

Understanding and preventing youth crime

The decline in the number of young offenders recorded in criminal justice statistics over the last 15 years is almost certainly illusory and many young offenders become habitual criminals. Tackling youth crime is now an imperative, according to a review by David Farrington of the Institute of Criminology. He found:

f The number of young offenders recorded in criminal justice statistics has declined markedly in the past 15 years, but this decrease is the result of procedural changes and almost certainly illusory.

f Young people who commit crime from an early age are especially likely to become habitual offenders with long criminal careers.

f Major risk factors for youth crime are:

- low income and poor housing
- living in deteriorated inner city areas
- a high degree of impulsiveness and hyperactivity
- low intelligence and low school attainment
- poor parental supervision and harsh and erratic discipline
- parental conflict and broken families

f Evaluative research suggests that the most promising techniques for reducing the risks of young people's involvement in drug misuse, crime and other antisocial behaviour include:

- frequent home visiting by health professionals during pregnancy and infancy
- education in parenting
- high quality nursery education
- training children to 'stop and think'

f The most hopeful strategy for reducing youth crime is to identify the main risks and ways of reducing these within a community. This knowledge can be used to apply prevention techniques whose effectiveness has been demonstrated by research.

Youth crime

The number of young people found guilty by the juvenile courts or formally cautioned by police has fallen in England and Wales during the past 15 years. For example, between 1983 and 1993 the proportion of 10- to 13-year-old boys who were found guilty or cautioned for more serious 'indictable' offences dropped by 42 per cent, with a corresponding 15 per cent decline among 14- to 17-year-olds.

However, the apparent decrease is almost certainly an illusion. Police-recorded crime statistics and national surveys of the victims of crime both agree that the types of offence most often committed by young people - such as burglary and taking vehicles - have risen dramatically over the same period.

Procedural changes appear to account for the discrepancy, especially a growing reluctance to take juveniles to court and an increasing tendency on the part of police to issue unrecorded warnings rather than formal cautions. The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee suggested in 1993 that one explanation for a higher crime rate and a lower number of juvenile offenders might be an increase in the number of persistent young offenders responsible for a disproportionate volume of crime. But there is no evidence to support this suggestion.

Criminal careers

The life-time likelihood of acquiring at least one criminal conviction is greater than commonly realised. More than four out of ten males and one in ten females are likely to be found guilty or cautioned for an indictable offence at some point during their lives. However, it is also true that a comparatively small proportion of the population - about 5 per cent of males - are chronic offenders who account for about half of all known offending.

Official records and 'self-report' studies also show that individuals more often break the law when they are young. The 'peak' ages at which they are most likely to be found guilty or cautioned are between 15 and 19. Criminal involvement typically starts before the age of 15, but declines markedly once young people reach their 20s. However, young people who become involved in crime at the earliest ages - before they are 14 - tend to become the most persistent offenders, with longer criminal careers.

Young offenders tend to be versatile and rarely specialise in particular types of crime, including violence. Longitudinal research has identified features in the childhood and adult lives of violent offenders and non-violent persistent offenders that are very similar, suggesting that violent offenders are essentially frequent offenders. Studies have also found that young offenders are versatile in committing other types of antisocial behaviour, including heavy drinking, drug-taking, dangerous driving and promiscuous sex. Delinquency is, therefore, only one element in a much larger syndrome of antisocial behaviour.

Interviews with young offenders, meanwhile, suggest that their crimes are most commonly committed for material gain. However, a minority of offences, especially vandalism and taking vehicles

without the owner's consent, are committed for excitement, enjoyment or to relieve boredom.

