



Criminological Highlights: **Children and Youth**

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This issue of *Criminological Highlights: Children and Youth* addresses the following questions:

1. Does attending an ‘advantaged’ school affect all students equally?
2. What kinds of drug treatment programs have been shown to reduce crime?
3. Can we identify who is likely to become a high rate offender?
4. What do research findings suggest would constitute sensible responses to offending by youths?
5. What kinds of neighbourhoods are safest?
6. Can effective programs be designed to reduce reoffending by young violent men being released from jail?

Criminological Highlights is designed to provide an accessible look at some of the more interesting criminological research that is currently being published. These summaries of high quality, policy related, published research are produced by the Centre for Criminology & Sociolegal Studies at the University of Toronto. The *Children and Youth* edition constitutes a selection of these summaries (from the full edition) chosen by researchers at the National Center for Juvenile Justice and the University of Toronto. It is designed for those people especially interested in matters related to children and youth. Some of the articles may relate primarily to broad criminal justice issues but have been chosen because we felt they also have relevance for those interested primarily in matters related to children and youth. Each issue of the *Children and Youth* edition contains “Headlines and Conclusions” for each of 6 articles, followed by one-page summaries of each article.

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Youths who are enrolled in “advantaged” schools – most notably boys and those who are especially high risk for offending – are less involved in offending than would be the case if they were in less advantaged schools.

The impact of personal characteristics normally related to involvement in delinquency – being male and being impulsive/sensation-seeking are reduced in favourable settings (advantaged schools). It is possible that the advantaged schools have higher levels of social cohesion and social control, or that the youths are simply exposed to fewer risk factors. Whatever the reason, it would appear that providing favourable settings for ‘at risk’ youths, in particular, can reduce offending.

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An analysis of all known treatment programs for drug-abusing offenders in Europe that have relatively adequate evaluations demonstrates that programs that include pharmacological substitution treatments were quite effective. Programs that relied primarily on drug testing were ineffective.

It would appear that the European drug treatment programs may have a larger effect on reoffending than studies carried out elsewhere. This may have to do with the fact that the effective treatments in this review involved pharmacological substitution. The necessity of adequate control groups was also demonstrated by the fact that, over time, in most of these studies, there was a reduction in drug use in *both* the treatment and the control groups. A simple “before – after” design, without a control group would therefore have been inadequate since any program, even ones that had no effect, would demonstrate ‘change’ in these circumstances.

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It is impossible to predict at an early age who will turn out to be a ‘high rate’ or serious offender. What can be predicted is that people become less likely to re-offend as they grow older no matter what their early pattern of offending looks like.

The results are consistent with previous findings demonstrating the futility of trying to predict in advance which offenders are likely to be high rate or chronic offenders. Although certain factors (e.g., low intelligence and psychological instability) predict early onset and chronic offending to some extent, the ability of factors such as these to identify high rate offenders is extremely limited. Hence policies based on early identification and treatment (or incapacitation) of high rate offenders are doomed to failure.

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The ways in which communities respond to offending by young people typically do not reflect what is known about youth crime.

These findings “highlight the importance of case work [with youths] focused on welfare needs and of educational inclusion rather than more narrowly circumscribed criminogenic needs...” (p. 200). In political debates it is often suggested that there is an “irreconcilable tension between tackling the broader needs of young offenders and delivering justice for communities and for victims of crime... [Clearly] these are not alternative strategies...” (p. 202). Providing reasonable policies for youth serves community *and* victims’ interests.

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Neighbourhoods are most likely to be safe if very few or almost all streets in the neighbourhood are active and have people on them. The most dangerous neighbourhoods appear to be those that have a mixture of some active streets and some largely empty streets.

It would appear that when neighbourhood streets are mostly empty, “increases in the prevalence of active streets may offer little more than additional potential targets for victimization” (p. 1035). However, once a threshold is reached, increases in street use in a neighbourhood reduces exposure to violence, violent victimization, and homicide rates. Hence it is possible that the ‘gentrification’ of neighbourhoods may produce short term increases in violence due to there being fewer people on the streets. The increase in violence will continue until the neighbourhood experiences higher rates of street use at which point it, the streets do, in fact, become safe.

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The recidivism rate of young violent men who are released from prison can be reduced.

Compared to many correctional programs, this program was unusual on at least two dimensions: It targeted difficult offenders who were expected to have a relatively high recidivism rate and, similar to some other programs for offenders who are a concern to many citizens (e.g., see *Criminological Highlights*, 9(3)#6, 11(2)#6), it was very intensive. Nevertheless, it does demonstrate that programs aimed at those released from prison on some form of conditional release can be effective.

