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International Summaries

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From Great Britain

Parental Supervision and Juvenile Delinquency

The level of supervision and family relationships can influence the likelihood of teenage delinquency

By David Riley and Margaret Shaw

Introduction

This study highlights the findings of a nationally representative survey of teenagers and their parents which focused on the association between parental control and juvenile offending. It discusses both parents' and teenagers' views on several subjects: parental supervision, teenagers' use of free time and their spending habits, drinking and drug abuse, and family relationships. Correlations between parental supervision and both boys' and girls' delinquent behavior are discussed, as are factors that might explain differences in supervision. The study also reports the survey's findings about supervision in one-parent families and offers guidelines for parents to reduce the risk of their children becoming delinquent.

Research has confirmed that delinquent behavior increases from the age of 12 and

This is a summary of *Parental Supervision and Juvenile Delinquency*, Home Office Research Study No. 83. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office. HMSO Books, Publication Centre, P.O. Box 276, London SW8 5DT, 1985. 85 pages. (NCJ 78198). Six appendixes in the original describe the survey's methodology, including sample selection, the self-report delinquency instrument, and statistical techniques, and give additional data on survey factors related to delinquency and factors associated with parental supervision. A bibliography of more than 80 references is supplied in the original.

peaks at age 14 or 15. Self-report surveys have shown that some delinquent activity is found among children from all backgrounds, but that only a very small minority are ever caught or prosecuted. Other studies have established that children who offend at an early age and who become serious offenders tend to come from large families, to have parents with criminal records, and to have poor or erratic discipline at home, conflict between parents, and poor supervision. These conclusions, however, have almost entirely focused on boys and have been based on assessments of family circumstances and relationships when the children were young.

Parental supervision is one of the few family factors found to be associated with delinquency. Again, most studies have concentrated on boys living in poorer areas with high crime rates and on parents' attempts to supervise them from an early age up to 10 or 11 years. The few studies that have focused on teenage boys suggest that boys' attachment to their families and a good relationship with parents helped protect them from delinquency. On the whole, little is known about the supervision of older children and almost nothing is known about that of girls.

Methodology

The present study is based on a national survey of 751 teenagers and their parents in England and Wales. An independent sur-

vey organization conducted household interviews between June and August 1983, holding separate interviews with the mother and the teenager in each family. If no mother was living in the household, the father was seen. Areas covered in the survey questions included the extent of family interaction, issues about which parents had arguments with teenagers or about which they gave advice, and teenagers' attitudes toward school, friends, parents, offending, smoking, drinking, and drugs. Teens were asked if they had ever committed a range of minor and more serious acts that would be defined as offenses if they were caught.

The study screened a stratified random sample of 17,782 electoral register addresses to identify households where children aged 14 or 15 lived with one or both of their parents. Because the population census indicated that only 1 in every 12 households would have children this age, addresses were screened in tight clusters. Addresses were selected from the register, not individually, but in blocks of six, in three stages: selection of constituencies, then of wards, and finally of addresses. The total number of eligible households identified through this process was 1,063. Interviews were held successfully with the mother and the teenager at 773 homes; loss in transit reduced the final sample to 751 (373 girls and 378 boys). Interviews with the parent lasted about 45 minutes and those with the teenagers about 30 minutes.

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The aim of the data analysis was to examine whether or not variations in parental supervision relate to delinquency after allowing for the effects of other possible influences. The statistical technique selected as most appropriate was logistic regression based on the generalized linear model. The general method was to examine the improvement in the fit of the model taking one factor at a time, but omitting consideration of parental supervision in the initial stages of the model-building process. Thus, the first factor to be fitted to the model was that associated with the largest reduction in scaled deviance. The second factor was that which produced the largest reduction in scaled deviance when added to a model containing the first factor. This process was continued in a stepwise manner until no further variables significantly improved the fit of the model. At this point, it was possible to evaluate the independent effect of including as a factor parental supervision.

Views of parents and teenagers regarding discipline

This discussion is based on interviews with parents (733 mothers and 18 fathers) and teenagers. It examines parents' capacities to exercise supervision in terms of how much time they spend with their children and their use of less direct forms of control. It identifies issues on which they disagreed with their children or gave advice. The discussion also focuses on three aspects of teenagers' lives: use of free time, spending habits and sources of money, and involvement with parents. It describes their reactions to parental supervision and the extent to which they felt their parents' practices were fair.

