

REPORT 2006

A Study of Disproportionate Minority Contact in Juvenile Arrests in Three Connecticut Municipalities

“Minority overrepresentation raises difficult issues
for our juvenile justice system.

The research suggests that minority children
may be more likely to be detained and incarcerated
than white children, even when charged with the same offense.

This not only unnecessarily increases the cost of the juvenile
justice system in the short-term, but it also reduces public trust
in our justice system and undermines the basic American ideal
that everyone receives equal justice under the law.”

Fernando Muñiz, *Executive Director,*
Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance

In 2002, the Greater Bridgeport Juvenile Justice Task Force published the outcomes of a study that profiled youth involved with the Bridgeport Juvenile Court. It documented that a disproportionate number of minority youth were being arrested and detained relative to their numbers in the overall population. In 2004, a follow-up study was conducted to look at patterns of arrest and how young people from Bridgeport, Stratford, and Trumbull become involved with the juvenile justice system in an effort to understand the causes of this racial disparity. Working in connection with the police departments from these three municipalities, researchers reviewed 1,139 arrest reports filed between July 1, 2003 and June 30, 2004.

While the purpose of this report was to explore the phenomenon of disproportionate minority contact (DMC) in Bridgeport and two surrounding communities, it became clear at the start that comparing data would not be easy because of varying collection methods across police departments. For example, while Stratford requires police officers to keep track of every contact with a young person whether or not it leads to arrest, Bridgeport and Trumbull do not. As a result, it is impossible to know which youth are simply given warnings or taken home to their parents and which end up involved in the justice system. Decisions can be very subjective.

Key Findings

- Placing a youth in detention is a last resort for all three police departments. Bridgeport detained youth most frequently: 10 percent of all those arrested were detained.
- Youth who were detained were disproportionately African American or Hispanic.
- More than half of the juvenile arrests in Bridgeport took place during the school day on school property. This was not true in Stratford and Trumbull, where the majority of arrests occurred between 2:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m.
- The large majority of arrests are initiated by citizens, school officials and business owners, not by the police.
- The vast majority of those arrested were charged with misdemeanors.
- The practices and policies of police departments and boards of education differ from town to town.

