



Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency

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An Introduction prepared by
**Rochester Youth Development Study
Denver Youth Survey
Pittsburgh Youth Study**

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PROGRAM OF RESEARCH ON THE CAUSES AND CORRELATES OF DELINQUENCY

INTRODUCTION

The Search for the Causes of Delinquency

Many of us are interested in knowing why boys and girls become delinquent, especially serious and violent delinquents and problem drug users. We are also interested in what can be done to prevent these behaviors. To help answer these questions, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has started the Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency. The program is designed to improve our understanding of the development of delinquent and prosocial behavior of children and adolescents. We hope to benefit from the experiences of high risk youths who manage to "beat the odds", thereby allowing us to identify pathways that might prevent other high risk youth from entering delinquent careers.

What We Have Learned from Previous Research

Past research indicates that many variables correlate with delinquency, and that many factors tend to increase the risk of later delinquent behavior. Among these risk factors are: birth trauma, child abuse and neglect, ineffective parental discipline, family disruptions, conduct disorder in children, school failure, learning disabilities, negative peer influences, limited employment opportunities, inadequate housing, and residence in a high crime neighborhood. We also know that neither correlates nor risk factors, however, can be equated with causal factors.

Difficulties in Drawing Causal Inferences

In fact, researchers have not yet been able to discriminate well between causal and other factors. Nor have researchers been able to delineate which constellations of causes are most crucial. The reason for this state of affairs is due, in large part, to limitations of the methodologies previously employed and an inadequate understanding of the theoretical bases for causal relationships.

Indeed, it is not easy to determine causality for human behavior, especially in the natural environment, where, in contrast to laboratory science, controls are not easy to achieve. We cannot simply presume that any child who experiences one of the risk factors (e.g., child abuse) will automatically become delinquent; many children who experience abuse may never engage in delinquent behavior. Each individual brings to a given situation unique personal characteristics which have been influenced by a host of factors in the arenas of the family, school, peer context, and the community environment.

Overall, research findings support the conclusion that no single cause accounts for all delinquency, and no single pathway leads to a life of crime. To date, however, we have not clearly identified the different causal pathways that lead to delinquency and the factors that cause different individuals to be susceptible to different pathways. One of the principal aims of the Program of Research is to better discriminate between causes, on the one hand, and mere correlates and risk factors of crime on the other. We also want to clarify how one cause may follow another over time, and how successive causes influence incremental and developmental changes in offending.

Why Longitudinal Research is Needed

Longitudinal studies, in contrast to cross-sectional studies, offer many opportunities to better discriminate among correlates, risk factors, and causes. This type of investigation involves repeated contacts with the same individual subjects, so that individuals' development can be studied. Particularly, the study of changes in individual offending allows us to examine potential causal factors that may influence those changes. The strength of the longitudinal investigation is that it permits researchers to sort out which factors precede changes in offending, predict such changes, and do so independently of other factors. With the aid of the repeated measurements it is then possible to identify pathways to delinquency, each with unique causal factors that, like delinquency, may change over time. Successfully accomplishing this, of course, is the only way to develop truly effective intervention programs.

A Challenge to Researchers

In announcing this Program of Research, the OJJDP challenged the research community to approach creatively the "why" of the development of delinquent behavior in order to provide a sound, empirical basis for developing improved strategies of delinquency prevention and juvenile justice system intervention. OJJDP encouraged the establishment of interdisciplinary research teams who could utilize the most advanced assessment techniques from their respective fields to investigate the multicausal nature of antisocial behavior. OJJDP recognized that interdisciplinary expertise was required to explore the full range of relevant life experiences, including social, psychological, behavioral, and environmental influences. Researchers were charged to examine causes of crime in the context of the community, family, school, and individual differences.

Overview of the Current Program of Research

Three research teams were competitively selected to participate in this Program of Research, which was launched in the fall of 1986. They are located at the University of Albany, the University of Colorado, and the University of Pittsburgh, with study sites in Rochester (New York), Denver (Colorado), and Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), respectively. The three prospective studies, over the course of five years, will collect data that allow for the interpretation of the causal sequencing of key events in childhood and adolescence.

The research teams have collaborated extensively in the design of the studies, the identification of key theoretical constructs, and the development of "core" measures for these constructs. The culmination of this effort is the use of a body of common measurements in the surveys of the three projects. The following are examples of content areas addressed in the core measures:

- official and self-report of delinquent behavior;
- self-report of drug use;
- characteristics of the community and neighborhood;
- demographic characteristics of the family;
- parental attitudes and child rearing practices;
- youth/child attitudes, school performance, and perceived consequences of delinquency;
- peer delinquency and conventional activities.