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Youths who are enrolled in “advantaged” schools – most notably boys and those who are especially high risk for offending – are less involved in offending than would be the case if they were in less advantaged schools.

It is well established that youths’ own levels of delinquency are affected by the delinquency level of those whom they spend time with (see *Criminological Highlights* 6(4)#5, 6(4)#6, 7(4)#5, 10(5)#3, 10(6)#4, 14(2)#3, 14(2)#4). This paper extends these findings by relating the characteristics of the school that a young person attends to the youth’s involvement in delinquency. Specifically, the paper examines the differential impact of the school environment on youths who vary in personality characteristics related to involvement in delinquency.

Schools in many cities vary dramatically in terms of the socioeconomic status of the families of the students, the ethnicity of the students, and the likelihood that students have been involved with the justice system. Thus, like neighbourhoods (see *Criminological Highlights* 1(2)#2, 8(1)#5, 8(2)#4, 9(6)#6, 10(5)#3, 11(6)#8, 13(3)#6, 14(1)#5, 14(2)#5), schools may have an independent effect on a youth’s offending. In addition, research has shown that youths with certain personality types – impulsivity and sensation seeking, for example – are more likely to be involved in crime. This paper investigates the hypothesis that the impact of personal characteristics related to offending in youths – being male and being impulsive/sensation seeking – is reduced in “advantaged” schools (those with large numbers of youths from relatively well-off families, etc.).

Data were collected from a sample of 5619 Grade 9 youths from 89 schools in Stockholm, Sweden. A measure of ‘school advantage’ was developed consisting of three highly correlated indicators: the average student marks at the school, the percent of students in the school born in Sweden, and the percent of students with at least one parent with post-secondary education.

A delinquency measure – self-reports of the frequency of 19 different offences, calculated so as to give more weight to more serious offences – was calculated for each student. Various individual controls were also included in the analyses: gender, how long the youth had lived in Sweden, parents’ education, family structure, parental unemployment, alcohol and drug use, whether the youth smoked, and the youth’s marks. Impulsivity/sensation seeking was measured by the youth’s level of agreement with statements such as “I like doing exciting and dangerous things, even if they are forbidden” and “Sometimes I do things without thinking.”

Not surprisingly, delinquency was, overall, lower in the more advantaged schools, even controlling for the individual characteristics of the youths. Girls reported less delinquency than boys. More interesting was the fact that the impact of impulsivity/sensation-seeking traits was lower in more organized schools, even taking into account all of the control variables. Said differently, in the more advantaged schools, there was very little impact of the youth’s level of impulsivity/sensation seeking; but in the less advantaged

schools, there were strong effects of impulsivity/sensation-seeking. Similarly, the difference between delinquency levels for boys and girls was lower in the advantaged schools.

Conclusion: The impact of personal characteristics normally related to involvement in delinquency – being male and being impulsive/sensation-seeking are reduced in favourable settings (advantaged schools). It is possible that the advantaged schools have higher levels of social cohesion and social control, or that the youths are simply exposed to fewer risk factors. Whatever the reason, it would appear that providing favourable settings for ‘at risk’ youths, in particular, can reduce offending.

Reference: Elkund, Jenny M. and Johan Fritzell (2014). Keeping Delinquency at Bay: The Role of the School Context for Impulsive and Sensation-Seeking Adolescents. *European Journal of Criminology*, 11(6), 682-70.

An analysis of all known treatment programs for drug-abusing offenders in Europe that have relatively adequate evaluations demonstrates that programs that include pharmacological substitution treatments were quite effective. Programs that relied primarily on drug testing were ineffective.

It is quite clear from a number of studies that substance abuse and crime are linked: drug abuse is common among prisoners and the likelihood of offending is considerably higher among those using illegal drugs than it is in the general population. Not surprisingly, therefore, correctional authorities often provide drug treatment programs.

What is more surprising is how little is known, on a systematic basis, about the relative value of various forms of drug treatment programs. In large part, this is the result of the failure of correctional authorities to do high quality evaluations. Equally often, drug programs are implemented in a manner that does not permit a 'no treatment' or 'treatment as usual' comparison group.

This paper presents a systematic review of European studies (published and unpublished, and written in any European language) on drug treatment programs where crime reduction was one of the measured goals. Only studies that include a demonstrated equivalence between treatment and control groups were included. There had to be, as well, some measure of subsequent offending (self-report or criminal justice). Over 30 thousand studies were initially identified of which 1422 passed an initial screening (on such factors as the presence of a comparison group). In the end, however, there were only 13 studies with 15 controlled evaluations (involving 1698 people in the drug treatment program) that met the selection criteria. Most programs, clearly, are not adequately evaluated.

