



Research Matters

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The Offending Trajectories of Canadian Juvenile Probationers

Issue: Can we identify the criminal pathways and characteristics of Canadian youths who are responsible for the vast majority of all offences and the most serious types of crime?

Context: The identification and characterization of subgroups of youths who engage in various levels of criminal activity has been a central research theme within the field of developmental criminology. Findings from this line of research have provided evidence for the existence of two primary subgroups of offenders who follow a distinctive course of offending related to different risk factors: early onset persisters (EOP) and late onset desisters (LOD).

The antisocial behavioural pattern of the EOP is said to start with less serious forms of offending in childhood, and to gradually worsen during the life-course. The offending pathway of the LOD is posited to begin later in life (during adolescence) and to end upon entering the adult years. The EOP are thought to engage more frequently in criminal activity, and to be responsible for a wider variety of offences and more of the violent crimes. It is important to identify those youths most at risk of continued and serious offending, and to understand the factors contributing to their severe and persistent offending, in order to invest and distribute prevention and intervention resources wisely.

Method: The study sample was comprised of 514 male and female youths from Manitoba, Canada, under a probation sentence during the years 1986

to 1991. Information on various personal-social demographic characteristics, as well as risk and needs, were collected based on interviews upon admission to supervision. The criminal careers of the youths were then tracked until 2005.

Results: The results revealed the presence of two subgroups of juvenile probationers who followed distinct offending trajectories from early adolescence (age 12-15) to middle adulthood (age 31 and up). One group ($\approx 13\%$ of the sample) showed a chronic high and serious level of offending behaviour over time. The offending frequency/severity of this group increased steadily from adolescence onwards. The remainder of the sample (thereafter referred to as stable low offenders) was characterized by sporadic and less serious involvement in criminal behaviour over the years. Their offending pattern remained fairly stable, although it tended to show a slight decline in frequency/severity starting at age 26.

Throughout the life-course, the chronic high offenders recidivated at a much higher rate than the stable low offenders. Furthermore, the differences in recidivism rates between the two offending groups became progressively more pronounced over time, with the largest dissimilarities evidenced from age 26 onwards. After the age of 15, at least 80% of the chronic high offenders received one or more convictions in each assessment period (ages 16-20; 21-25; 26-30; and 31+). In contrast, the recidivism rate for the stable low offenders declined from approximately 70%

during late adolescence (age 16-20) to less than 20% in the last wave of assessment (when the offenders were 31 years or older). An observation of particular interest was that almost all of the chronic high offenders (95.7%), were convicted of at least one violent offence during their adult years (age 21 and up), compared to only 56.0% of the stable low offenders.

The risk/needs factor that best predicted group membership was the youths' pattern of associations. Not surprisingly, a greater proportion of youths who had negative and unconstructive ties with their peers were identified as chronic high or persistent offenders, compared to those who did not evidence difficulty in this area. Substance use was also a robust and reliable predictor of group membership, such that the chronic high or persistent group comprised more offenders who had substance use problems than the stable low group.

Implications:

1. Youths can be reliably categorized into two distinctive offending trajectory groups. These groups have different characteristics that place the youths at varying risk for reoffending. Thus, chronic high and stable low offenders require distinct levels of services.
2. A small proportion of offenders who engage in relatively frequent and serious criminal activity do not desist from crime despite receiving numerous and sometimes lengthy sentences. This suggests that preventative and rehabilitative resources are more likely to have an impact on high risk individuals than punitive measures.
3. To be effective and efficient, prevention and intervention strategies should be implemented as early as possible in the criminal careers of high risk youths. Such programs should target negative peer influence and alcohol/drug consumption as these two factors place youths at risk of embarking on a criminal career.

Source: Yessine, A. K., & Bonta, J. *The Offending Trajectories of Youth Probationers from Early Adolescence to Young Adulthood: Relation to Dual Taxonomies*. Research Report. Ottawa: Public Safety Canada. (In Progress)

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