Risk factors

Research concerned with the backgrounds, circumstances and attitudes of future offenders has identified thousands of factors that point to an increased risk that children and young people will become criminally involved in the future. The major risk factors for juvenile offending are:

- *Prenatal and perinatal*: early child-bearing increases the risks of such undesirable outcomes for children as low school attainment, antisocial behaviour, substance use and early sexual activity. An increased risk of offending among children of teenage mothers is associated with low income, poor housing, absent fathers and poor child-rearing methods.
- *Personality*: impulsiveness, hyperactivity, restlessness and limited ability to concentrate are associated with low attainment in school and a poor ability to foresee the consequences of offending.
- *Intelligence and attainment*: low intelligence and poor performance in school, although important statistical predictors of offending, are difficult to disentangle from each other. One plausible explanation of the link between low intelligence and crime is its association with a poor ability to manipulate abstract concepts and to appreciate the feelings of victims.
- *Parental supervision and discipline*: harsh or erratic parental discipline and cold or rejecting parental attitudes have been linked to delinquency and are associated with children's lack of internal inhibitions against offending. Physical abuse by parents has been associated with an increased risk of the children themselves becoming violent offenders in later life.
- *Parental conflict and separation*: living in a home affected by separation or divorce is more strongly related to delinquency than when the disruption has been caused by the death of one parent. However, it may not be a 'broken home' that creates an increased risk of offending so much as the parental conflict that lead to the separation.
- *Socio-economic status*: social and economic deprivation are important predictors of antisocial behaviour and crime, but low family income and poor housing are better measurements than the prestige of parents' occupations.
- *Delinquent friends*: delinquents tend to have delinquent friends. But it is not certain whether membership of a delinquent peer group leads to offending or whether delinquents simply gravitate towards each other's company (or both). Breaking up with delinquent friends often coincides with desisting from crime.
- *School influences*: the prevalence of offending by pupils varies widely between secondary schools. But it is not clear how far schools themselves have

an effect on delinquency (for example, by paying insufficient attention to bullying or providing too much punishment and too little praise), or whether it is simply that troublesome children tend to go to high delinquency-rate schools.

- *Community influences:* the risks of becoming criminally involved are higher for young people raised in disorganised inner city areas, characterised by physical deterioration, overcrowded households, publicly-subsidised renting and high residential mobility. It is not clear, however, whether this is due to a direct influence on children, or whether environmental stress causes family adversities which in turn cause delinquency.

One difficulty in explaining the development of offending is that most risk factors coincide and are interrelated. For example, adolescents living in physically deteriorated and social disorganised neighbourhoods tend, disproportionately, to come from families with poor parental supervision and erratic discipline, and to display a high level of impulsiveness and low intelligence.

Moreover, while a great deal is known about risk factors, comparatively little attention has been paid to factors that may protect young people, especially those from high-risk backgrounds, against offending. Those factors that are known include having: a resilient temperament; a warm, affectionate relationship with at least one parent; parents who provide effective supervision, pro-social beliefs and consistent discipline; and parents who maintain a strong interest in their children's education. An understanding of how to build on the positive features influencing individuals, their families and communities can be used to increase the effectiveness of prevention strategies.

Prevention techniques

Strategies for preventing crime, drug misuse and other antisocial behaviour among young people should be designed to counter specific risk factors and, where possible, to enhance known protective factors. A combination of interventions may be more effective than a single method. On the basis of well-designed experimental research - mostly conducted in the United States and Canada - the most hopeful methods of preventing youth crime are outlined below.

- *Frequent home visiting* by health professionals to women during pregnancy and infancy provide advice about prenatal and postnatal care of the child, infant development, proper nutrition, and avoiding smoking, drinking and drug use in pregnancy. Studies suggest that this can lead to a reduction in child abuse by parents as well as a longer term reduction in delinquency among the children concerned.
- *Pre-school 'intellectual enrichment' programmes* are designed to stimulate thinking and reasoning ability in young children, and hence to increase their school success. The High/Scope Perry Pre-school Programme in Michigan provided high quality nursery education for an experimental

group of children in a disadvantaged African American community, including a curriculum that encouraged children to plan, implement and review their play activities. A long-term follow-up of former participants at age 27 found that they were less likely to have been arrested than a control group of similar children, and more likely to have completed their secondary education, to have reasonably well-paid jobs and to own their homes.