Twelve of these 15 studies involved primarily substitution-based treatment, often combined with various psychological or psychosocial treatments, client supervision and drug testing. The remaining 3 studies focused primarily on the effectiveness in reducing crime of criminal justice-based drug testing orders. In the pharmacological substitution studies, the form of the treatments varied considerably as did the frequency of contact between the client and the clinic delivering the treatment. The control groups were typically "treatment-as-usual." For example, for opiate-dependent populations in many European countries, methadone maintenance treatment is the conventional program; hence this was often the 'treatment-as-usual' condition.

There were significant positive improvements associated with the treatment on various physical health measures. "Pharmacological substitution treatments [showed] particularly strong... effects on both crime and illicit drug use" (p. 593). Programs based on drug-testing, however, did not demonstrate significant effects on either crime or drug use. It would appear that, on average, re-offending rates dropped by about 37% with the substitution drug treatment.

Conclusion: It would appear that the European drug treatment programs may have a larger effect on reoffending than studies carried out elsewhere. This may have to do with the fact that the effective treatments in this review involved pharmacological substitution. The necessity of adequate control groups was also demonstrated by the fact that, over time, in most of these studies, there was a reduction in drug use in *both* the treatment and the control groups. A simple "before – after" design, without a control group would therefore have been inadequate since any program, even ones that had no effect, would demonstrate 'change' in these circumstances.

Reference: Koehler, Johann A., David K. Humphreys, Thomas D. Akoensi, Olga Sánchez de Ribera, and Friedrich Lösel (2014). A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis on the Effects of European Drug Treatment Programs on Reoffending. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 20(6), 584-602.

It is impossible to predict at an early age who will turn out to be a 'high rate' or serious offender. What can be predicted is that people become less likely to re-offend as they grow older no matter what their early pattern of offending looks like.

There is a good deal of research demonstrating that offenders are typically relatively young and that even relatively high rate offenders eventually slow down or stop offending (see, e.g., *Criminological Highlights* 6(4)#3). However, some policy makers appear to believe that because, in retrospect, it can be shown that a small portion of the population was responsible for a disproportionate amount of past offending, early identification and incapacitation of high rate offenders would be an effective crime control strategy. Such a belief is based on a lack of understanding of the problem of predicting rare events.

This paper focuses on an interesting sample: all of those convicted of criminal offences in the Netherlands in 1977. It then examines their previous offending patterns as well as their offending for the next 25 years. From a practical perspective, then, it allows one to answer two questions: (1) What are the various 'patterns' of offending of those who are in contact with the criminal justice system? (2) Can one predict with any useful level of accuracy who, in the future, is likely to be a high rate offender?

Starting with those who were convicted in 1977, and looking back to records of offending from age 12 onwards and forward for decades, there was, not surprisingly, a relatively early peak in the overall offending rate of this group in the late teens and early 20s and a gradual dropoff after that. The rate of violent offending was, as is normally the case, somewhat flatter, but did show a gradual decrease with age. Those offenders whose offending careers began relatively early in life (age 15 or younger, or, in a separate analysis, age 13 or younger) obviously had, overall, higher rates of offending. However, the shape of the curve was the same as that of other offenders: peaking

in early adulthood followed by a decline thereafter. Similar declines were found for those who were early and high rate offenders: rates of offending dropped off after the late teens or early 20s.

When offenders were divided into four groups (according to their patterns of offending) there were some differences across groups. Chronic offenders (the 4% of the group with relatively high rates of offending throughout their 20s and 30s), were more likely to have started offending early in life at a high rate, to have a low IQ, and to have been assessed as unstable psychologically. One might think, therefore, that they could be accurately identified in advance. That turns out *not* to be the case.

In a two stage validation study, a descriptive model identified a small group of 'low rate offenders' (14% of the total sample) – those who continue offending at a low rate for relatively long periods of time. However, the best predictive model that would have been available to identify them would have picked out only 3 out of 328 of them. More important was the inability to identify the 'chronic offenders' – those

with relatively high rates of offending for long periods of time. Of the 84 who were identified as such on the basis of actual offending patterns over their whole lives, only two could have been identified in advance using the best predictive model that would have been available when they were young.

