



Young people are disproportionately responsible for and victims of violent crime. While overall rates of youth crime have decreased since their peak in the mid-1990s, reducing criminal activity committed by young people and putting them on a better path remains a top priority for policymakers. Some proposed policies, such as lowering the age at which a youth can be charged as an adult, come with substantial individual, social, and economic costs and are not based on scientific evidence concerning brain development and impulse control. Strategies that increase the swiftness and certainty of punishment (thus ensuring predictable, short-term consequences) are likely to deter more crime and be far more cost-effective.

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT COMBATING YOUTH VIOLENCE

- **Certainty of punishment:** Research shows that increasing the probability of getting caught is a far more effective way to deter crime than increasing the severity of punishment. This is especially true for juveniles, who tend to be more impulsive and discount risks and long-term consequences.
- **Age of majority:** Reforms to “raise the age” of criminal majority — the minimum age to be prosecuted in the adult legal system — may moderately increase criminal offending, but prosecuting youth as adults produces social and economic costs.<sup>1</sup> Other strategies will be far more cost-effective.
- **Criminal convictions:** An adult criminal conviction has long-term effects on labor market participation, earnings, and economic productivity.<sup>2</sup> Prosecuting youth as adults increases costs through more jail and prison time.
- **Programming:** Proven interventions prevent youth from engaging in crime by helping them see alternative paths forward and make better decisions. This reduces the costs of both crime and incarceration.
  - › Strong causal evidence shows that summer youth employment programs work to reduce violent crime, including homicide, with effects lasting up to 18 months after program participation. These programs typically involve subsidized wages for youth working at selected employers on a part- or full-time basis over the summer and usually include additional training or mentorship support.<sup>3</sup>
  - › Studies demonstrate that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) significantly reduces violent crime, victimization, and recidivism among high-risk populations, including young people. CBT interventions typically involve a combination of stop-and-think training, intensive mentoring, and trauma-informed therapy aimed at reducing aggression and improving social-emotional skills. Program examples include Becoming a Man, Choose to Change, and the Rapid Employment and Development Initiative. They are effective when delivered in the community or inside juvenile facilities.

## WHAT POLICYMAKERS SHOULD FOCUS ON

- Deterring young people from committing violent crimes through policies that increase the likelihood of getting caught, investments in investigative resources, and deployment of new crime-solving technologies. Making consequences more severe will have limited benefits and large costs.
- Scaling programs that are proven to reduce crime among youth, such as summer youth employment and CBT.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Arora, A. (2023). Juvenile crime and anticipated punishment. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 15(4), 522–550.
- 2 Agan, A. Y., Garin, A., Koustas, D. K., Mas, A., & Yang, C. (2024). *Can you erase the mark of a criminal record? Labor market impacts of criminal record remediation* (NBER Working Paper No. 32394). National Bureau of Economic Research.
- 3 Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab. (2022, May 23). *The promises of summer youth employment programs: Lessons from randomized evaluations*. Retrieved December 12, 2025, from <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/publication/promises-summer-youth-employment-programs-lessons-randomized-evaluations>.

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