent adults, it is necessary to know how many violent adults started as violent juveniles.

The Institute analyzed the criminal histories of **adult** violent offenders in Washington to see how many had, in their youth, a juvenile court conviction in Washington for a violent felony. We studied all adults convicted of a violent felony in Washington who were born in 1970. These adults were 18 in 1988 and 25 in 1995.

Figure 3 shows the juvenile criminal background, if any, of these adult violent felons. Most—53 percent—did not have a juvenile court conviction of any kind. Only a small slice—9 percent of all adult violent felons—had a juvenile court conviction for a violent felony.



Thus, if every juvenile convicted of a violent felony today was successfully rehabilitated, the total level of adult violence would drop by only 9 percent in future years.

In the months ahead, the Institute will publish additional findings on the costs and benefits of Washington's policies and programs to reduce criminal violence. For further information, contact Steve Aos or Robert Barnoski at (360) 866-6000, ext. 6380.