

Crime Trend Series

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Media Presentations of Juvenile Crime in Hawaii: WILD IN THE STREETS?

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National media coverage of crime has increased dramatically in recent years (*Media Monitor*, 1994), and violent and gang-related offenses have often been the subjects of this new media attention (Males, 1996). For example, a recent study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs revealed that while the homicide rate in the U.S. fell 20% between 1993 and 1996, media coverage of murders increased 721% (*Washington Post*, August 12, 1997: D1). While, as shall be noted, links between media trends and public perceptions are generally complex, it is also the case that the number of Americans naming crime as the nation's "most important problem" increased sixfold between June of 1993 and January of 1994—at a time when official crime statistics and victimization surveys showed little change (*Media Monitor*, 1994). Certainly, criminology must begin to take account of media coverage in more systematic ways than has previously been the case.

Extant national research suggests that the media often "over-report" crime-related news by "exaggerating the seriousness of events, the violence that occurred, and the damage caused" (Cohen, 1981), and by producing crime-related articles in patterns that bear little resemblance to actual crime trends (Garofolo, 1981; Sheley, 1981;

Davis, 1952). Even stories that are specifically *about* official crime statistics may misrepresent these figures by either downplaying, ignoring, or focusing excessively on certain statistics and extenuating circumstances (Smith, 1981). For example, the media may focus less on a ten-percent decrease in overall violent crime than they do on an embedded five-percent increase in aggravated assaults. Similarly, a ten-percent decrease in the crime rate may only be given passing mention in the back pages of a newspaper, while a five-percent *increase* may be automatic headline news.

The results from another study of media reports of youth gangs provide a useful component in this brief exploration of the complicated patterns and effects of media crime coverage. Decker & Kempf-Leonard (1991) interviewed groups of St. Louis gang members, non-gang member juvenile detainees, police officers, and local policymakers with a questionnaire designed to establish how the respondents had received the majority of their knowledge about youth gangs, and how accurate they believed media representations of youth gangs were.

While 100% of gang members, 85% of non-gang detainees, and 96% of police officers responded that most of their information came from first- or secondhand knowledge (i.e., either by being a gang member or by having contact with gang members), 52% of policymakers reported that mass media were the primary sources of their gang

information. When asked to rate how accurately media portrayed gangs, only 25% of gang members, 28% of non-gang detainees, 9% of police officers, and 30% of policymakers rated media portrayal as “accurate.”

The policymakers are the group who wield the most community power to respond to gang problems, but by their own acknowledgment they received the majority of their gang information from a source that they believed to be generally inaccurate. Essentially, even those who do not have faith in the accuracy of media reporting may still be influenced by it. The study also demonstrates that individuals who have the most direct contact with gang members (or at least with those that reside in St. Louis) find media portrayals of gangs to be especially improbable.

JUVENILE ARRESTS IN HAWAII

To assess the manner in which the media have covered juvenile crime in Hawaii, it is first necessary to establish the actual extent and nature of local juvenile crime during the period in question. Patterns of youth crime in the state during the last decade have typically been very much unlike those of the nation as a whole. This may perhaps be best demonstrated by a comparison between statistics drawn from annually-published editions of the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s *Crime in the United States: Uniform Crime Reports* and the Hawaii Department of the Attorney General’s *Crime in Hawaii: A Review of Uniform Crime Reports*.

While national juvenile arrests rose 35% between 1987 and 1996, Hawaii only recorded a 9% increase. Moreover, when a 91% increase in arrests for non-criminal status offenses such as running away and curfew violation is excluded, Hawaii experienced an 11% decrease in juvenile arrests during this period. Not only are status offenses typically considered to be very minor offenses, it is also crucial to note that the increase in status offense arrests in Hawaii has largely been the product of increasingly enhanced police effort

to make these arrests (Kassebaum, Marker, Glancey, Tripp, Tanji, Bridges, & Kei, 1997). In contrast, the national increase in juvenile arrests was primarily attributable to more arrests for serious offenses, such as weapons possession (up 69%) and “other assaults” (up 100%). Status offense arrests accounted for almost one in seven national juvenile arrests in 1996; in Hawaii, slightly more than one in three juvenile arrests were for status offenses.

