



OJJDP FACT SHEET

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Highlights of Findings From the Pittsburgh Youth Study

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The Pittsburgh Youth Study, a longitudinal study of 1,517 inner-city boys from Pittsburgh, PA, is 1 of 3 coordinated projects that have been supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) since 1986 through its Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency (Causes and Correlates). The Pittsburgh study has been following three samples of boys for more than a decade to advance knowledge about how and why boys become involved in delinquent and other problem behaviors. At the beginning of the study, boys were randomly chosen from students in the first, fourth, and seventh grades. Researchers conducted an initial screening of antisocial behavior, then developed a sample with an overrepresentation of boys who had already demonstrated some disruptive behavior. This Fact Sheet summarizes key findings presented in "The Development of Male Offending: Key Findings From the First Decade of the Pittsburgh Youth Study" (Loeber et al., 1998).

Prevalence, Frequency, and Onset of Offending

The study found a high level of involvement in serious delinquency among the three samples of boys.

- ◆ There were no differences between African-American and Caucasian boys at age 6, but differences gradually developed, with the prevalence of serious delinquency at age 16 reaching 27 percent for African-American boys and 19 percent for Caucasian boys.
- ◆ As prevalence increased, so did the average frequency of serious offending, rising more rapidly for African-American boys than for Caucasian boys.
- ◆ In regard to the onset of offending among the boys involved in serious delinquency, 51 percent of African-American boys and 28 percent of Caucasian boys had committed serious delinquent acts by age 15.

Developmental Pathways

One of the important findings to emerge from the study was that the boys generally developed disruptive and delinquent behavior in an orderly, progressive fashion, with less serious problem behaviors preceding more serious problem behaviors. Pittsburgh Youth Study researchers identified three developmental pathways that display progressively more serious problem behaviors. The pathways, which represent conceptually similar groupings of offenses, are as follows:

- ◆ Authority Conflict—Youth on this pathway exhibit stubbornness prior to age 12, then move on to defiance and avoidance of authority.
- ◆ Covert—This pathway includes minor covert acts (e.g., lying) followed by property damage and moderately serious delinquency, then serious delinquency.
- ◆ Overt—This pathway includes minor aggression followed by fighting and violence.

Risk Factors for Delinquency

A basic premise of the Pittsburgh Youth Study is that offending by most juveniles is the result of forces within an individual [intelligence quotient (IQ), personality] and forces in an individual's social environment (parents, siblings, peers) in different contexts (family, school, neighborhood).

Individual Risk Factors

The study found that delinquency was related to individual risk factors such as impulsivity, IQ, and personality.

- ◆ Both impulsive judgment and impulsive behavior were significantly and positively related to delinquency, accounting for 16 percent of the variance in delinquency when the effects of socioeconomic status and IQ were controlled. Researchers found that impulsivity interacts with neighborhood factors to influence juvenile offending. For example, impulsive boys

were at greatest risk for juvenile offending in Pittsburgh's poorest neighborhoods, perhaps due to lower levels of informal social controls.

- ◆ Low IQ was related to delinquency independently of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, neighborhood, and impulsivity.
- ◆ In terms of personality, delinquents tended to have a low threshold for experiencing negative emotions (such as fear, anxiety, and anger) and they tended to behave in a less constrained manner (such as seeking thrills and acting without caution).

Additional individual risk factors related to delinquency include lack of guilt feelings, being older than classmates, a high degree of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, low achievement, and depression. The most important of these predictors was lack of guilt, followed by being older than classmates and depression.

Family Risk Factors

Of the family risk factors examined by the study, poor supervision was the best explanatory variable for delinquency, increasing the risk of delinquency by a factor of 2.6 for the oldest sample but somewhat less for the younger samples. Poor parent-son communication and physical punishment by the mother also increased the risk of delinquency.

Macro Level Risk Factors

Of the socioeconomic risk factors examined by the study, family receipt of public assistance (welfare) was associated with the highest risk of delinquency, followed by low socioeconomic status. The demographic variable most strongly related to delinquency was having a broken family. Living in a bad neighborhood doubled the risk for delinquency.

Cumulative Effects of Risk Factors

The cumulative effects of risk factors on serious delinquency were examined using a risk score based on 12 key explanatory

variables. This analysis showed that the probability of delinquency increased as the number of risk factors increased.

For Further Information

Summaries of the findings of the companion projects in OJJDP's Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency (the Denver Youth Survey and the Rochester Youth Development Study), and a report describing the methodology used in all three studies, are being developed. Future publications about Causes and Correlates research will address such issues as the impact of family transitions on delinquency, juvenile victims of violence, and protective factors for youth in high-risk neighborhoods.

For additional information about the Pittsburgh Youth Study, contact Rolf Loeber, Ph.D., or Magda Stouthamer-Loeber, Ph.D., Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, University of Pittsburgh, 3811 O'Hara Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15213.

Reference

Loeber, R., Farrington, D.P., Stouthamer-Loeber, M., Moffitt, T., and Caspi, A. 1998. The development of male offending: Key findings from the first decade of the Pittsburgh Youth Study. *Studies in Crime and Crime Prevention* 7:141-172.

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