

# **SERIOUS AND VIOLENT JUVENILE OFFENDERS: THE PATHS THEY FOLLOW, FACTORS THAT PUT THEM AT RISK, AND INTERVENTIONS THAT HOLD PROMISE**

Serious and violent juvenile offenders commit crimes that shock – murder, rape – the kinds of crime that make the evening news. They commit armed robberies and carjackings. They are involved in extortion, drug trafficking, kidnaping, arson, and other crimes far more severe than those of other delinquents.

This distinct class of juvenile offender has grown dramatically in number over the past two decades, creating a difficult and dangerous problem for juvenile authorities and the American public. Research, however, reveals much about serious and violent juvenile offenders, shedding light on the pathways children follow to violence, the factors that put them at risk, and preventive measures and interventions that hold promise. Perhaps most importantly, research suggests it is never too early to begin efforts to prevent juvenile violence and never too late to intervene with known offenders.

## **The Problem**

The number of serious and violent juvenile offenders rose significantly between 1975 and 1995 with juvenile arrest records showing dramatic increases in several of the most serious crimes, including murder.

Between 1975 and 1995, juvenile arrests for murder nearly doubled from a rate of 5.7 arrests per 100,000 youths between the ages of 10-17 to 11.2 arrests per 100,000 youths, according to the National Center for Juvenile Justice in Pittsburgh.

Arrests for other violent and serious crimes showed similar trends between 1975 and 1995. Juvenile arrests for aggravated assault increased from 131.4 arrests per 100,000 to 283.2; forcible rape arrests rose from 14.2 per 100,000 youths to 18.4; and robbery arrests increased from 162.2 arrests per 100,000 youths to 197.5.

Juveniles were responsible for 13% of the nation's violent crime in 1996 compared to 9% in 1987, based on case clearance data reported in the Uniform Crime Reports.

Moreover, the majority of serious and violent juvenile offenders continue to commit crimes year after year. These chronic offenders account for more than half of all serious crime committed by juveniles and account for larger shares of certain crimes. White male chronic offenders, for example, were found to account for 93% of all robberies.<sup>1</sup>

## **Characteristics**

The actual delinquency careers of serious and violent juvenile offenders have been found to be quite different from what is officially recorded.

On average, the first contact with juvenile court for male offenders occurs around age 14. However, based on their own statements and those of their mothers, these youth actually begin much earlier with minor behavior problems surfacing around age 7 and their first serious crime being committed around age 12.

### **Risk Factors**

Research identifies many individual characteristics and factors found in the family, school, community, and among peers that place children at risk of becoming serious and violent offenders. It is unlikely, however, that the influence of a single risk factor will lead a child to commit violence. More often, violence results from a mix of risk factors.

### **Psychological Characteristics**

Several psychological characteristics of children increase the risk of later delinquent and violent behavior.

- **Hyperactivity** can predict later violent behavior. The relationship between hyperactivity and later violence has been found consistently across studies, regardless of the measurement methods used.
- **Concentration problems** predict later violent behavior as well as academic difficulties, which themselves are risk factors for violence. In Sweden, 15% of boys identified as having problems with restlessness and concentration at age 13 were arrested for violence by age 26 compared to only 3% of those who did not have those problems.<sup>2</sup>

### **Aggression**

Many researchers have noted continuity of antisocial behavior from early aggression to violent crime.

- **Aggressive behavior** from age 6 to age 13 has been consistently shown to predict later violence in males across studies. Among a group of African-American boys in Chicago, nearly half who were rated as aggressive by their teachers at age six, had been arrested for violent crimes by age 33 compared with a third of their nonaggressive counterparts. And similar results were found among females.<sup>3</sup>
- **Early violent behavior and delinquency is also associated with more chronic and serious violence.** In one study, for example, half of the boys convicted for a violent crime between ages 10 and 16 were convicted of a violent crime again by age 24 compared with only 8% of those who had not been convicted of violence as juveniles.<sup>4</sup>

## Attitudes and Beliefs

Control theory argues that beliefs or norms serve as internal controls against violent behaviors. Several investigators have found individual beliefs and attitudes regarding violence to be related to violent behavior.

- **Acceptance of problem behaviors such as drug use and crime places children at higher risk of engaging in them.** During elementary school years, children usually express anti-drug, anti-crime, and pro-social attitudes. Such attitudes lower their risks of later engaging in behaviors such as drug use and crime. But in middle school, when others they know engage in problem behaviors, children's attitudes often shift toward greater acceptance of those behaviors, placing them at higher risk.<sup>5</sup>
- **Dishonesty, antisocial beliefs and attitudes, and hostility toward police** have all been found to predict later violence among males. Among females, the relationship between those attitudes and beliefs and violent behavior appears less consistent.