Arrests of juveniles for serious crimes of violence (murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) did increase by 60% between 1987 and 1996 in Hawaii, but these arrests typically amount to less than 3% of all juvenile arrests (464 of 17,516 juvenile arrests in 1996 were for serious violent offenses). The national increase in juvenile arrests for serious violent crimes was also 60%, but violent crime arrests accounted for about 5% of all 1996 juvenile arrests. Critically, the raw number of juvenile arrests for serious violent offenses is low enough each year in Hawaii that an increase or decrease of only a few dozen arrests can translate into a percent change that probably sounds more dramatic than it actually is. For instance, a drop of 50 juvenile arrests for violent crimes in 1986 resulted in a one-year decrease of 21%. Statistics reported in the latest edition of the *Kids Count Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-Being* (1997) show that Hawaii’s ranking for juvenile violent crime arrest rates improved from 24th lowest in the nation in 1985 to 12th lowest in 1994.

Juvenile arrests for serious property offenses (burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson) decreased 26% between 1987 and 1996 in Hawaii, but increased 8% in the nation during the same period. Serious property offense arrests accounted for 23% of all juvenile arrests in Hawaii in 1996, and 25% of national juvenile arrests.

Arrests for all serious offenses (*Index Offenses*) decreased by 21% from 1987 to 1996 in Hawaii,

but increased by 14% in the nation as a whole during the same period.

Generally, juvenile arrest trends in Hawaii have been stable or on the decline throughout the last decade, and have been less characterized by arrests for violent acts than has been the case in many other parts of the nation. Central to the present discussion is that there clearly has not been an “explosion” or “epidemic” of local juvenile crime. At the same time, national research indicates that the media tend to focus rather narrowly on violence and other “bad news” in their presentation of crime issues. The task at hand, then, is to assess the specific manner in which local news media have reported juvenile crime.

METHOD

The Hawaii State Public Library System (HSPLS) provides an online index of articles that appear in Hawaii’s two major daily newspapers, and it is possible to search the listings for articles that have been coded for certain subject keywords. While a more narrow filter may be used to search for articles that actually *contain* certain keywords, the method employed for this project focused on the location of articles that had been coded by HSPLS to be *about* certain topics. This system is dependent upon the validity and reliability of the HSPLS coding schema; discussions with HSPLS staff revealed that standards are in place to ensure that coding is not conducted in an arbitrary fashion.

Numerous query strings were run for subject words that appeared likely to yield relevant articles for the ten-year period between 1987 and 1996. After approximately ten unique searches had been run, a detailed inspection of the lists revealed that the subject words “gangs” and “juvenile delinquency” provided the most comprehensive and useful article citations. It was also noted that many of the stories were duplicated in both major local newspapers, so it was decided to focus on only one daily paper (*The Honolulu Star Bulletin*,

which is printed from Monday through Saturday) plus the Sunday edition of the other (*The Honolulu Advertiser*). This filtering yielded lists of 319 “gangs” and 330 “juvenile delinquency” articles (649 total); these became the two master lists for subsequent inquiry.

The process of locating and photocopying each article from microfilm allowed for an *ad hoc* test of the validity and reliability of the HSPLS coding system. Only a handful of articles were chanced upon that did not appear on either index list but seemed as though they should have, and even fewer articles were found that appeared on the lists but did not seem to fit the criteria for stories about street gangs or juvenile delinquency. This margin of error was deemed to be acceptable.

Once the articles had been collected, it was possible to begin a systematic process of quantitative content analysis. It was immediately apparent that the yearly ebb and flow of articles as contrasted against official juvenile crime statistics would be significant, while subsequent qualitative analysis led to a further delineation of the manner in which local media have covered juvenile crime in Hawaii.

MEDIA OUTPUT

After making simple calculations and observations based on the number of articles that appeared each year, several key findings emerged. Table 1 provides a quick summary of these data.

Table 1: “Gangs” & “Juvenile Delinquency” Articles, 1987-1996

	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	Sum
Gangs	2	12	40	23	41	10	24	52	33	82	319
J.D.	3	6	4	10	15	11	33	76	85	87	330

It is notable that the total number of gang articles is approximately equal to the number of juvenile delinquency articles, as youth gang issues should presumably be only a subset of the broader category of juvenile delinquency. Additionally, there were several gang-related stories that were

duplicated in the juvenile delinquency list, yet the reverse condition was entirely absent. This makes sense if one accepts that gang issues are indeed a subset of juvenile delinquency issues, but it is nonetheless significant that the total number of gang articles would have surpassed that of juvenile delinquency had the latter list been altered so as to be exclusive of gang articles. Youth gang activity, whether or not it accounts for the most and/or most serious juvenile crime in Hawaii, clearly seems to be the most *newsworthy* juvenile crime topic in the state.

