



JUVENILE JUSTICE

Drugs, Delinquency,
and Other Data

Also

- ◆ Disproportionate Minority Representation
- ◆ Permanency Planning for Children

OJJDP

A Journal of the
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

From the Administrator

Serious problems call for serious solutions. The temptation of a quick-fix—which, in retrospect, rarely fixes anything for long—should be resisted in favor of real remedies based on sound analysis.

Longitudinal studies can play a key role in research that leads to effective solutions to juvenile justice problems. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Juvenile Delinquency represents, as **Stuart Greenbaum** notes, a “massive, groundbreaking study,” following 4,000 juveniles for 5 years. *Drugs, Delinquency, and Other Data* describes the study and highlights some of its significant findings.

A disturbing trend that has long concerned OJJDP is the overrepresentation of minority juveniles in secure facilities. In keeping with our legislative mandate and our commitment to equal justice under the law, we are leading the effort to assess and address this problem. Our preliminary report by **Eugene Rhoden**, coordinator of OJJDP’s Disproportionate Minority Confinement Program, is aptly titled *Disproportionate Minority Representation: First Steps to a Solution*. Mr. Rhoden’s article provides an overview of OJJDP’s pilot program.

In *Courting Disaster: Permanency Planning for Children*, we encounter yet another challenge facing juvenile and family courts: the placement of children in cases of purported abuse or neglect. Such decisions—as tragic headlines have demonstrated—can become quite literally matters of life and death. Today’s judges require the wisdom of Solomon as they seek to protect the best interests of children in cases where, as **Patricia White** observes, “There are no easy solutions.”

Serious problems do indeed call for serious solutions. I am convinced that effective solutions to the problems confronting our youth and our communities will only come from working together. We welcome your involvement and contributions.

John J. Wilson
Acting Administrator
Office of Juvenile Justice
and Delinquency Prevention

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Disproportionate minority representation in local juvenile justice systems must be determined objectively, assessed accurately, and addressed adequately.

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When a juvenile court judge decides whether a child can remain safely with the family, the decision may have lasting consequences for child and family alike.

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nity that guide the child's response to a given risk factor. Social scientists continue to caution that no single cause accounts for all delinquency. Likewise, no single pathway invariably leads to a life of crime.

Common Measurements

The three research teams launched their collaborative study by devising a set of core measures for delinquency development:

- ◆ Delinquent behavior, as reported by the subject and by officials.
- ◆ Drug use, as reported by the subject.
- ◆ Family demographic characteristics.
- ◆ Characteristics of the community and neighborhood.
- ◆ Parental attitudes and childrearing practices.
- ◆ Subjects' attitudes, performance in school, and perceptions of the consequences of delinquency.
- ◆ Peers' conventional and delinquent activities.

The study's longitudinal, shared-measurement approach has been described as a milestone in criminological research. More than 60,000 interviews were conducted with test subjects and their caregivers during the 5 years of data collection. The researchers reported that they were able to retain 90 percent of their subjects during the initial years of the research study. This is a noteworthy achievement in a population noted for its transient families and crucial in a longitudinal study.

Drugs and Delinquency

Those who work with delinquent youth have long known of the relationship be-

tween criminal behavior and the use of drugs. But to what extent does one influence the other? This study found that among all age, gender, and ethnic groups, the more seriously involved in drugs a youth was, the more seriously that juvenile was involved in delinquency, and vice versa. In addition, when this relationship was observed over time, it appeared that drug use stimulated more changes in delinquency than the reverse.

This relationship takes on critical importance when we consider another finding: substance use started at a young age. Researchers reported that the use of alcohol in this population began early. By age 16, half the study subjects were using alcohol regularly. Marijuana use began later. By age 16 about one-quarter of the subjects were using marijuana. The use of harder drugs began even later in life and never involved more than 10 percent of the subjects. It is the high rate of alcohol use that is noteworthy to the research teams, who say alcohol remains the drug of choice among American adolescents.

Street crimes also began at an early age. In the Pittsburgh and Denver studies, about 10 percent of 7-year-old boys reported having committed at least one street offense such as bicycle theft, burglary, or purse-snatching. By age 9, the

Each survey oversampled youth at high risk of delinquency.

rate increased to nearly 20 percent. As boys reached their teens, more had committed crimes and gotten arrested, and the crimes were more serious: car theft, robbery, rape, and illegal drug sales. By the time boys in all three studies were 17, about 40 percent of them had committed at least one crime.

If the reported rates of criminal activity and drug use among juveniles are

alarming, there is further cause for alarm in regard to their sexual activities. Among subjects between the ages of 13 and 17, well over half of the boys—and almost half of the girls—had had sexual intercourse. The consequences of this early sexual activity were clearly reflected: one-third of the oldest girls in the Rochester study and nearly half of the oldest girls in the Denver study had been pregnant at least once.

Developmental pathways can lead to serious delinquency.

How do drugs and delinquency relate to this? The findings showed that youth who were sexually active or who had become pregnant were more likely to use alcohol or other drugs. They were also more likely to be involved in some form of delinquency.