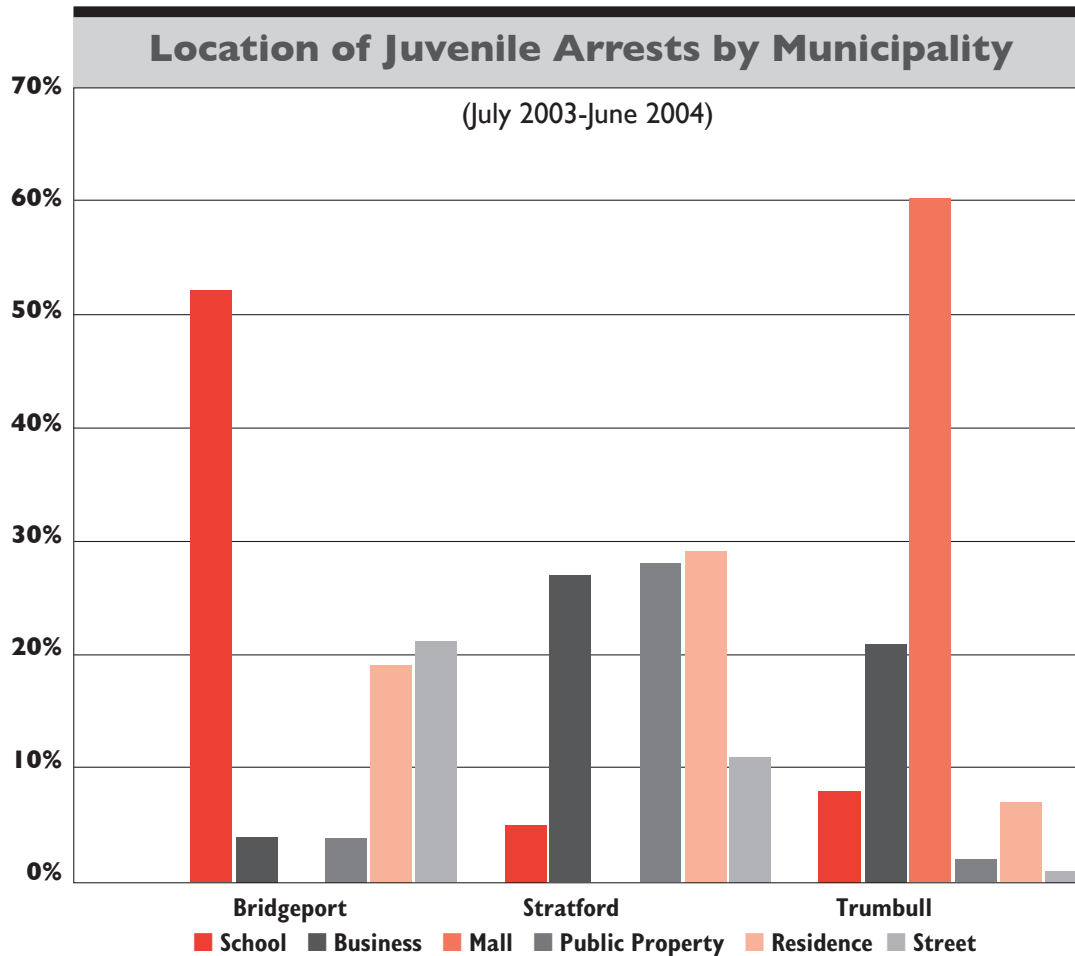
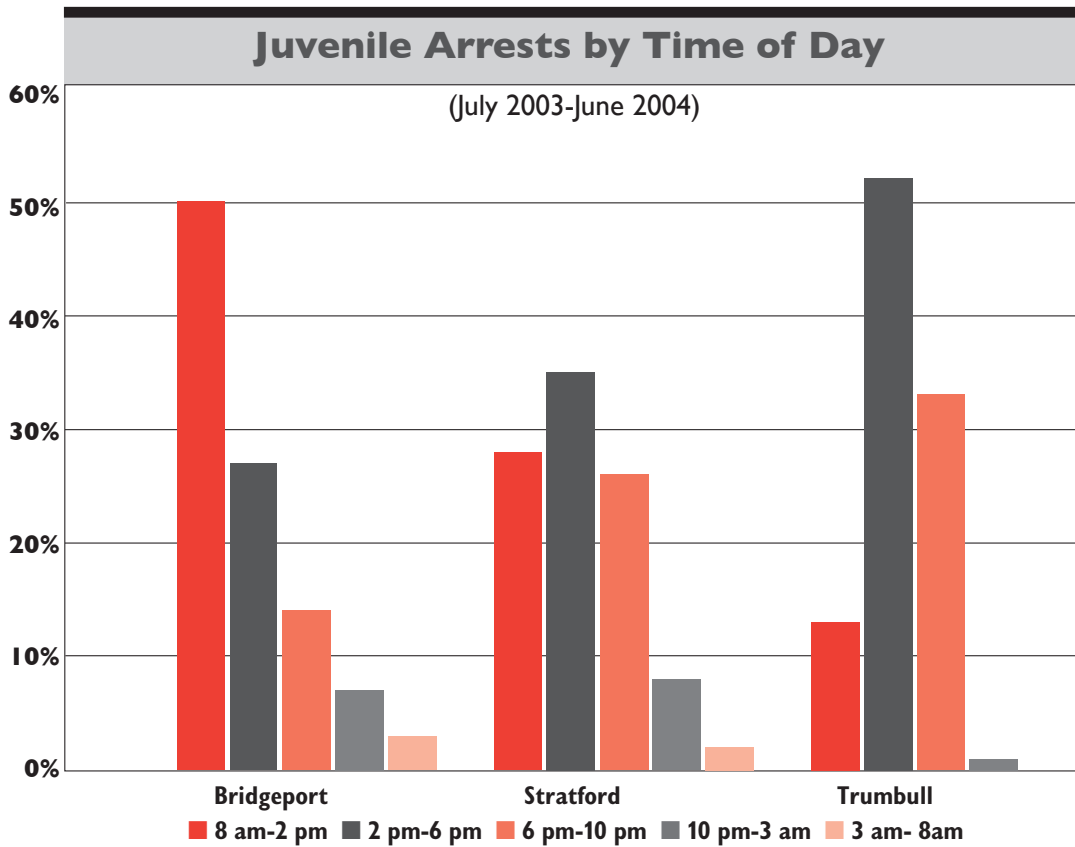
Where and when are youth arrested?