Bookin-Weiner & Horowitz (1983), and Huff (1990) have suggested that community concern about gang problems tends to be cyclical and is not strongly related to the actual extent of gang activity. Evidence of this is apparent in the fluctuation of gang articles over the study time period. Notable in this regard are 1989, 1991, and 1994, while 1996 appears to have been a particularly salient year.

While the large number of articles about gangs and the cyclical nature of their output are important to consider, even more critical are the large annual increases in the post-1992 and 1993 output of articles. For example, the average number of gang articles per year for the 1994-1996 period (55.6) is two and a half times of that for all previous years (21.7), while the mean number of juvenile delinquency articles per year for the 1994-1996 period (82.6) is about seven times of that for previous years (11.7).

When these data are analyzed in the manner typically used to calculate trends—that is, by simply comparing the first and last years in a given time period—the mid-1990’s increases in media attention become ones of sizable proportion: since 1987, annual article output has increased almost 30 times over for juvenile delinquency stories and more than 40 times over for gang stories.

Of course, the newspaper articles were not always about specific youth crimes that had occurred.

Editorials, feature stories about agencies and programs, reports of legislative issues, follow-up stories about earlier crimes and incidents, trial news, and the like each accounted for a share of the articles. However, when only first reports of specific youth crime incidents are examined, 1993 again emerges as the year in which a significant increase in the number of articles began (Table 2).

Table 2: First Reports of Specific Youth Crime Incidents, 1987-1996

	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	Sum
Gangs	0	2	6	3	3	1	9	9	13	23	69
J.D.	1	1	1	1	1	1	15	38	52	53	164

The average number of gang incident stories per year for 1994-1996 is 15.0, while the mean for all previous years is 3.4. For juvenile delinquency incident stories, the figures are 47.7 for 1994-1996, and 3.0 for previous years. Establishing the trends by comparing starting and ending years yields ten-year increases of more than twenty times over for gang incident stories and more than fifty times over for juvenile delinquency incident stories.

In more practical terms, specific youth crime incidents were reported in the newspapers about once every five days in 1996 (76 stories total), while articles more broadly about juvenile crime appeared almost every other day (169 stories). In comparison, a total of five juvenile crime-related articles (including one incident story) were run in 1987.

Additionally, the cyclical output of gang stories is entirely absent in the incident-specific example, which may again lend support to the notion that community interest in the topic (as measured earlier by the appearance of non-incident-specific feature stories, etc.) waxes and wanes without regard to actual increases and/or decreases in gang activity. As far fewer gang incident articles appeared than did juvenile delinquency incident stories, while both subject groups were about equal when the sum of all articles of each type

were considered, it could be argued that feature stories about youth gangs are perceived as being more interesting, and thus more saleable, than stories about “garden variety” juvenile crime.

MEDIA OUTPUT VS. ARREST AND SURVEY DATA

An obvious explanation for the marked increase in youth crime media attention would be that the output of newspaper articles simply reflected a corresponding sharp increase in juvenile crime. However, as was noted earlier, total juvenile arrests (excluding non-criminal status offenses) and juvenile arrests for serious offenses have actually decreased in Hawaii during the past decade. The increase in status offense arrests has been due primarily to changes in police focus and policy, and an increase in arrests for some violent offenses has failed to move Hawaii out of what most analysts would agree is a category of comparatively little violent juvenile crime. In any event, the state has dramatically improved its national ranking for juvenile violent offense arrest rates.

These trends demonstrate that the actual extent of juvenile crime in Hawaii has certainly not increased between several hundred and a few thousand percent, as has the output of newspaper articles *about* juvenile crime. The disparity between the media output of youth crime-related stories and total juvenile arrests (Figure 1) and juvenile arrests for serious offenses (Figure 2) becomes quite obvious when the patterns are graphically compared. Thus, the recent media focus on juvenile crime does not appear to have been based on any sort of increase in the actual extent of juvenile crime—more juvenile crime did not simply give reporters more to write about.