Such findings are important considerations for preventive interventions aimed at helping children develop positive beliefs and standards of behavior. For example, they underscore the importance of "social and emotional literacy," a process by which children learn to successfully participate in social life by being taught to take turns, wait in line, tell the truth, and so on.

## Family Factors

Certain characteristics of family life are suspected as contributing to the development of serious and violent juvenile offenders. They include:

- **Parent's criminal history.** Children with criminal fathers are more likely to commit violent crime later in their lives compared to children of noncriminal fathers. Whether there is a biological link to violence is not clear, but research suggests that violent behavior is more likely learned in a criminal family.
- **Child maltreatment.** Abuse and neglect are associated with later violent behavior. But the degree of risk depends on the type of abuse. Adults who had been physically abused as children were found to be slightly more likely to commit a violent crime, while those who had been neglected were much more likely to commit violence.<sup>6</sup>
- **Poor family management practices.** Failure to set clear expectations for behavior, lax supervision, excessively severe and inconsistent discipline and other poor parenting practices are factors that predict violence in children. In one study, 10-year-old boys with very strict parents reported committing the most violence and those with very permissive parents reported the second-highest levels of violence.<sup>7</sup>

- **Lack of parent-child involvement.** Factors that predict later violence include parents who are not involved in their children's education, fathers who do not engage in leisure activities with their sons, and the lack of communication between parents and adolescent children.
- **Family conflict.** Exposure to high levels of family conflict and marital strife increases the risk of violent behavior in children, with age at the time of exposure being a factor. While exposure to family conflict at age 10 does not appear to be an influence, exposure to high levels of conflict at ages 14 and 16 increases the likelihood of violent behavior at age 18.<sup>8</sup>
- **Separation from parents.** The disruption of the parent-child relationship is another factor that increases the likelihood of violent behavior later in life. Researchers report the risk of violent behavior increases for boys when relationships with parents are broken before age 10 and for both boys and girls when they leave home before age 16.
- Having **delinquent brothers and sisters** raises the risks of violent behavior. Studies report that 10-year-olds with delinquent siblings have an increased risk of being convicted of violent crimes; delinquent siblings have their strongest correlation with violent behavior during adolescence; and delinquent siblings have greater influence over girls than boys.

## School Failure

**Poor academic achievement** is one of the most consistently-reported risk factors. In study after study, low academic achievement has been found to increase the likelihood of violent behavior and crime.

Students on low academic tracks in secondary school have been found to be twice as likely to be convicted of a violent crime. In the elementary grades, 20% of the boys with teacher reports of low attainment ended up being convicted of a violent crime as an adult – nearly twice the rate found among other students.<sup>9</sup>

## Peer-Related Factors

The behavior and attitudes of peers and siblings also help determine whether a child will travel the path to violent behavior.

- Having **delinquent peers** contributes to the spread of violence during adolescence. On the other hand, having peers who disapprove of delinquent behavior may inhibit later violence.
- **Gang membership** appears to be a more serious risk. When gang membership occurs at ages 14 and 16, it increases the likelihood of violent behavior at age 18.

## Community Factors

Circumstances exist in some neighborhoods that increase the risk of children developing violent behaviors.

- **Studies of individuals show a strong link between growing up poor and violent behavior.**
- **Growing up in low-income families** increases the likelihood of teen violence and conviction of violent crimes. In one study, more than 23% of boys who grew up poor were convicted of violent crimes compared to 8.8% of boys who were not poor.<sup>10</sup>
- **Community disorganization, low neighborhood attachment, neighborhood adults involved in crime, and greater availability of drugs** also increase the likelihood of serious delinquency and violence. These risk factors are more often found within poor communities.

## Intervention

Violence is related to many factors, so treatment of specific problems may lessen risks of violent behavior at the same time. If attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder puts a child at risk for violent behavior, for example, then treating ADHD may decrease the chances of later violence.

However, so many factors put children at risk of becoming serious and violent offenders that intervention is not likely to be successful if it addresses a single risk or a single source of influence, such as individual characteristics, family, school, peers, or community. Multiple-component programs focused on preventive measures to reduce risk factors across several domains are more effective.

Studies of a wide range of interventions to reduce serious and violent juvenile crime suggest that:

- **Simultaneous intervention in the home and in school** is the most successful approach.
- **Community interventions** are helpful, particularly public health approaches, such as those aimed at reducing gang membership, the availability of guns, and drug markets.
- **Early prevention is important.** Effective early prevention includes home visitation for pregnant women and teen parents, parent training, preschool intellectual enrichment, and interpersonal skills training.
- **Later intervention is also important.** Interventions for juvenile offenders can reduce the risk that they will return to criminal behavior. The most effective interventions for noninstitutionalized serious juvenile offenders include interpersonal skills training, behavioral contracting, individual counseling, and drug abstinence programs. Among institutionalized

serious juvenile offenders, the most effective interventions include interpersonal skills training and cognitive-behavioral programs.