Developmental Pathways

Previous research has shown that problem behaviors among young people can accumulate and lead to serious delinquency. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed researchers to observe sequences in disruptive behavior from childhood to adolescence. Studying these sequences in boys, researchers were able to distinguish three separate developmental pathways, each consisting of three successive stages:

- ◆ Authority conflict pathway. Subjects started down this pathway quite young—some as young as 3 or 4 years of age. The first step was stubborn behavior, followed by defiance—around age 11—and authority avoidance—truancy, staying out late at night, or running away.
- ◆ Covert pathway. This pathway began with minor covert acts such as frequent

lying and shoplifting, usually around age 10. It progressed to acts of property damage, such as firestarting or vandalism, around age 11 or 12, followed by moderate and serious forms of delinquency.

- ◆ Overt pathway. Step one was marked by minor aggression—annoying others and bullying—around age 11 or 12. This escalated to physical fighting and violence as the juvenile progressed along the pathway.

The study teams found that most young people entered a pathway via the first step and progressed from there. Some were in just one pathway, but others were in more than one. The most seriously delinquent participated in all three.

Families, Guns, and Peers

Greater risks exist for violent offending when a child is physically abused or neglected early in life. Such a child is more likely to begin violent offending earlier and to be more involved in such offending than children who have not been abused or neglected. Children who are victims of or witnesses to multiple acts of violence in the home are two and one-half times more likely to commit subsequent acts of violence than children who are spared such domestic violence.

Although it remains difficult to determine the causes of delinquency, this study traced several explanatory factors. Two of these were family attachment and parenting behavior. Delinquency and drug use were found to be related to poor family attachment—that is, a child did not feel a strong emotional bond with his parents. Poor parenting behavior, manifested in failure to communicate with and monitor children, related to both delinquency and drug use as well.

Poor family life was found to exacerbate delinquent behavior and drug use. And the more delinquent and drug-using a youth became, the worse family life became. Researchers point out, however, that the relationship between family factors and delinquency/drug use was not particularly strong in this study.

A stronger correlation existed between delinquency and illegal gun ownership. Seventy-four percent of illegal gun owners in the Rochester study had committed street crimes. Forty-one percent of them used drugs. A striking finding of the study is the difference in the crime rate of those who owned guns illegally and those who were legal owners of firearms. Compared with the 74 percent of illegal gun owners who had committed street crimes in Rochester, only 14 percent of legal gun owners had committed street crimes. What accounts for the difference? Researchers found that young legal owners of firearms were likely to have fathers who owned guns for hunting and sport, while illegal gun owners were likely to be affiliated with street gangs.

Affiliation with street gangs was a factor in delinquency when the affiliation endured. Researchers found that although juveniles in this age group frequently moved in and out of gangs, those who remained in a street gang for a long period of time had high rates of delinquency. In the Rochester study, for example, 88 percent of those whose gang membership was most stable committed serious offenses; 64 percent committed street crimes.

Gang members or not, peers who were delinquent or used drugs had a great impact on youth, researchers found. And the impact became stronger over time. For example, subjects who associated with drug-using peers during a given year showed much higher rates of drug use the next year. Moreover, those same subjects

were more likely to associate with drug-using peers the following year.

Education, Neighborhood, and Jobs

The study revealed two educational factors. The first concerned commitment to school. Subjects who were not highly committed to school in one year had higher rates of street crime in the following year. The opposite influence was also found: youth who committed street crimes in one year showed less commitment to school the following year.

The second finding was the relationship between delinquency and school performance, as measured by reading achievement, teacher-rated reading performance, and failure to be promoted. The study found that children who were delinquent had poorer reading skills than nondelinquent children. A link was found between delinquency and being held back in school. These associative factors appeared as early as the first grade.

The Causes and Correlates study addressed the classic issue of nature versus nurture: is a person's development influenced more by genetic code or by the environment in which that person grows up? It is not too surprising that the data from the Pittsburgh study showed a relationship between delinquency and living in an underclass neighborhood. But

Poor family life exacerbates delinquency and drug use.

when researchers considered only youth who were more involved with their families and more closely supervised by their parents (factors found to be positive influences), youth from underclass neighborhoods were still more likely to be

delinquent than those from more affluent neighborhoods. The researchers concluded that living in underclass areas seemed to increase the chances of delinquency.

Can improving employment opportunities for young people help? Many youth jobs programs are predicated on that belief. But the study confirmed earlier findings that working at a job doesn't necessarily keep a youth from becoming delinquent. In fact, a larger percentage of working adolescents in Denver were involved in street crimes compared with their nonworking counterparts. In Rochester there was little difference. Similarly, there was no evidence that working was related to lower levels of drug use.

Help-Seeking Caregivers, Resilient Youth

Researchers examined the extent to which caregivers of delinquent youth sought professional help. They found that the more delinquency increased, the more caregivers tried to find help—most often from schools and professional counselors. But overall, only one-third of caregivers sought professional help for their delinquent youth.

By the time serious offenders reach high school, their characters are well established.