Figure 1: Youth Crime Media Coverage vs. Juvenile Arrests

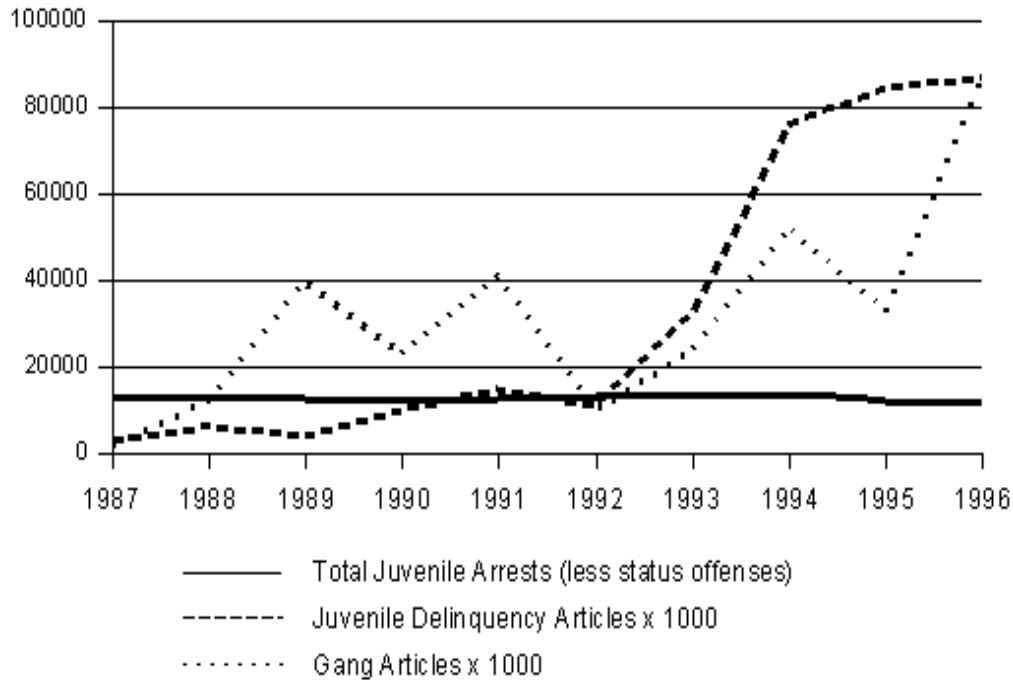
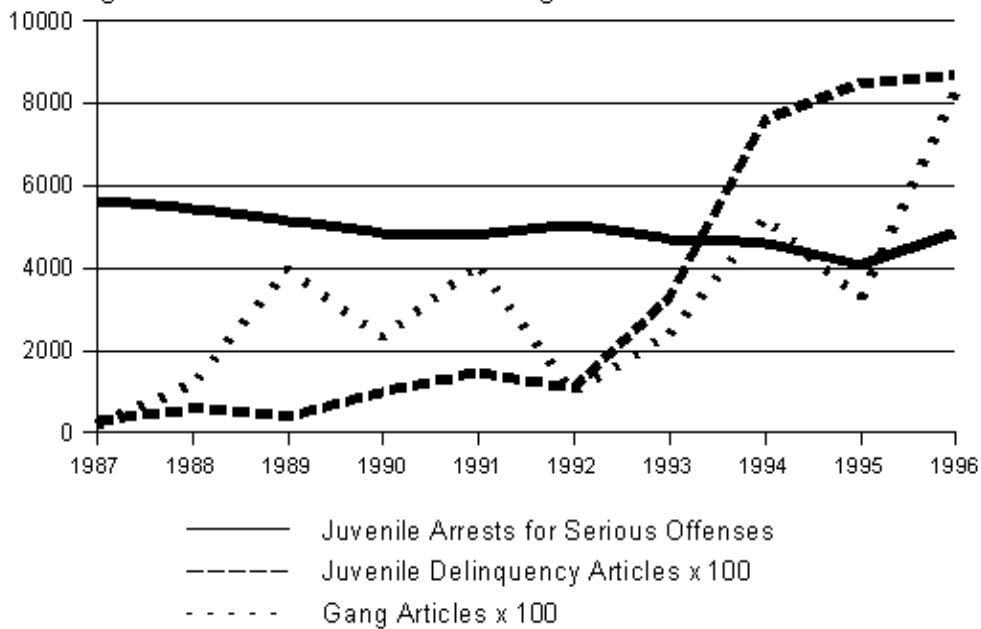


Figure 2: Youth Crime Media Coverage vs. Arrests for Serious Offenses*



* "Serious Offenses" are defined as murder, forcible rape, aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, motor vehicle theft, larceny-theft, and arson (i.e., *Index Offenses*).