The parents' view

The survey provided little evidence that teenagers were left to themselves before and after school. At least one parent generally was at home when the teenager left for school, and 83 percent of the teenagers said there was usually one adult at home when they returned. Two-thirds of the mothers were reasonably content with the amount of time they had to spend with their children. Fathers were less so, and almost half said they would like more time to spend with their son or daughter.

The families were concerned about where their teenagers were going and what they were doing. Differing opinions between parents and teens revealed that parents

were not as well informed about their children's activities as they thought they were. Parents' anxiety about their children was coupled with a feeling that they should or could trust their son or daughter to behave well when outside the home. While supervision for most was based on a concept of trust, parents were much stricter about asking girls where they were going and with whom than about asking boys. While night-time curfew was an important issue to parents, few felt the need to control their children's choices of friends.

Parents were still exercising a fair degree of authority over their children during their teen years. Disagreements were common, but serious conflicts were rare. Various sanctions, such as stopping pocket money, were used to maintain discipline. Most parents were content with their teenagers' school, but one-third felt that discipline could be stricter. Homework was a common source of friction, particularly with boys. Eleven percent of the parents, but twice as many teenagers, reported truancy.

Drinking was clearly acceptable—84 percent of the parents reported allowing their child to have an alcoholic drink at home or on a special occasion. Drinking in situations less controlled than family gatherings was less well endorsed. Smoking was far less acceptable to parents, even though almost two-thirds smoked themselves. Of the teenagers, 11 percent reported they were current smokers, and their own estimates of the number of cigarettes they smoked was well above the parents' estimates. Parents were concerned about drugs and glue sniffing, and almost 70 percent had discussed them with their children. Very few teenagers admitted to using these substances, although 18 percent had been offered glue, cannabis, or pills. There were marked differences between parents of boys and those of girls in their responses about sexual relationships. Only half of the boys' parents had discussed sex with their children compared to about three-quarters of the girls' parents.

Most parents had views on crime, frequently giving lack of parental interest and control as the reason for delinquency. About 15 percent reported that their child had done something at some time that could have gotten him or her into trouble with the police. In contrast, just under half the teenagers reported having recently committed such an act.

The teenagers' view

Two-thirds of the teenagers said they belonged to a club or took part in an organized activity outside school hours. Almost all named hobbies and interests that occupied part of their spare time. Around 70 percent, more often girls than boys, were expected to help in the house regularly without pay. About one-third of the teenagers had a paid job, usually paper routes, babysitting, or helping in a shop.

Apart from these activities, most teenagers went out during the week to see friends. There was a wide divergence of opinion as to how often the teenagers went out, with parents giving consistently lower estimates than their children. About 80 percent of the teenagers received pocket money from their parents, and about half occasionally got extra spending money. Only about 20 percent thought it was very important to have plenty of money to spend. These teenagers purchased an enormous range of goods and services that generally reflected this age group's preoccupation with music and style.

Three-quarters of the teenagers thought it was very serious to shoplift something worth £10 (about \$13) and an even higher proportion said they would feel very guilty if they had shoplifted something on impulse. Almost all believed their parents would be very upset if they found out their child had stolen something.

Despite the time they were away from home, teenagers still had numerous opportunities to be with their parents. Overall, 62 percent of the girls and 52 percent of the boys went out at least once a week with their families. Around two-thirds of the teenagers spent considerable time chatting with their parents, mostly with the mother. Three-quarters or more took to their parents problems about school, friends, future jobs, or other matters. About 62 percent of both sexes felt very close to their mothers, and 46 percent felt very close to their fathers.

Most teenagers did not think their parents were too strict and accepted that they had a right to tell them what to do. While teenagers commonly complained that their friends were allowed to do things they were not, two-thirds thought their parents were about average in their supervision. Teenagers felt they did not have rules but rather understandings about what they were allowed to do. A parent who did not impose

some sense of discipline and structure was seen as uncaring.