We believe that these collaborative efforts are a milestone in criminological research in that they constitute the largest shared coordination and measurement approach ever achieved in delinquency research. Under this Program of Research, we will be able to aggregate data across projects and also replicate findings across sites. In addition to the common measures, each project is also utilizing unique measurements that are expected to add special yields to the findings from each site.

Highlights of the Three Studies

The following overview summarizes some of the features which distinguish each of the three studies in terms of:

- theoretical framework guiding the inclusion of key risk factors;
- selection of study communities characterized by serious delinquency;
- sampling plan to capture a sufficient number of high risk children and youth; and
- plans for longitudinal data collection.

ROCHESTER YOUTH DEVELOPMENT STUDY

Theoretical Framework

The Rochester Youth Development Study is guided by an interactional theory, which holds that the basic cause of delinquency is the weakening of a person's bonds to conventional society. Adolescents who are weakly bonded to the conventional world of family, school, and the like are much less controlled than youth who are strongly bonded. The behavioral freedom that results from weak bonds is likely to lead to delinquent conduct, especially if the person's social environment and peer group reinforce and encourage these behaviors.

The theory highlights three general causal processes. First, it emphasizes the development of delinquency over the life cycle rather than focusing on a single snapshot of the causes of delinquency. For example, the role of the family appears to play a much greater role at earlier ages, but diminishes as the peer group increases in importance during mid-adolescence. Second, interactional theory highlights the importance of causal variables that reciprocally or mutually influence one another over time. Importantly, delinquency is not viewed simply as an outcome of poor parenting, association with delinquent peers or similar variables. Indeed, delinquency is seen as adversely affecting family relationships, the choice of peers, and similar variables. In this way, delinquency is produced by these more general social factors but also, via feedback effects, is seen as a causal factor in its own continuation. Third, the theory examines the impact of the person's position in the social structure on his or her behavior and on the social processes just discussed.

Major Research Questions

The Rochester Youth Development Study addresses three major research issues. First, the study describes the delinquent careers of a sample of adolescents in terms of the proportion of youth who engage in delinquency, the number of offenses they commit over time, the seriousness of offenses, age of onset, the rate of offending per year, and the length of careers. The second issue examines the causes of delinquency and analyzes the impact of such factors as family, school, peers, delinquent and conventional values, and commitment to conventional life styles. Attention is paid to identifying causal factors uniquely associated with the initiation, maintenance or termination of delinquent careers. The third research question concerns the identification and explanation of why some youth from extremely high risk environments do not become delinquent, and why some youth from very conventional backgrounds have extensive delinquent careers.

Study Design and Sample

To address these questions, the Rochester Youth Development Study sampled 1,000 students in the seventh and eighth grades of the public schools of Rochester, New York. To maximize the number of serious chronic offenders available for the study, the sample

includes more youth from the high crime areas and fewer youth from the low crime areas.

Interview data are collected at six-month intervals. One of the student's parents, most typically the mother, is interviewed in the home and the student is interviewed in a private space in their school. This process is repeated at six-month intervals over three and a half years for seven data collection points. Each interview lasts approximately one hour. In addition, data are collected from a variety of Rochester agencies including the schools, the police, the courts, and social services.

Measures

The measurement strategy calls for the collection of as wide a set of social and psychological variables as possible. Whenever possible, multiple sources of information are used. Of the primary measures to be used in the analyses only a few can be mentioned here. Detailed information on the social class of the family is collected in the parent interview, along with data about family structure and neighborhood context. Family process variables include monitoring, supervision, disciplinary practices and affective relationships. Students' commitment to and involvement in school and of other conventional behaviors are also covered, as is belief in both conventional and delinquent values. Students describe their attachment to peers and indicate their perceptions of peer beliefs and behaviors, both conventional and deviant. They also describe the social and psychological consequences of delinquent behavior. Finally, lengthy self-report sections are included to measure both delinquent behavior and drug use.

DENVER YOUTH SURVEY

Theoretical Framework

The primary objective of the Denver Youth Survey is to identify the social conditions, personal characteristics, and developmental processes that are causally linked to the initiation, maintenance, and termination of delinquent behavior and drug use. The research is guided by a multidisciplinary theoretical orientation that integrates psychological and social development variables, personal attributes, primary socialization contexts such as the family and peer groups, and the influence of larger social systems such as schools and neighborhoods. The project builds upon a social-psychological model developed in an earlier study, the National Youth Survey. The model emphasizes the development of internal controls on behavior that result from early socialization and other social learning experiences and the importance of peer groups. This project extends this model by incorporating a social disorganization perspective that includes neighborhood characteristics which may contribute to the etiology of delinquency and by incorporating biological variables that may be precursors to deviant behavior. By integrating the social-psychological model with social disorganization and biological determinants, the project will test a general developmental model of the etiology of crime, delinquency, and drug use.

