



Photo by DAVID JOLIS • Star Tribune

The recent surge in carjackings belies the fact that the arrest rate for teenagers in Minnesota and elsewhere has been steadily dropping over the past five years. But the frequency and ferocity of these crimes is provoking outrage in community forums, at city halls and at the State Capitol.

Abdullahi Abdi, an Uber driver who lives in Burnsville, was found covered in blood and barely able to walk after a 16-year-old boy repeatedly struck him with a metal rod while trying to steal his phone. The assault was so severe that, six months later, Abdi was still unable to lift both arms above his head and has had to learn how to read lips because the many blows permanently damaged his hearing. He also learned to scrutinize each of his Uber passengers for hints of trouble, and to cancel rides when he sees people who look like the teenager who left him bleeding along a dark road.

"For 16 years I have lived in this country and had no problem," said Abdi, 62, who fled Somalia's civil war in the 1990s. "Now I think it is unsafe to live here."

Criminal justice reformers and many county officials blame much of the problem on the pandemic that upended children's lives, and a dearth of child and family services. DFL Gov. Tim Walz recently recommended allocating more than \$20 million over the next four years toward after-school programs, mentoring and other programs for youth, as well as conflict resolution centers that help connect teens with services.

Republican lawmakers and law enforcement officials argue the attacks demand a tougher approach. Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka, a Republican candidate for governor, has called for mandatory minimum sentences for carjackers and other juvenile offenders he accuses of terrorizing the urban core. "Instead of learning math and science and social studies, they're learning to become hardened criminals," Gazelka said.

The rhetoric echoes that of an earlier era.

In the early 1990s, a surge in homicides and other violent crimes among youth ushered in a wave of intensified policing and tougher sentencing laws that blurred the once-stark distinctions between the juvenile and adult criminal systems. Some criminologists warned of a new breed of violent youth, or "superpredators," who terrorized victims without remorse. Lawmakers in Minnesota and more than 40 states responded by enacting laws that made it easier to prosecute children as adults.

But the projected youth crime wave never materialized. Homicides and other violent crimes by adolescents plunged before tougher sanctions were even imposed.

By the early 2000s, the pendulum began swinging back toward rehabilitation. New research showed that locking up youth often resulted in them dropping out of school and becoming permanently entangled in the criminal justice system.

There was also growing outrage over the harsher treatment of kids of color, who were being arrested and incarcerated at rates far exceeding their white counterparts. Black youth in Minnesota are more than eight times likelier than their white peers to be held in juvenile facilities — the 10th highest rate in the nation — despite studies showing few differences between white and Black youth in common categories of arrests for delinquent behavior.

"Historically, we have allowed white children, or folks with means, to engage in developmentally appropriate behavior," said Sarah Davis, executive director of the Legal Rights Center in Minneapolis. "Our youth of color have gotten an entirely different system, which is criminalizing those behaviors and then funneling them deep into the adult justice system."

