

Some types of out-of-school employment increase the likelihood of delinquency, but close attachments with family and school can help prevent it

Do juvenile delinquents grow up to be adult criminals? That was the question that propelled the U.S. Department of Justice to fund a long-term study of the factors contributing to juvenile delinquency and subsequent adult criminality (Shannon, 1982).

The study focused on three groups of children born in Racine, Wisconsin: 1,352 born in 1942; 2,099 born in 1949; and 2,676 born in 1955. Researchers collected data on demographic characteristics, police contacts, and court dispositions, and interviewed subsamples of the 1942 and 1949 groups regarding their delinquent and criminal activities and their perceptions of themselves and their behavior.

Although 60 to 70 percent of the youths had at least one police contact (involving other than traffic violations), a much smaller percentage were chronic offenders who accounted for 77 to 83 percent of all police contacts. Furthermore, 8 to 14 percent of each group's members was responsible for all of the group's felonies. Half of the males had fewer than five police contacts and half of the females had but one. The most prevalent pattern was one of declining frequency and seriousness of contacts. However, once a person had four contacts, the probability of additional contacts was at least 80 percent.

Nevertheless, the report concluded that it is extremely difficult to predict who will continue criminal activities as an adult. About 16 percent of the juveniles in the study who had police contacts before age 18 had none thereafter, and approximately 43 percent of those

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with no police contacts before age 18 had contacts after 18. Only youths with long histories of delinquent behavior could be accurately predicted to continue criminal activities as adults.

Based on interviews with members of the 1942 and 1949 groups, the study also indicated numerous factors that were related to greater numbers of police contacts and more serious offenses, such as socioeconomic status of the neighborhood, quality of family relationships, leaving high school before graduation, having friends in trouble with the police, full-time employment at age 17 or younger, and summer or after-school employment.

Employment is most likely to be correlated with delinquency when the job is part-time, is not career oriented, and when youths are not properly trained or carefully supervised. Also, employment may increase exposure to negative factors that might influence someone who is already experiencing poor family relationships and lack of success in school.

In another report, Weis and Hawkins (1981) also correlated delinquency with

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family, school, peer, and employment variables. Their social development model of delinquency prevention emphasizes the importance of attachment to parents and school and belief and commitment to moral order and the law. It posits that opportunities for involvement in school, consistent expectations in the school environment, and skill development increase attachment to school and commitment to education, which help prevent delinquency.

The model, which is described in a film called "Preventing Delinquency,"<sup>1</sup> is now being tested in a comprehensive program in Seattle, Washington, and the school-based components are being tested in junior and senior high schools in six other cities.

Schools, as well as social service agencies, are sure to benefit from the present research, which holds the potential to make a serious contribution to decreasing juvenile delinquency in society and discipline problems in education. □

References

Shannon, Lyle. *Assessing the Relationship of Adult Criminal Careers to Juvenile Careers*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982.

Weis, J. G., and Hawkins, J. D. *Preventing Delinquency*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981.

<sup>1</sup>"Preventing Delinquency" can be rented from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service audiovisual program, telephone (301) 251-5500; Address: Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850, Toll-free telephone (800) 638-8736.

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