Parental supervision and how it relates to delinquency

The survey examined more than the extent of parents' control over their 14 and 15 year olds by exploring the direct relationship between supervision and delinquency. It measured supervision in terms of how often the parents knew who their son or daughter was with, where they were going, and what they were doing. Those who answered "almost always" to all three questions were regarded as exerting high supervision, while those who did not were defined as providing low supervision. Delinquency was measured by a self-report survey that asked teenagers to sort a set of 21 cards describing various illegal acts into two groups: those they had ever committed and those they had not. The acts involved vandalism, theft, and dishonesty (e.g., shoplifting, stealing a bicycle, traveling on a bus or train without a ticket, stealing a wallet).

The analysis showed that three factors made a significant difference in the chances of delinquency for both sexes: whether or not their friends were delinquent, their views about stealing, and their feelings toward their fathers. Parental knowledge of the details of how the boys spent their spare time was unrelated to the chances of being delinquent, once account was taken of the boys' friends. In contrast, differences in parental supervision did relate to girls' delinquency, even after allowing for the effects of other influences. This suggests that, regardless of the influences exerted by friends, parents are less likely to have delinquent daughters if they know in detail how the daughters spend their spare time. It seems likely that for teenage girls, low supervision indicates that the parents play a less prominent or intrusive role in the lives of their children.

Specifically, the survey findings were that:

- In the 12 months prior to the survey, 43 percent of the teenagers had committed at least one illegal act.
- The prevalence of self-reported delinquency was 49 percent for boys and 39 percent for girls.
- The types of delinquency committed by boys and girls were similar.
- Of those experiencing high supervision, 41 percent of the boys and 29 percent of the girls had committed one or more delin-

quent acts, compared to 56 percent of the boys and 55 percent of the girls with low parental supervision.

Delinquent boys differed in several ways from their nondelinquent counterparts. They were less willing to accept control over the way they spent their time away from home with their friends, and they had some difficulties in their relationships with their fathers. Delinquent boys had school problems, spent more time with their friends, and were more often involved with girls than nondelinquent boys. Boys who had committed offenses in the year prior to the survey regarded lawbreaking in a less serious light, felt less guilty if they stole, and were less likely to expect to be caught if they did steal.

Compared to their nondelinquent counterparts, delinquent girls appeared more remote from both parents, especially their fathers. They frequently argued about their appearance, the time they spent with friends, and curfews. Their patterns with regard to school, spending time with friends, and attitudes toward lawbreaking were similar to those of delinquent boys.

Both groups more frequently reported involvement with the police than nondelinquents; this included seeking assistance as well as being stopped on the street and questioned. Both were more likely to feel the police treated young people unfairly.

What explains the differences in parental supervision?

It was contrary to expectations that parental supervision alone does not completely explain variations in delinquency among the 14- to 15-year old age group, and that it has no impact on boys' delinquency. Differences in supervision were, however, consistently related to a broad range of factors that form a useful basis for interpreting how parent-child relationships influence supervision levels.

Three factors were associated with differences in supervision: the teenagers' willingness to give their parents information about their activities with friends, whether the teenagers went out three or more times a week, and whether or not they were reliable about coming home at sensible times in the evening. These findings suggest that the extent of parents' information about their children's activities depends very much on the children themselves. Those who are less involved with their families are less prepared to share their lives outside the home with family members.

The specific findings for boys and girls outlined below show how much more likely these categories of teenagers were of being in the low supervision group.

Percentage of boys more likely to be in the low supervision group.

- Boys who were less often trusted by parents to behave themselves when out with friends: 2.7 times.
- Boys who went out with friends at least three times a week: 2.6 times.
- Boys whose parents had a poor view of their neighborhood: 2.2 times.
- Boys who had frequent rows with their parents over how they spent time with friends: 1.8 times.
- Boys who were unreliable about coming home at what parents considered a sensible hour: 1.7 times.

Percentage of girls more likely to be in the low supervision group.

- Girls who were unwilling to tell their parents about how they spent their time with friends: 5.8 times.
- Girls who went out three or more times a week to see their friends: 4.9 times.
- Girls whose mothers left school at or before age 15: 4.5 times.
- Girls who tended not to share their problems with their parents: 2.9 times.
- Girls who were unreliable about coming home at a sensible time: 2.7 times.
- Girls who were delinquent: 2.2 times.

