

Individual Risk, Life-Style Risk, and Adolescent Offending

Findings from the Peterborough Youth Study

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The Peterborough Youth Study (PYS) is the forerunner to the ongoing Peterborough Adolescent Development Study (PADS). It is a cross-sectional study of all juveniles who started Year Ten (aged fourteen to fifteen years) in Autumn 2000 in the thirteen Peterborough state schools (the questionnaire study) and a random sample of them who participated in a space and time-budget study concerning a week's activities (the interview study).

The questionnaire study was carried out in late 2000 and early 2001 and included 1,957 boys and girls. The response rate was 92.4 percent. The interview study was carried out in spring and early summer 2001 and included 339 boys and girls. The response rate was 82.9 percent. Data from 1998-99 on neighbourhood disadvantage, and enumeration district data on population characteristics from the 1991 Census, were used to classify the structural contexts of areas of residence.

The study gives a snap-shot of 14-15 year old adolescents' individual characteristics, lives, and involvement in crime in a medium-sized UK city. Adolescence is when involvement in crime peaks. This study focuses on current offending and victimisation as it relates to individual characteristics and the behavioural context of the youths. A particular strength is its focus on the youths' behavioural contexts (as represented by life-styles and routines) and their individual characteristics, and especially the interaction between the two.

Types of Youth Offenders

The findings suggest the existence of three main groups of adolescent offenders.

Propensity Induced Offenders. This group is very small and consists of youths who are poorly adjusted and likely to have a high level of overall offending, regardless of their life-style risk (very few have a low risk life-style). Their offending may result more from their individual dispositions (propensity to offend) than from situational risk. **Life-Style Dependent Offenders.** This group are neither individually very well adjusted, nor individually poorly adjusted. They appear to run the highest risk of getting into frequent offending by having a high-risk life-style. Whether their (medium) level of propensity will materialise in offending may depend highly on whether they have a life-style that frequently brings them into situations of risk. For this group, peer influence may be a major reason for offending.

Situationally Limited Offenders. These are well-adjusted youths who, if they live a risky life-style, may occasionally offend (in particular committing an occasional aggressive crime), without any great risk of developing a "criminal career". Crime by this group appears to result more from occasionally strong situational risks (primarily related to drinking or using drugs) than from an underlying

propensity to offend.

Adolescents' involvement in crime is closely linked to their individual characteristics, their life-styles, and interactions between the two. Any successful adolescent crime prevention strategy must build on an integrated approach, including social/developmental, situational, and criminal justice elements (Wikström & Torstensson (1999) that target the particular problem of prevention related to the different groups of adolescent offenders. A strategy that aims permanently to affect social conditions and day-to-day living of adolescents and which targets or involves the key players of crime prevention (parents and teachers) holds the most promise for making a difference.

Major Findings

Many previous studies focus on the link between individual risk and offending. The relationship between life-style and victimisation has been the subject of many studies, but few have explored the link between life-style and offending. No previous studies have addressed the interaction between individual and life-style risk and its influence on offending.

Offending of a less serious nature is a widespread experience in adolescence. Committing common crimes, like acts of aggression or shop-lifting, is a common experience in adolescence. As table 1 shows, 38 percent of young people reported having committed the offences shown. More serious offending is rarer. This accords with previous findings.

Whilst adolescent offending is not statistically a highly deviant phenomenon, this is not to say that there are no differentiating factors between those who have and have not offended, or between those who offend occasionally or offend more frequently. There are significant individual and life-style differences.

High frequency adolescent offenders are versatile in their offending and normally this includes committing more serious crimes. High-frequency offenders have a higher propensity than others to break the law (and possibly also to break rules more generally). For example, this study shows that those who have weak pro-social values as regards offending, and who report anticipating low levels of shame if caught, offend much more than others. That high-frequency offenders in most cases are versatile in their offending (that is, commit many different types of crime), a finding also demonstrated in previous studies, suggests that their propensity to offend is generalised rather than specific. Individual variations in the mix of crime types committed by high frequency offenders (cross-sectionally and over time), or variation in types of crime committed by occasional offenders, may result primarily from situational factors rather than from a particu-

TABLE 1: Self-Reported Offending Prevalence and Lambda

	Prevalence*	Prevalence by number of crimes**						Lambda***
		1	2	3	4	5	6+	
Shop-lifting	13.9	5.8	2.3	1.5	0.6	0.8	3.0	2.8
Non-residential burglary	3.1	2.0	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.1	1.7
Residential burglary	1.3	0.9	0.4	0.1	-	-	0.1	1.5
Thefts of or from cars	3.2	1.7	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.4	0.5	2.6
Robbery	1.4	0.8	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	1.9
Vandalism	17.0	7.0	3.4	1.6	1.3	1.0	2.6	2.6
Assault	24.0	11.4	5.8	2.8	1.2	0.9	1.9	2.1
Serious theft****	6.8	3.5	1.3	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.8	3.0
All crimes	37.7	12.1	7.2	4.4	1.8	2.6	9.4	4.1

* Percent of all juveniles who have committed the crime

** Percent of all juveniles who have committed the crime once, twice etc.

*** Average crimes per offender. Lambda is underestimated. The maximum count for separate categories of crimes is six (i.e., reports of six or more crimes are all counted as six). For "all crimes" the maximum count of crime is 42 (i.e., seven categories times six).