Conclusion: The results are consistent with previous findings demonstrating the futility of trying to predict in advance which offenders are likely to be high rate or chronic offenders. Although certain factors (e.g., low intelligence and psychological instability) predict early onset and chronic offending to some extent, the ability of factors such as these to identify high rate offenders is extremely limited. Hence policies based on early identification and treatment (or incapacitation) of high rate offenders are doomed to failure.

Reference: Bersani, Bianca E., Paul Nieuwbeerta, and John Laub (2009) Predicting Trajectories of Offending over the Life Course: Findings from a Dutch Conviction Cohort. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 46 (4), 468-494.

The ways in which communities respond to offending by young people typically do not reflect what is known about youth crime.

Western countries vary considerably in the manner in which they respond to offending by young people. In addition, communities vary in the programs and policies that they have in place that have an impact on youth crime. This paper examines four lessons that should be learned concerning the manner in which juvenile justice systems might be structured. The 'lessons' are based on the findings of a large study of Edinburgh youth that examined, among other things, self-reported offending.

The first important fact youth justice systems need to take into account is that "persistent serious offending is associated with victimization and social adversity" (p. 185). Violent offenders, for example, were found to have been more likely to experience a range of problems prior to being identified as offenders. These included economic deprivations, problems at school, various health related problems (e.g., alcohol or drug use, self-harm) and crime victimization as children. The exact factors varied somewhat for girls and boys. Though some of these risk factors are structural (e.g., social deprivation), others relate to interactions with peers, families and other adults. These findings would suggest that if one were interested in reducing persistent serious offending, broad based interventions directed at improving the lives of children (generally) would be important.

Second, the study demonstrates that early intervention of at-risk children is not likely to be very helpful and may, in fact, *increase* the likelihood of offending. Only a third of those involved in persistent serious offending at age 17 (according to their self-reports) were ever known to the social work or youth justice systems. On the other hand, most of those who had been *convicted* of an offence by age 17 had been

formally identified as being 'at risk' prior to age 15 and nevertheless ended up in the criminal justice system. Being identified as having problems does not mean that these problems can be eliminated. Indeed being labelled as an 'at-risk' child is likely to create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Of the 105 youths identified with behavioural problems by age 5, between a quarter and a third of them were persistent serious offenders between age 13 and 17.

Third, there are ways in which interventions might be effective. Early onset offenders who continued to offend after about age 15 differed from those whose offending rates decreased. One important difference related to their experiences at school. Being excluded from school at some point between age 13 and 15 appears to be a key way in which society can *increase* offending by those at risk. Formal involvement with the police also seemed to *increase* subsequent offending. Hence, as other studies have suggested, a focus on schools may be more effective than a focus on 'bad' youths and youth justice interventions.

Finally, diversionary strategies facilitate (or, minimally, do not inhibit) the process by which youths stop offending. Because police in Scotland often

(but not always) divert youths away from the formal youth justice system, the study was able to examine the impact of formal contact with the youth justice system, while controlling for previous contact with the police and earlier involvement in crime. "The deeper young people who were [known to the police] penetrated the youth justice system, the more likely it was that their pattern of desistance from involvement in serious offending was *inhibited*" (p. 198).

Conclusion: These findings "highlight the importance of case work [with youths] focused on welfare needs and of educational inclusion rather than more narrowly circumscribed criminogenic needs..." (p. 200). In political debates it is often suggested that there is an "irreconcilable tension between tackling the broader needs of young offenders and delivering justice for communities and for victims of crime... [Clearly] these are not alternative strategies..." (p. 202). Providing reasonable policies for youth serves community *and* victims' interests.

Reference: McAra, Lesley and Susan McVie (2010). Youth Crime and Justice: Key Messages from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 10 (2), 179-209.

Neighbourhoods are most likely to be safe if very few or almost all streets in the neighbourhood are active and have people on them. The most dangerous neighbourhoods appear to be those that have a mixture of some active streets and some largely empty streets.

Jane Jacobs suggested in 1961 that neighbourhoods with active street life were safer than quieter streets in part because there were always people around to ensure that crime did not occur. The assumption, of course, is that people will intervene if there is trouble and that the presence of others will deter those who, otherwise, might commit street crime. Hence neighbourhoods composed of streets with many adults on them should be safe.

From a neighbourhood perspective, however, if almost all of the activity is concentrated on a few streets, leaving the others empty, adding more 'active' streets may simply add more potential victims.