Board of Education policies vary widely
across the three municipalities
regarding when school matters become police matters.
These policies have a significant impact
upon the juvenile justice system.
More than half of the juvenile arrests in Bridgeport
took place during the school day on school property.

In Stratford, where a significant number of arrests also took place during the school day (26%), they did not take place in school buildings. This implies that the youth were truant or had been expelled from school.

In Trumbull, most of the arrests took place between the times that youth left school in the afternoon and went home at night. These arrests were predominately property crimes committed by Caucasian children at the Westfield Shopping Mall in Trumbull.

The three jurisdictions demonstrate different approaches to police presence in the schools. Bridgeport has a significant Board of Education police and security force, in addition to the Bridgeport Police Department's School Resource Officers (SRO). Stratford and Trumbull also have SRO programs, but not Board of Education police and security. It is possible and highly likely that the mere presence of a school-based police/security force, such as that in Bridgeport, results in a significantly higher rate of juvenile arrests on school grounds.



Demographic Characteristics of Arrested Youth

Disproportionate minority contact (DMC) is an issue of concern in all three municipalities —especially Bridgeport.

DMC is defined as a situation where the proportion of minorities in contact with law enforcement is greater than their representative proportion of the general population. The research documents DMC in juvenile arrests, with African American and Hispanic youth overrepresented in all three municipalities. **The table below combines information from several parts of this study to show that even when young people are arrested for similar crimes, African American youth are likely to receive the most severe consequences at every decision point throughout the system.** Part of the reason for disproportionality in juvenile arrests in Bridgeport may be because of the very high number of arrests at schools. The

public schools in Bridgeport are almost 95% African American or Hispanic, with Caucasian students more likely to attend parochial and private schools. However, the very large disparity in Stratford and Trumbull cannot be as easily explained.

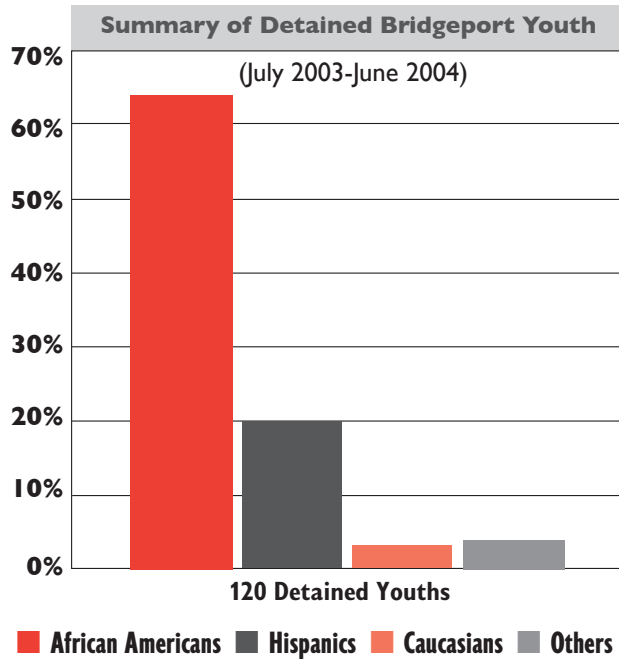
Post Arrest Dispositions

Another critical portion of the research examined what happens after the arrest. Police officers decide whether to release the arrested juvenile to a responsible adult or place him or her in Bridgeport’s juvenile detention center, Mead Hall. In all three municipalities, young people were most likely to be released with a promise to appear. Bridgeport youth were detained most frequently (10% of the time, for a total of 120 youth), leading us to believe that police departments are detaining youth only when absolutely necessary. However, when youth are detained in Bridgeport, minorities are disproportionately affected.