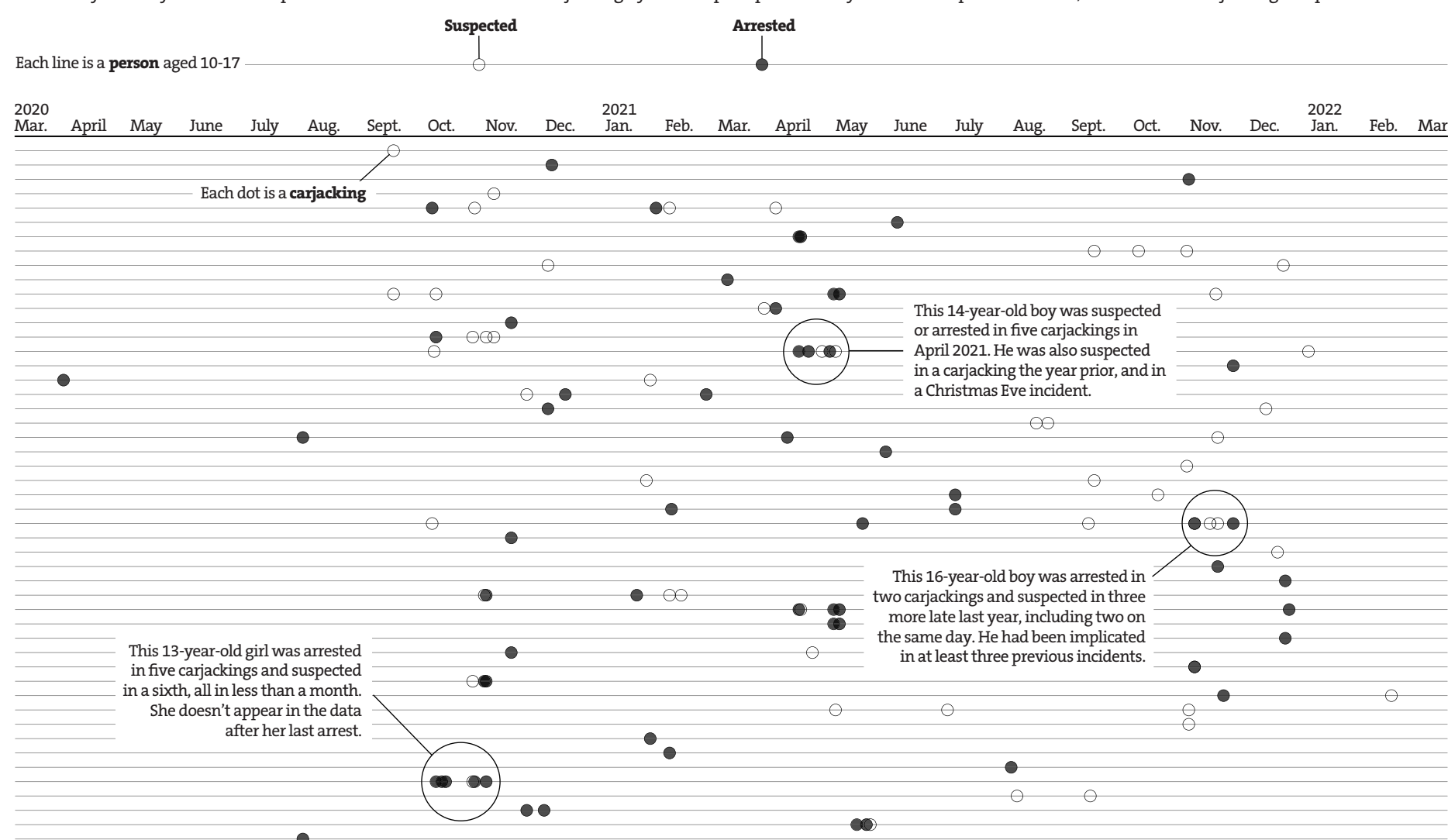
In 2005, several of Minnesota's largest counties signed on to the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), an ambitious national effort to reform the juvenile system by shifting the emphasis from punishment to rehabilitation.

They adopted a screening tool to gauge a child's risk of reoffending or failure to show up for court. Designed to remove racial bias from the juvenile system, it also raised the threshold for who would be detained and for how long. Teens accused of low-level assaults and auto thefts, for example, no longer qualified for a bed in most instances.

Overall admission to juvenile detention centers in Minneapolis and St. Paul soon plummeted. Corrections officials became more reliant on electronic home monitoring to keep track of youth, even if some occasionally snipped off the ankle bracelets and vanished from oversight.

## THE REVOLVING DOOR

Over two years 49 youth were suspected or arrested in at least one carjacking by Minneapolis police. Many had been implicated before, sometimes in carjackings in quick succession.



Source: Minneapolis Police Department

C.J. SINNER and MARYJO WEBSTER • Star Tribune



*"The juvenile system literally is just a slap on the wrist. The whole community is failing them."*

Alex Swenson and his family, above, are still grappling with a carjacking two years ago, when teens beat him and sped away with two of his kids in the vehicle. In a separate incident, at top, two teens died in December when they crashed a stolen SUV.