Major Research Questions

A major objective of this project is to understand the developmental processes, stages and personal life experiences that lead to sustained involvement in serious delinquent behavior, and to examine these processes, stages, and experiences (and the similar factors for the prosocial behavior of nondelinquents) to suggest both the nature and timing of prevention and treatment programs. A focus of the study is to identify the factors that explain why some youth initiate and continue involvement in serious delinquent behavior while other apparently similar youth do not. The inclusion of younger children in the sample allows the examination of factors presumed to foreshadow involvement in delinquent behavior. The added focus on the termination of delinquent behavior (that may involve processes different from those of initiation or maintenance) may help to identify appropriate targets for intervention among those already delinquent. Examination of the influence of rewards for delinquent behavior and the perceived risks from law enforcement, parents, school and others for delinquent behavior may also provide suggestions for direct deterrence strategies.

Study Design and Sample

The longitudinal survey involves annual interviews with a probability sample of five different birth cohorts and their parents selected from areas of Denver, Colorado, which have high risk for delinquency. The subjects include both boys and girls who were 7, 9, 11, 13, and 15 years of age at the start of the study. During the course of the study, the use of these birth cohorts will allow an examination of developmental sequences across the full age span from 7 to 17. The inclusion of the younger cohorts (ages 7 and 9) is designed to facilitate assessment of the developmental outcome of early problem behavior on later delinquency.

The sampling procedure is also designed to insure a sufficient number of serious, chronic offenders for an analysis of their development, and at the same time provide data on normal developmental patterns in control subjects. The sampling procedure involves a random selection of over 20,000 households within high risk neighborhoods. Risk was determined by a social ecology analysis that identified areas having housing and population characteristics associated with delinquency and by official crime rates. All eligible children and a parent in families living in the sampled households are the respondents of the survey. The sample includes a large number of black and Hispanic youth that will permit an examination of the relationship between race/ethnicity, social status, family background, and delinquency.

Measures

Improved self-report measures of both delinquent behavior and drug use were designed, eliminating many of the trivial offenses included in previous works and concentrating on more serious forms of behavior. Systematic follow-up questions were developed to tap episodic behavior and to determine the seriousness of reported acts. The drug measure includes items about th

use of both prescription and illicit nonprescription drugs and collects information about frequency of use, amounts used, and reasons for use.

Explanatory or theoretical variables include personal characteristics, family characteristics, parental skills, supervision and involvement, delinquency and conventionality of peers, and involvement in prosocial activities. The project emphasizes the medical and psychological history of child respondents and other family members and perinatal events. Unique to this project is a social-psychological model that emphasizes the development of bonds to conventional prosocial organizations, groups and activities and the forces and processes that prevent development or weaken these bonds, the perceived awareness of limited opportunities, moral development, the influence of "rational choice" variables (perceived rewards and risks for engaging in delinquent behavior), and a focus on gang involvement and gang influence (a factor currently present in Denver).

PITTSBURGH YOUTH STUDY

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study incorporates several approaches. First, it assumes that individual differences among youngsters' degree of delinquency are, in part, the result of biological and psychological factors and, in part, the result of social learning. Thus, adolescents may differ, for example, as to their impulse control, their ability to concentrate, and their intelligence. Some of these individual differences are present early in children's lives, while others emerge during childhood and adolescence. A second basic assumption is that, even with a given propensity to commit antisocial acts, the manifestations of the acts are thought to be learned through social intercourse with others. The social learning approach focuses on antecedents and consequences of delinquent behavior provided by parents and siblings in their modeling, reinforcing, and punishing of child behavior in the family home and by peers in the school and in the community. It also assumes that repeated performance of behaviors is an essential component of the learning process of delinquent skills.

Third it is proposed that a child's becoming skilled in the performance of trivial antisocial behavior (including status offenses) facilitates the initiation of more serious antisocial behaviors. The basic idea is that nondelinquent conduct problems are precursors of nonserious delinquent acts, which in turn are precursors of serious delinquent acts. Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that early problem behaviors predict later delinquency, and suggest that some criminogenic processes "crystallize" prior to early adolescence, at least for seriously antisocial individuals.

Fourth, it is thought that development of internal controls is influenced by juveniles' bonds to parents or to conventional institutions such as the school, which enables them to forego antisocial acts. The internalization of controls is thought to be slowed down in neighborhoods with high degrees of social disorganization and high levels of crime.

Major Research Questions

The crucial questions addressed in the Pittsburgh Youth Study are:

- a) What are the developmental progressions that lead to serious delinquent outcomes?
- b) Is it possible to predict which individuals are likely to outgrow early delinquent behaviors and which are not?
- c) Is antisocial and delinquent propensity a single phenomenon, or do youngsters progress toward distinctly different antisocial outcomes?
- d) Are different sets of causal variables associated with each antisocial outcome? And are the causal factors different for the initiation, maintenance and desistance of delinquent involvement?