While the comparison between juvenile arrests and articles about juvenile delinquency seems valid, the case could be made that these general arrest trends are poor measures of gang activity in a community. Trend data on gang incidents in Hawaii are non-existent and data on the level of local gang membership do not cover the entire period under study, but self-report surveys of at-risk youth participating in gang prevention and intervention programs (see Chesney-Lind, Brown, Mayeda, Kwack, Perrone, Kato, Marker, & Hookano, 1997) fail to show a dramatic increase in gang membership or gang activities. As Table 3 shows, there was no significant change in the proportion of youth reporting some form of gang affiliation between 1992 and 1996. In any event, although it is theoretically possible that the number of gang-related incidents increased by several hundred or thousand percent during the 1994-1996 period, it seems very unlikely that this in fact occurred.

Table 3: Self-Reported Gang Membership Among Youth in Gang Prevention Programs, 1992, 1994, 1996

	1992	1994	1996
Are you now in a gang?	11%*	18%	14%
Have you ever been in a gang?	24%	18%	24%
Do you want to be in a gang?	12%	16%	13%

*Percent reporting "yes" to each question. Youth responding to the surveys in each period differ, with only one agency surveyed in all three periods. Source: Chesney-Lind, et al., 1997.

One possible interpretation of the newspaper data is that the media grossly *under*-reported juvenile crime prior to 1993 or 1994, and are only now reporting at an appropriate level. Whether or not this is the most plausible explanation (the media output was quite sparse in Hawaii's comparatively higher juvenile crime era of the late 1980's, after all), the point remains largely irrelevant. A blame-oriented "early era/under-reporting" or "current era/over-reporting" explanation is not as useful as simply stating that longtime readers of the local newspapers have been presented with a

dramatically accelerating output of juvenile crime articles, and that this media output has occurred during a period of mostly decreasing local juvenile crime. Thus, the effect that this may have had on public perception of the extent of juvenile crime in Hawaii becomes the next avenue of discussion.

MEDIA INFLUENCE AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Although content analysis cannot prove causation—it is impossible to state that the huge increases in local juvenile crime media coverage directly affected people's perceptions of juvenile crime—such possibilities can certainly be discussed. And even with the qualification that causation cannot be established, a few things seem self-evident. Given that most people are not directly confronted with youth crime, few other sources seem as likely as mass media to provide the necessary information on which to base opinions. Decker & Kempf-Leonard (1991) demonstrate how even youth crime policymakers received the majority of their knowledge about youth gangs from media sources. Even if people tend not to "believe everything they read," they ultimately have to believe *something*, and unless they actively seek out more official, firsthand, and/or otherwise valid information about juvenile crime, print media are likely to provide what seems to be the accurate information available. Beyond the press lie broadcast media, which tend to distort crime news more drastically than print media (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). Particularly troubling are pseudo-journalistic television programs ("America's Most Wanted" or "Cops") and fictional entertainment (the feature film "Menace II Society,") which clearly sensationalize street crime. Compared to portrayals of youth crime in these media, very little that appears in newspapers may seem overstated.

The Hawaii State Department of the Attorney General publishes the annual results of a statewide crime victimization survey. For the 1997 survey, a question was added that was designed to assess

respondents' knowledge about local juvenile arrest trends. As can be seen in Table 4, the results indicate that the public perception of the extent of local juvenile crime, while certainly not reflecting the actual stable-to-downward juvenile arrest trends, rather closely parallels the skyrocketing increase in local juvenile crime media coverage. That more than nine out of ten respondents believed juvenile arrests had increased, and two-thirds of the group thought that the increase had been large, may go a long way toward supporting the contention that the amount of media coverage juvenile crime receives provides the public with the most convincing gauge of the actual extent of juvenile crime.

Table 4: Public Perception of Local Juvenile Arrest Trends

"To the best of my knowledge, the number of juvenile arrests in Hawaii between 1992 and 1995 showed..." [n=745]		
A large increase	67%	An increase = 92%
A small increase	25%	
No change	6%	A decrease = 2%
A small decrease	2%	
A large decrease	0%	

Source: *Crime and Justice in Hawaii: 1997 Hawaii Household Survey Report*, Hawaii Department of the Attorney General

The argument that the media may have directly affected public perception of the extent of local juvenile crime would be invalidated if it could be established that the public tends not to have faith in the accuracy of media reporting. The argument would similarly be weakened if it could be shown that the media are anything other than people's primary source of crime information. Tables 5 and 6 also draw from the Attorney General's 1997 victimization survey report and demonstrate that Hawaii residents believe the media do a fairly good job reporting crime news, that the media act as primary sources of crime information, and that newspapers are specifically the number one source of such information.