A more encouraging finding is that some youth who appeared to be at high risk for delinquency and drug use managed to avoid both. Longitudinal observation sheds light on their resiliency. Researchers found that parental supervision, attachment to family, and consistency of

discipline were the most important barriers to delinquency and drug use. Commitment to school and, in particular, avoidance of delinquent and drug-using peers were additional protective factors.

Program Implications

The study can contribute to the improvement of delinquency prevention and intervention programs. The researchers recommend:

- ◆ *Get an earlier start.* Intervention programs should probably begin as early as elementary school. By the time many serious offenders reach high school, their characters are well established; they are resistant to changing their delinquent behavior and can successfully thwart efforts to do so.
- ◆ *Design programs based on pathway models.* As we have seen, delinquency progresses along a pathway from less serious to more serious forms of behavior. If we can identify a juvenile's position on a given pathway, we can attempt to short-circuit the progression. The effort should be to prevent young people from entering pathways in the first place, but failing that, we should intercept them in a negative pathway before the delinquent behavior becomes ingrained.
- ◆ *Make programs more comprehensive.* First, provide services that deal with multiple, co-occurring behaviors exhibited by serious delinquents. These behaviors can include using drugs, engaging in early sexual activities, failing at school, joining gangs, and possessing illegal guns. Second, take into consideration the interrelated nature of risk factors. An example provided by the study is that youth who were poorly supervised by their parents and who associated with delinquent peers had higher rates of delinquency and drug use than youth with only one of these risk factors.

◆ *Design programs for the long range.*

High-risk adolescents generally require social and psychological support for years, not months, since the risk factors in their lives have long-term behavioral effects. The research demonstrated that behavior tended to improve while the juveniles were in well-designed, well-organized treatment programs. But once they left them, delinquency reemerged—particularly if they returned to their original social environment. Increasing the length of exposure to these programs is apt to produce better results.

A major conclusion of the study is that delinquency prevention and treatment programs need to emphasize attachment to prosocial groups and activities. Such attachment provides a shield against delinquency and drug use. It involves positive emotional ties, a sense of belonging, and a sense of doing well in the family, school, and community. It speaks to healthy relationships with prosocial friends. The challenge is figuring out ways to create this attachment when it does not exist naturally.

Family life could be strengthened by better parental skills training and more comprehensive support services for parents so that children are more effectively monitored and disciplined. Schools could help children become more attached and integrated into society by developing programs in which every student can succeed at something that is socially constructive. Community leaders could take a similar tack in designing various activities and processes.

In all the above, deterring the development of delinquent peer groups is crucial. The best strategy may be to mix delinquency-prone youth into prosocial groups that provide positive influences. Such groups would require a good deal of adult involvement to monitor activities and ensure a positive outcome.

Researchers conclude that involving youth in prosocial groups and activities while addressing risk factors such as drug use, early sexual activity, and illegal gun

High-risk adolescents may require support for years.

ownership can result in better delinquency prevention and intervention programs. Current and future generations of at-risk youth—and a public rightfully concerned about crime—stand to benefit from the effort.

Supplemental Reading

Abram, K.M., and L.A. Teplin. "Drug Disorder, Mental Illness, and Violence." In *Drugs and Violence: Causes, Correlates, and Consequences*, edited by M. De La Rosa and E.Y. Lambert et al. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990. The role of mental illness in drug-violence relations was explored among 728 male jail detainees to determine whether drug use and psychopathology, alone and in combination, predicts violence.

Cernkovich, S.A., and P.C. Giordano. "School Bonding, Race, and Delinquency." *Criminology*, vol. 30, no. 2 (May 1992), pp. 261–291. Data from interviews with 942 adolescents aged 12 to 19 in the Toledo, Ohio, metropolitan area are analyzed with respect to racial variations in the role of the school in involvement in juvenile delinquency, with emphasis on the delinquent involvement of black youth.

Huizinga, D., R. Loeber, and T. Thornberry. *Urban Delinquency and Substance Abuse: Initial Findings* (Research Summary). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice

and Delinquency Prevention, 1993. Researchers are conducting three longitudinal surveys in Denver, Colorado, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Rochester, New York, to examine the causes and correlates of juvenile delinquency and juvenile drug use.

Kumpfer, K. *Strengthening America's Families: Promising Parenting and Family Strategies for Delinquency Prevention*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1993. This report helps program planners, policymakers, and service providers determine the most effective family and parenting intervention strategies to prevent juvenile delinquency in high-risk youth.

Tittle, C.R., and D.A. Ward. "Interaction of Age With the Correlates and Causes of Crime." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1993), pp. 3–53. A survey of persons aged 15 through 94 tested the Hirschi-Gottfredson hy-

pothesis that the correlates and causes of crime do not interact with age.

Wright, K.N., and K.E. Wright. *Family Life and Delinquency and Crime: A Policymakers' Guide to the Literature* (Research Summary). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. This monograph reviews the research literature on the extent to which family life may directly contribute to the development of delinquent and criminal tendencies.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute on Drug Abuse. *Drugs and Violence: Causes, Correlates, and Consequences*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990. This monograph reports on a 1989 meeting convened by the National Institute on Drug Abuse in collaboration with the National Institute of Justice to discuss recent research in the study of drugs and violence.