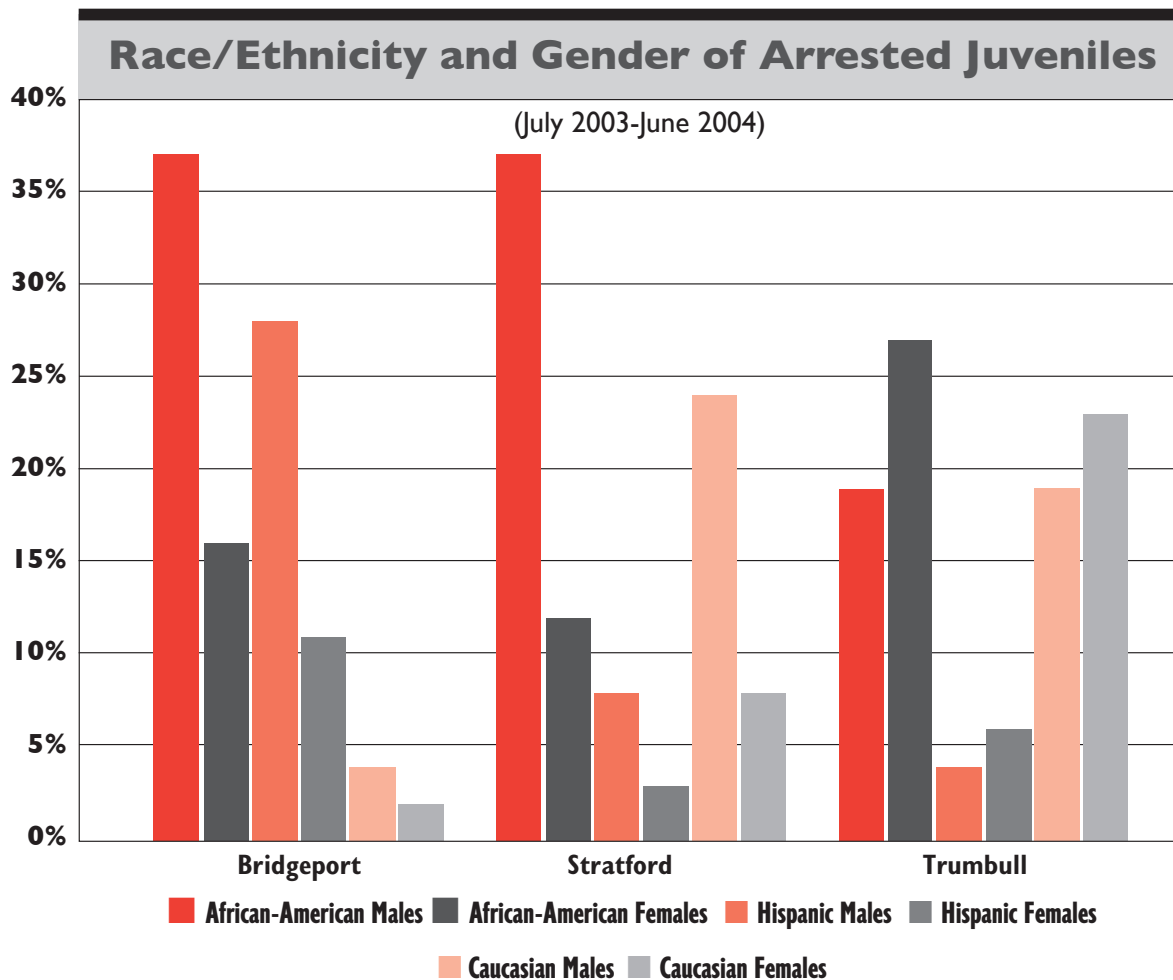
Racial Disparities in Bridgeport Juvenile Justice (July 2003-June 2004)

| | African-American | Hispanic | Caucasian |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------|------------|------------|
| Percentage of Population | 31% | 31% | 45% |
| Arrest Rate | 53% | 39% | 6% |
| Severity of Crime* | 8.7 | 4.9 | 8.4 |
| Percentage of Crimes that are Felonies | 24% | 21% | 21% |
| Detention Rate | 34% | 29% | 3% |

*Determined based on a 12-point scale created by the Connecticut Policy and Economic Council



African American and Hispanic youth are disproportionately arrested in all three communities. In Bridgeport, minority youth are detained at a much higher rate than Caucasian youth, even when their crimes are less severe than those of their Caucasian peers.