## **Family-Focused**

Some interventions aim at strengthening the family to lessen risks of later violence.

- **Family preservation**, a widely-used approach, offers a range of services, such as parent management and life skills training, to help families deal with stresses brought on by unemployment, family conflict, and other problems. Some family preservation programs appear to work well. In Michigan, compared to families with children returning home from foster care, preservation program families had significantly lower rates of further out-of-home placements through 30 months. But recent well-publicized failures of social service agencies to prevent further abuse or even death among children remaining in the home raise questions about the value of in-home placement.
- **Parent management training (PMT)**. This approach attempts to improve a child's behavior by improving parenting techniques, such as communicating clearly, responding in positive ways to good behavior, and appropriately punishing bad behavior. PMT results in improved behavior for many youth, but 25-40% of children whose parents receive the training continue to have significant behavior problems.<sup>11</sup>
- **Functional family therapy**. To increase communication and mutual problem-solving, parents are taught to use behavioral techniques such as setting clear and specific rules and consequences, use of social reinforcement, and employing a token economy. Primarily used with adolescents, this approach has helped to improve family communication and lower recidivism among delinquent youth.<sup>12</sup>

## **Child-Focused**

Aggressive children often lack certain critical cognitive and social skills believed to be important to positive social interactions. They may, for example, fail to read relevant social clues or they may simply believe aggressive behavior is appropriate.

**Social competence training** teaches children to increase the use of positive social behaviors, such as conversation skills, academic performance, and behavioral control strategies. Social-cognitive processes, such as problem solving and self-control, are also taught. This approach was used in a violence prevention curriculum for troubled African-American youth. Those who participated showed improved behavior and fewer school suspensions and expulsions over time.<sup>13</sup>

## **School-Related**

Academic problems contribute to antisocial and violent behavior. Failure to finish homework and poor reading skills are associated with aggressive behavior. Among antisocial youth, the most serious and chronic offenders typically are those who had low academic skills as children. Several interventions that target academic skills and student behavior have helped reduce the risk of serious and violent offending.

- Interventions focused on improving **school performance, attendance, and reading** may also reduce the chances of children becoming serious and violent juvenile offenders. For example, seventh graders with academic or discipline problems improved their school performance and reduced their delinquent activities when techniques were used such as awarding points for attendance and positive teacher ratings that could be cashed in for school trips and other perks. Five years later, significantly fewer of the young men and women had criminal records compared to youth who were not enrolled in the program.<sup>14</sup>
- **Classroom contingency training** is another intervention that attempts to improve student behavior. In this approach, successful parent management techniques are adapted to the classroom. For example, teachers are taught to establish clear expectations regarding attendance and behavior and how to target encouragement and praise.

## **Peer-Based**

**Conflict resolution** to reduce violence is a strategy that recently has become popular in middle schools and high schools. The programs are generally psychoeducational and aim at teaching students about the causes and consequences of violence, self-control, and social problem-solving. Little evaluation data are available on these programs. However, a recent review casts doubt on their effectiveness largely because they presume that students are similar enough to benefit from a standardized program.<sup>15</sup> In fact, children develop antisocial behavior differently. Some are “early starters” and others “late starters,” for example.

## **Policy Implications**

Parents, schools, neighborhoods, and the juvenile justice system all play important roles in preventing children from becoming serious and violent juvenile offenders and intervening to turn around the lives of known offenders.

Several school, community, and family interventions have shown promise in lessening the risk factors of serious and violent delinquency.

- **Early intervention for at-risk families** has helped ease the stresses of unemployment, conflict, and other problems in the home that can lead to serious risks for children, such as violence, abuse, and neglect.

## **Juvenile Justice System**

Compared to schools, neighborhoods, and families, the juvenile justice system is in a worse position to prevent serious and violent juvenile delinquency. One shortcoming is its focus on the adolescent population, despite research that places the onset of serious offending occurring between ages 7 and 14. In fact, about two thirds of serious violent crime does not show up in juvenile justice records.

Several steps have been suggested to help the juvenile justice system become more effective in efforts to prevent serious and violent juvenile crime.

Among the suggestions is the use of better tools to identify potentially-serious offenders in order to steer those youth into early interventions. Many serious and violent offenders are not identified as such early on if their first offense is minor.

Only recently have there been hopeful signs that national levels of youth violence are on the decline. Murder arrests, for example, have fallen in recent years from a high of 14.5 arrests per 100,000 youths in 1993 to 11.2 two years later.

However, new generations of children are at increased risk of becoming serious and violent juvenile offenders. Their best hopes of avoiding such lives rest with parents, schools, and neighborhoods – the primary socializing agents for children with the resources to provide them with brighter futures.

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: This report, written by Jeffery Fraser, is based on the above article. It is not intended to be an original work but a summary for the convenience of our readers. References noted in the text of the report follow.*

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