Table 5: Public Rating of Local Media Crime Coverage

"Local news media make Hawaii's crime problem seem _____ it really is." [n=764]	
Better than	15%
About the same as	41%
Worse than	18%
(Not sure)	27%

Source: *Crime and Justice in Hawaii: 1997 Hawaii Household Survey Report*, Hawaii Department of the Attorney General

Table 6: Contributors to Public Knowledge About Crime Issues

"Where do you get information about crime in your neighborhood?" [n=784]	
Newspapers	83%
Television	75%
Radio	55%
Relatives & Friends	50%
Neighborhood Talk	36%
Newsletters	23%
Groups/Organizations	13%
Police	12%
"Other"	5%

Source: *Crime and Justice in Hawaii: 1997 Hawaii Household Survey Report*, Hawaii Department of the Attorney General

LITTLE MONSTERS AND FALLEN ANGELS

Although a complete delineation is beyond the scope of this report, the articles were read, coded, and analyzed for theme (or "flavor") through a systematic process of content analysis. It is anticipated that this facet of the study will be published in an upcoming edition of the academic journal *Social Justice*.

While the majority of articles seemed to neither sensationalize nor downplay juvenile crime in Hawaii, at either end of a theoretical spectrum lay a small, but persuasive, group of articles that not only reported the news but also implied an ideological context in which to generally consider juvenile offenders. Running the gamut from

seemingly apocalyptic condemnations of “evil youth running wild” to the rather saccharine defense of “blameless youth led astray,” the appearance of either of these article types seemed dependent upon, respectively, the recent presence or long term absence of a notably violent youth gang incident. Unfortunately, absent from these sorts of media accounts were the gritty complexities of life for troubled children in communities heavily impacted by gangs, drugs, and violence. Finally, it was postulated that the use of these simplistic “evil child/good world” and opposing “good child/evil world” ideologies is anything but historically unique, and tends to serve political interests (particularly when those who define the nature of the problem also purport to have crafted “the” solution).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The annual number of gang and juvenile delinquency articles appearing in Hawaii’s major newspapers has increased several hundred percent in the last five years, and a few *thousand* percent in the last decade. If one went primarily by media accounts, as survey data indicate is generally the case, Hawaii has clearly been in the throes of a youth crime epidemic.

Is this really the case? In fact, this research has documented a wide disparity between the output of youth crime-related media coverage and actual juvenile crime trends as measured by either arrest or self-report data. Of further note is that the disparity becomes especially pronounced when the arrest trends are compared against those articles which are strictly first-mentions of specific youth crime incidents. Existing media research demonstrates that such disparate patterns can be expected, yet it is nonetheless difficult to explain *why* they were found.

A typical reader of Hawaii’s newspapers might also assume that local youth crime is characterized by gang activity, as the number of gang articles over the ten-year period is approximately equal to

the sum of juvenile delinquency articles. Furthermore, that two- to ten-times more gang articles than juvenile delinquency articles appeared during five of those years seems to indicate the tendency of the media to narrowly focus on youth gang activity in their coverage of juvenile crime issues.

In sum, while the extent of juvenile crime in Hawaii has declined or remained stable since at least the mid-1980s, newspaper attention has soared in the last few years. Survey data reveal that newspapers are usually the primary source of state residents’ crime information, and, as could be expected, that more than nine out of ten residents believe juvenile crime is on the rise. It is also likely that many people perceive the nature of juvenile crime in Hawaii to be typified by violent and/or gang-related offenses.

One can only speculate about the impact that the media and public perception can have on public policy, but it is no secret that in many places exclusively punitive responses to juvenile crime have become the norm. Under no circumstance should the implication be that juvenile crime is not a problem in Hawaii, or that the most serious occurrences should be discounted as mere statistical anomalies. However, it is strongly cautioned that allowing media-derived perceptions of juvenile crime to drive “get tough” initiatives seems reactionary, especially when one goes beyond the headlines to discover that many juvenile justice professionals are now advocating a balanced, “get smart” approach.

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