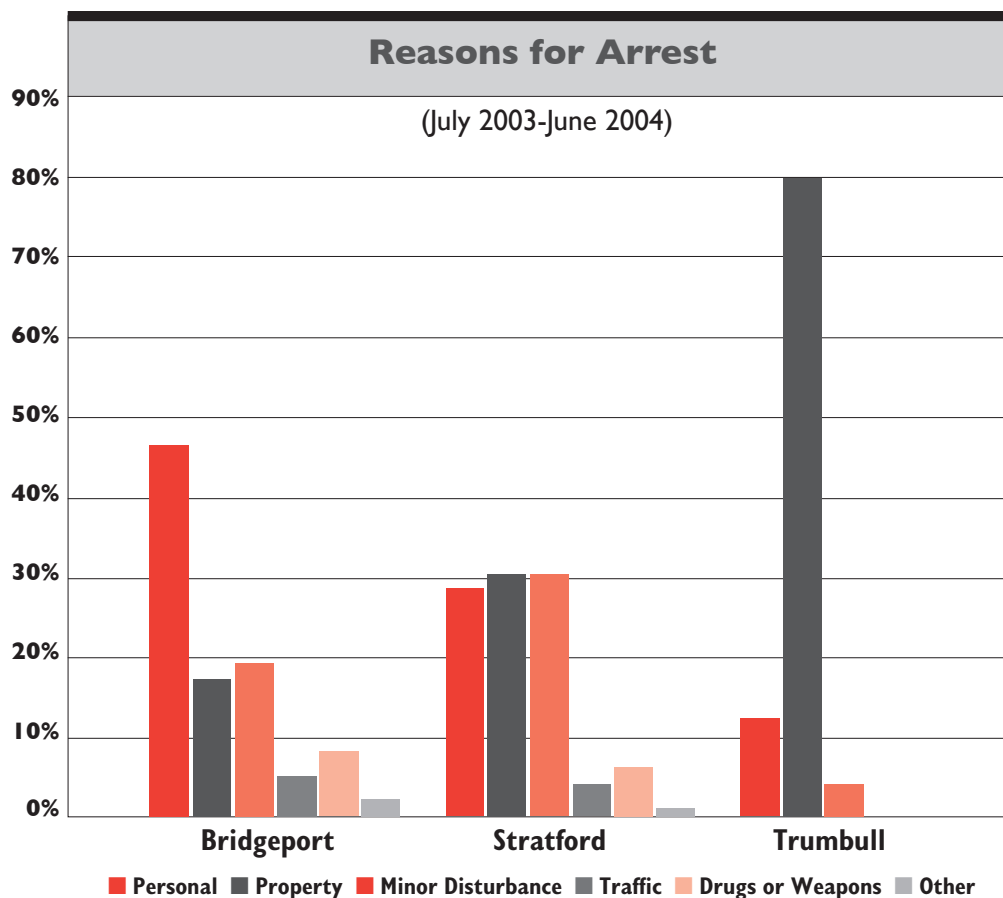


What Crimes Are Young People Committing?

The large majority of juveniles arrested are charged with misdemeanors and, in the case of school arrests, breach of peace.

As noted earlier in this report, most of the youth arrested in Trumbull were arrested for property crimes, such as shoplifting, while most of the youth arrested in Bridgeport were arrested for crimes against persons, such as fighting. In all three municipalities,

the vast majority of youth were arrested for misdemeanors, followed in much smaller numbers by felonies and infractions. The charts provided here show the crime resulting in arrest by race/ethnicity and municipality.



Conclusions and Recommendations

This study's findings challenge certain assumptions that surround the interaction between police enforcement and young people - at least those under the age of 16. The notion that there are police officers specifically targeting out-of-town youth is discredited as the vast majority of youth were arrested in their own municipalities. Sixty percent of the arrests in Trumbull occurred at

the Westfield Mall on the Bridgeport-Trumbull border, and yet 87% of the arrests at the mall were of Trumbull residents.

There are a number of specific recommendations that are supported by this research, as well as through discussions of these findings with the Greater Bridgeport Juvenile Justice Task Force, participating law enforcement agencies and state and national experts on disproportionality.