Using data from a large Chicago study, 157 neighbourhoods were examined. Children and their parents were interviewed. In addition, all of the streets in each neighbourhood were observed to determine whether adults generally were present on the street. The neighbourhoods themselves were also assessed (using census data as well as crime and survey data) on various characteristics such as the level of poverty, people's connection to the neighbourhood and their trust of others in the neighbourhood, whether people reported that they tended to know their neighbours, crime rates, etc. The main outcome measures were whether neighbourhood residents reported that they had witnessed violence in the previous year, whether they or a family member had been a victim of violence, and the neighbourhood homicide rate.

Exposure to violence was, in general, highest among African Americans and Latinos, males, youths without much family supervision and those living in poor neighbourhoods. The most relevant finding, however, was that there was a curvilinear relationship between the level of street activity and the experience of violence. Holding individual and other neighbourhood characteristics constant, in neighbourhoods in which most streets did not have any adults on them, there was apparently very little experience of violence (or victimization). As the proportion of streets with adults on them in the neighbourhood increased, the likelihood that residents would witness violence also increased. However, at about the point at which about half of the blocks had at least one adult on them, increasing the prevalence of adults on the street tended to decrease residents' exposure to violence. The findings were very similar for the measures of violent victimization and homicide.

Conclusion: It would appear that when neighbourhood streets are mostly empty, "increases in the prevalence of active streets may offer little more than additional potential targets for victimization" (p. 1035). However, once a threshold is reached, increases in street use in a neighbourhood reduces exposure to violence, violent victimization, and homicide rates. Hence it is possible that the 'gentrification' of neighbourhoods may produce short term increases in violence due to there being fewer people on the streets. The increase in violence will continue until the neighbourhood experiences higher rates of street use at which point it, the streets do, in fact, become safe.

Reference: Browning, Christopher R. and Aubrey L. Jackson (2013). The Social Ecology of Public Space: Active Streets and Violent Crime in Urban Neighbourhoods. *Criminology*, 51 (4), 1009-1043.

The recidivism rate of young violent men who are released from prison can be reduced.

Although imprisoning offenders is seen by many politicians to be a good way to reduce crime, it has three large problems: it is expensive and inefficient (see, e.g., *Criminological Highlights*, V3(1)#1); it may increase subsequent offending (e.g., *Criminological Highlights* 11(1)#1, 11(1)#2); and eventually most prisoners are released. This paper addresses the third problem: what can be done to reduce subsequent offending by serious violent offenders being released from jails.

The Boston Reentry Initiative (BRI) initiates contact with jailed inmates within 6 weeks of their entering the Suffolk County House of Correction. Inmates are chosen for the project on the basis of assessments (objective and subjective) that they are at high risk of involvement in violent crime upon release. Factors used to choose candidates included current offence, arrest history, gang membership, whether the inmate is from a violent neighbourhood or is seen to be likely to be involved in firearms incidents in the future.

While in jail, inmates meet with representatives of criminal justice agencies (e.g., prosecution, probation, parole departments), social service agencies, and faith-based organizations. The representatives of these organizations explain the services they could provide inmates upon release. Inmates are then assigned staff caseworkers and faith-based mentors from the community. Mentors' salaries are paid by the program and typically stay connected with BRI participants for 1-1.5 years. A plan for release is developed for each inmate, and enrolments in programs (in jail) are chosen to meet each inmate's needs. On

release, arrangements are made for the inmate to be met by a family member or a mentor at the door of the jail.

In this study, the average inmate, upon release, had 7.3 contacts with mentors and about 40 hours of programming in the community. Services in the community included such matters as obtaining shelter, clothing, a job, counselling, etc. Inmates were steered to 'community partners' (e.g., career centres, half-way houses) that had proved to be successful in linking inmates to jobs and communities. A somewhat imperfect control group was created consisting of jailed inmates who were matched to the treatment inmates on their propensity-to-offend scores (based on age, race, current offence, criminal history, and gang involvement).

Within a year of release 20% of the BRI participants and 35% of the comparison group had been arrested for a violent crime. 36% of the BRI participants and 51% of the comparison group were arrested for any crime within a year. These differences – less offending by program participants – were evident two and three years after release.

Conclusion: Compared to many correctional programs, this program was unusual on at least two dimensions: It targeted difficult offenders who were expected to have a relatively high recidivism rate and, similar to some other programs for offenders who are a concern to many citizens (e.g., see *Criminological Highlights*, 9(3)#6, 11(2)#6), it was very intensive. Nevertheless, it does demonstrate that programs aimed at those released from prison on some form of conditional release can be effective.

Reference: Braga, Anthony A., Anne M. Piehl, and David Hureau (2009). Controlling Violent Offenders Released to the Community: An Evaluation of the Boston Reentry Initiative. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 46 (4), 411-436.