- *Parenting education programmes* encourage parents to notice what their children are doing, to praise good behaviour, to state house rules clearly, and to make rewards and punishments contingent on children's behaviour. A number of programmes have demonstrated success in reducing children's antisocial behaviour, although reductions in stealing and other delinquent activities have in some instances proved short-lived.
- *Cognitive and social skills training* teaches children to stop and think before acting, to consider the consequences of antisocial behaviour, to understand other people's feelings, and to solve interpersonal problems by negotiation rather than aggression. Some of these techniques, intended to strengthen children's own inhibitions against antisocial behaviour, have also been used to reduce re-offending among juvenile offenders.
- *Peer influence strategies* offer young people advice on how to resist pressure from friends to engage in antisocial behaviour ranging from under-age drinking and smoking to drug abuse and other crimes. Research suggests that advice is most likely to be heeded when given by specially trained, high-status peers rather than by parents or teachers.
- *Classroom management* and other training can help teachers to communicate clear instructions and expectations, to notice and reward children for socially desirable behaviour and to be consistent in their use of discipline.
- *Anti-bullying initiatives in schools* include implementing explicit rules that encourage children to report bullying incidents and offer help to the victims. Playground monitoring and supervision may also need to be improved. Programmes in Norway and Britain have demonstrated success in reducing bullying, which is itself associated with an increased risk of delinquency.

Efforts to modify the risk factors associated with delinquency have also included community crime prevention programmes, with a focus on achieving physical improvements in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and providing recreational facilities for young people. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of convincing evidence for the effectiveness of these programmes. Crime prevention in the United Kingdom has, meanwhile, tended to emphasise measures designed to reduce the opportunities for crime in particular situations. Techniques include increased surveillance by closed circuit cameras, improving physical security, and protecting individuals against re-victimisation. The

major difficulty with such programmes is that they may merely displace crime to other places or victims rather than preventing it altogether.

Priorities for research and development

The most important knowledge about the causes and development of offending in the United Kingdom derives from rather old longitudinal data. New follow-up studies are needed to investigate the development of antisocial behaviour from childhood into the teenage years, and from the teenage years into adulthood. Such research should be closely concerned with protective as well as risk factors.

Although well-designed evaluations of preventive projects have been carried out in America, there is an urgent need to evaluate the replicability and effectiveness of such strategies in the United Kingdom. The available evidence suggests that prevention programmes are best implemented as elements of a larger programme targeted geographically on high crime areas. The aim should be to carry out a systematic assessment of the main risk factors in a community and to adopt effective strategies for reducing or eliminating them. A programme should also identify protective factors and other strengths within a community with a view to enhancing them.

Communities that Care

The *Communities that Care* programme for reducing antisocial behaviour among young people has been devised by researchers at the University of Washington, Seattle and is one of the most promising strategies to emerge in America. Its combination of flexibility and a systematic approach would lend itself to adaptation in the United Kingdom. Described as 'a risk and protection focused programme', it is based on a social development strategy that can be tailored to the specific needs of a neighbourhood, district or city. Its main features are:

- **Community mobilisation:** key leaders are brought together and a management board set up consisting of representatives from local agencies and the community. The board's task is to arrange a detailed assessment of local risks and resources and to agree an action plan.
- **Implementation:** prevention plans address the priority risk and protection factors by implementing techniques from a menu of strategies that research has shown to be effective.
- **Evaluation:** detailed monitoring is carried out to ensure that the programme's progress and effectiveness can be evaluated.

Conclusions

The time is now ripe to mount a large-scale community-based programme against crime that adopts the most promising prevention strategies to tackle risk factors that are problematic within particular communities. Such an approach would have similarities with public health programmes that seek to reduce illnesses such as coronary heart disease by tackling the known risk factors (smoking, a high-fat diet and lack of exercise, for instance). The programme's aim should be to promote community safety, pro-social behaviour and healthy development as well as to prevent drug misuse and crime.

About the study

David Farrington is Professor of Psychological Criminology at Cambridge University. He is Director of the longitudinal Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development and co-Principal Investigator of the Pittsburgh Youth Study in the United States. His review of youth crime and its prevention was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Trustees to inform discussion about their future priorities.

Further information

The full report - Understanding and preventing youth crime by David Farrington - is published for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation by York Publishing Services (price £8.50).

Related Findings

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- 149** Successes and failures in neighbourhood crime prevention (Jun 95)
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- 91** A survey of group-based parenting programmes (Jan 96)

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- 12** Unleashing the potential (Dec 95)

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