These include the following:

- To fully understand the dynamics of the decision to arrest and detain juvenile offenders, further study must be made of the complex relationship among factors such as offense severity, ethnicity and race, police contacts and attitudes that do not lead to arrest, family structure and support and economic stability. **Every attempt should be made to assure that all assessments and decision-making processes are race neutral.**
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- Future inquiries should attempt to understand the reasons behind the high rates of minority ethnic and racial representation in juvenile justice populations. As most arrests in this study were citizen-initiated, the role and attitudes of the general public in this process need to be explored. Efforts should be made to engage families, neighborhoods and youth themselves in the investigation of problems and identification of solutions regarding police/youth interactions. In addition, a broad-based community awareness program on overrepresentation of minorities and its effects should be implemented.
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- Schools should carefully examine zero-tolerance, suspension and expulsion policies to determine if current practices are the best ways to meet the needs of the students, school and community. Each youth and situation is unique. School policies must be flexible enough to insure that the best outcome is achieved in each case.
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- The impact of having a police presence in the schools should be explored to determine how this affects arrest rates, suspension/expulsion rates, school violence levels, etc. These questions must also discriminate among the types of police present in the schools (e.g., school police/security, regular patrol officers, School Resource Officers).
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- Current approaches to disruptive students and their discipline do not seem to be working. In Bridgeport, it seems that arrest is utilized excessively as a disciplinary measure. In all three communities, disciplinary policies regarding zero tolerance, expulsion and suspension do not appear to be consistent. Recommendations include:

Follow-up research should explore the use of arrest in Bridgeport schools in terms of its timing along the disciplinary continuum. What is its necessity, its impact on the learning environment and/or its effectiveness in altering behavior? Are there less severe alternative disciplinary actions available?

Training of teachers and administrators in appropriate intervention techniques short of police involvement need to be used as the first line of intervention.

More educational alternatives need to be developed for those students who are expelled or suspended from school in at least two ways: (1) positive alternative programming for basically “good kids” who need help and redirection (e.g., mentoring) and (2) structured and separate alternative programming for the small number of really troublesome youth who are endangering others and disrupting the educational environment.

- Early intervention, diversion and alternative to arrest programs should be identified and implemented at the school and community level. **Law enforcement described being routinely called to situations that could probably have been handled by school officials without the need for police intervention, but as the situation escalated, the officer was left with little choice but to arrest the youth.** Training should be provided for teachers and administrators to improve their ability to handle student situations earlier on and not depend so much on police intervention. Teen courts, juvenile review boards, etc., should be initiated on a community level as well.
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This study opens a window into where disproportionate minority overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system begins.

It illustrates quite clearly that race issues permeate society and everyone—schools, police, business employees and the community at large—bears responsibility for both the problem and the solution.

Robert Francis, *Executive Director, RYASAP and Co-Chair Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance*

The Greater Bridgeport Juvenile Justice Task Force is a committee of RYASAP consisting of local and state juvenile justice and behavioral health professionals, educators, state officials, legislators, and child and parent advocates. It is dedicated to raising awareness regarding the characteristics and needs of young people in the juvenile system and making recommendations for addressing these needs.

RYASAP is a youth and community development coalition serving Greater Bridgeport and Connecticut. Its mission is to build healthier and safer communities by reducing the harm caused by substance abuse, crime and violence.

Bridgeport, Stratford and Trumbull Police Departments

Thank you to the Bridgeport, Stratford and Trumbull police departments involved in this study. Their willingness to support the data collection efforts and interest in openly discussing these findings to discover more effective ways to handle these youth was truly impressive. These departments clearly have the best interest of the youth in mind and are seeking better ways to deal with these issues. In order to achieve necessary reforms, it is imperative that educators/administrators, communities, families and youth themselves become involved in a partnership with these police agencies.

In Connecticut, a juvenile is any child under the age of 16.

Anyone older than 16, who commits a crime, is processed by the adult criminal justice system. The data presented here represents arrests only and does not reflect other contacts between the police and juveniles.

This report was prepared by RYASAP in partnership with the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance and the Bridgeport, Stratford and Trumbull, Connecticut police departments from a study entitled *Juvenile Arrests in Three Connecticut Communities* by Stephen Cox, Ph.D., Central Connecticut State University, and Mario Gaboury, J.D., Ph.D., University of New Haven.

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