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Delinquency and supervision: one-parent families

Previous research studies have confirmed an association between broken homes and juvenile delinquency. This survey did not focus on single-parent families, but 18 of the 751 teenagers surveyed were living with only their father and 75 with only their mother. Scores for these teenagers on those measures most closely related to delinquency—such as delinquent friends, views on stealing, and feelings toward their fathers—were not significantly different for boys living in one-parent households. This was also true for girls, with the exception that girls from one-parent families were more likely to receive low supervision.

When examining other ways that children from single-parent families differed from children living with both parents, the survey found no differences in feelings of closeness between lone parents and their children, in how often they had rows about the teenager going out, in whether they had delinquent friends, in whether they had been stopped by the police for questioning, or in how willing teenagers were to tell parents how they spent their time with friends. In contrast, both boys and girls from single-parent families were more likely to go out to see their friends three or more times a week, to have a paid job on weekends, and to live in neighborhoods regarded unfavorably by their parent.

In conclusion, the survey did not support the notion that single-parent families are in any way criminogenic.

Stress and delinquency

While earlier research focused on relationships between family structure and delinquency, more recent work has emphasized stress, such as low income and poor housing, as a cause of delinquent behavior.

To examine the role of stress, this study constructed an index of family stress based on four measures: (1) families headed by a lone parent or fathers unemployed or fathers being in a low social class group; (2) families with four or more children; (3) parents' evaluation of a neighborhood as a good one in which to raise children; and (4) families that rent rather than own.

This analysis failed to discover any clear relationship between family stress and delinquency for either sex. Families with

high scores on family stress were more likely to exert low levels of supervision over their teenagers. It is doubtful if family stress is a direct influence on parental supervision during the teenage years, but it may have some impact on the development of relationships between parents and children.

What can parents do

The survey results suggest that parents are still exercising supervision over their younger teenagers in many ways, and that most teenagers accept the supervision. While parental influence was not as important in preventing boys' delinquency as expected, it clearly was a major influence on girls' delinquency. However, other aspects of family relationships seem to be very important for both boys and girls.

Teenagers with strong acquired inhibitions against offending will be less likely to succumb when faced with an opportunity. The finding that delinquency was strongly associated with a lack of close feelings between fathers and their teenage children suggests that it is worth encouraging parents to consider the wider implications of poor relationships with their children. It is unrealistic to expect all parents to get along well with their adolescents, but parents might explore ways, such as negotiation rather than confrontation, to reduce the tensions that are likely to arise. Because juvenile offending was strongly related to the levels of delinquency among friends, one preventive measure might be to limit the time boys spend with delinquent friends. Parents cannot always guide the specific choices children make, but they can discourage children from making friends with individuals who are prepared to violate the law. Parents also may be able to decrease the risk of their daughter's offending by increasing their involvement in and being less credulous about their daughters' activities outside the home.

Because school problems are correlated with delinquency, greater cooperation between home and school might bring early attention to teenagers who are underachieving or whose work is deteriorating and to incidences of truancy. One source of organized support that can help parents cope with teenagers is parents' self-help groups, often run by social service departments. While treatment programs are inappropriate for most families with delinquent

children, parents in difficulty could benefit from self-referral to community programs.

Do's and don't's for parents

The following suggestions somewhat oversimplify parent-child relations, but can provide a starting point for considering how such relationships might be influenced. Many parents already are doing as much as they can along these lines; in some cases, pressures outside the home may exert an overwhelming influence on teenagers. The primary objective of the suggestions is to encourage parents and their teenagers to think about the implications of their behavior for each other.

- Be aware that the risk exists for teenagers to get into trouble and be prepared to take action if needed.
- Be responsive or alert to unexpected or unexplained events that might indicate lawbreaking, drugs, or drinking.
- Be prepared to respond effectively to what you suspect might be the beginnings of adolescent delinquency rather than ignoring it and hoping it will go away.
- Make it clear that you disapprove strongly of antisocial and criminal activity.
- Spend time with your teenagers. Listen sympathetically to their problems and make your home an interesting place for your children to be.
- Protect relationships with children from deteriorating to the point where no one is talking. Negotiate and compromise to avoid this situation.
- If your child gets into trouble with the police, be supportive and recognize that commitment to the child may influence whether or not he or she stays out of trouble in the future.
- Take an interest in what your children do at school and take advantage of opportunities to visit the school.
- Take an interest in your children's friends and how they spend their time together.

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