Study Design and Sample

Subject acquisition of boys in grades 1, 4, and 7 has taken place in two phases. In Phase 1, during the Spring of 1987, about 750 subjects were acquired (cohort 1), while the remainder, another 1800 subjects were acquired during the Spring of 1988 (cohort 2). Subject participation was high: 83-85% of the families contacted participated.

Out of the 2250 subjects, 1500 were selected for follow-up by means of a screening procedure. Half of the 1500 subjects are high risk ones, while the other half are lower risk ones. The first follow-up of the earliest acquired subjects took place in the Fall of 1987. The overall participation rate was 94.9%. In the Spring of 1988 interviewers were trained for the second follow-up of the first cohorts, in which almost all of the subjects have participated again. In all, subjects, their parent, and their teacher, will be followed up half-yearly for a total of seven assessments.

Initial analyses show that about 60% are black, many of whom live under multiple handicaps. Given that at the beginning of the assessments the three groups of boys were in the 1st, 4th, and 7th grade, respectively, the study at the last assessment will have covered the age range from age 6 to age 15, a period in which most of the onset of delinquent activity is likely to take place.

Measures

The choice of measures and variables in the study reflects the mosaic of theoretical approaches mentioned earlier. Assessment strategies follow a number of rationales, among which are:

- a) It is necessary to use repeated measurements at half-yearly intervals in order to demonstrate that the onset of one behavior leads to the onset of another behavior.
- b) It is essential to use information on progression of delinquency and potential causal factors from several informants such as the youth, parents, and teachers.
- c) The half-yearly assessments from multiple informants lay the basis for causal analyses.

The emphasis of measurement is on documenting individual differences among the boys in their antisocial

and delinquent behavior, and on measuring social processes within the family, the peer group, and the school which tend to solidify these individual differences. In addition, more macro aspects of the child's environment are measured such as neighborhood and school characteristics.

RELATED PROJECTS

Because of the scope and design of this Research Program, OJJDP has provided each of the projects with a unique opportunity to secure additional funding for specialized studies. These studies will greatly enhance the basic projects and will substantially inform the policy recommendations emanating from them. At the present time the following special projects have been added:

Rochester Youth Development Study

"A Social Network Approach to Drug Use of Minority Youth",
National Institute on Drug Abuse

"The Inclusion of Parental Interviews in the Rochester Youth Development Study",
National Science Foundation

Denver Youth Survey

"Children, Youth and Drugs",
National Institute on Drug Abuse

"The Denver Neighborhood",
The MacArthur Foundation

Pittsburgh Youth Study

"Neuropsychology, Behavior Disorder, and Delinquency",
National Institute of Mental Health

"Attention Deficits, School Dysfunction, and Lead Exposure",
Centers for Disease Control

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

By funding the three projects, the Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency is a unique collaborative effort to create new knowledge about individual offending and the causes of changes in offending. Each study examines factors operating prior to the major onset of delinquent activity, and is likely to document predictive factors that can help to identify youth most likely to be delinquent later. The studies also document individuals' development of offending as evident from self-reports and official records. Delinquency is examined here as part of a broader context of nonconforming behavior--drug use, school failure, and the like--that require simultaneous attention. This is especially important if these behaviors are mutually reinforcing. A close study of delinquency and other nonconforming behaviors will help to document whether a single path or multiple paths exist toward different serious delinquent and antisocial outcomes.

Alongside this descriptive effort, a major contribution of the studies will be the identification of causal factors of offending. The studies will clarify the sequence in and changes of causal factors that influence offending in different periods of youngsters' lives. The three studies all include both youngsters exposed to known risk factors for delinquency and youngsters who can serve as controls. In that way, the studies will help to better distinguish between correlates, risk factors, and causal factors. At the same time, the studies will elucidate which causal factors are mostly associated with the initiation of delinquency, its maintenance, and, later, its desistance. The common measures among the studies will permit multiple replications of the findings, thereby enhancing the scientific yield of the research program.

A major expected outcome of the descriptive and causal inquiries is a better understanding about preventive, therapeutic, and juvenile justice system interventions. If each of the three theoretical orientations are supported, they would strongly suggest the need for varied, multiple forms of interventions. That is, interventions may be generated at different points along the developmental paths toward delinquency, each with different targets for modifications. That in itself will be an advance over current interventions, which usually have lacked a solid empirical knowledge about the nature of delinquency and its causes. The present three studies will provide such an empirical foundation, creating new knowledge about the causes of delinquency, and therefore pave the way for a new generation of preventive, judicial, and therapeutic interventions.