**** Burglary, thefts of and from cars, and robbery combined.

larly strong inclination to commit specific types of crimes.

We found that most serious crimes were committed by high-frequency offenders. This is in line with findings from longitudinal research on developmental pathways, which show that persistent offenders generally proceed from minor acts of crime to more serious crimes.

Adolescent offenders spend only a marginal amount of time on offending. Although offending is a widespread experience in adolescence, the amount of time spent on it is small. On average, the adolescents offended 1 hour and 38 minutes per week. Even the most persistent offend only in a limited number of circumstances, and their weekly time spent on offending was three hours. This suggests the great importance of behavioural contexts (situational factors) and, particularly, their interaction with individual characteristics related to offending risk, when developing explanations of adolescent offending. That prolific offenders spend so little time offending, and encounter a much larger number of "good opportunities" than materialise into crimes, makes it unlikely that highly deterministic explanatory models will fully capture the complexities of offending behaviour. This suggests the need for improved understanding of how indi-

vidual perception of action alternatives and processes of decision-making, as affected by individual characteristics and behavioural contexts, influence the occurrence of acts of crime.

Adolescent offenders are more often victimised than others. Being an offender, particularly a frequent offender, increases the risk of being a victim. The relationship is especially strong between frequent violent offending and violent victimisations. This is likely to reflect a more generalised link between offending and victimisation through youths' individual characteristics and their life-styles. For example, youths with high individual risk characteristics and strong life-styles risks more often get into "trouble", which sometimes results in them committing a crime, but at other times results in their being victimised (particularly being a victim of a violent crime).

Explanatory factors.

The strongest predictors of offending are youths' social situations, dispositions, individual routines, and lifestyle. Gender is a quite modest predictor and family structural characteristics are modest.

The impact of gender on adolescent offending behaviour is quite modest. Although adolescent males

offend more overall than adolescent females, knowing an adolescent's gender does not help much in predicting whether they have offended. This is true for violent and serious offending, where males offend about twice as much as females, and for shop-lifting, where females offend often more than males. Most, but not all, of the modest gender variance can be accounted for by the facts that more females than males have strong protective factors (the gender differences being strongest for self-control and shaming), and fewer females are characterised by high-risk life-styles. The factors that explain adolescent male variation in offending explain adolescent female involvement equally well, or sometimes slightly better. This suggests that there is no great need to develop gender-specific models for the proximate adolescent factors influencing offending. Instead, efforts to explain the modest gender differences in adolescent offending should be directed towards the more distant and indirect factors, explaining, for example, why females tend to have more protective factors than males.

Family structural characteristics have a modest impact on adolescent offending. Social class, family type, or ethnic background, separately or taken together, do not have strong

direct influence on adolescent offending and victimisation. However, they have an important effect on youths' individual risk-protective scores. Adolescents in more disadvantaged circumstances tend more often to have high risk factors, while youths from advantaged circumstances tend to have strong protective factors. This is congruent with the assumption that structural factors have a distant and indirect influence on offending, and is supported by the finding that structural characteristics have no significant effect on adolescent offending when controlling for the youths' risk-protective factors.

Adolescent crime is not particularly a lower-class phenomenon. Adolescent involvement in crime does not vary much by family social class. Offenders from lower social classes tend to be somewhat more active in aggressive crimes than others, but the effect is modest. Youths from upper and middle-class families tend to have somewhat stronger school bonds, self-control, and levels of shaming.

Youths living with foster-parents or in care have higher rates of offending than others. This may occur, at least partly, because being in care, but possibly also living with foster-parents, is often a consequence of a placement by social authorities initiated by the youths' or his or her family's social problems. These may have already involved criminality and substance abuse. There is no great difference in offending, and there is only a difference for girls, between youths living in a complete family of origin and those in a split family (with a single parent, with a biological and step-parent, or moving between families). It is not unusual for youths to live in a split family, and the social significance of being a child in a split family may be much less than in the past. Youths living in split families tend to have somewhat less strong social bonds (family and school bonds) and self-control than those living in a complete family of origin. This applies primarily to those living with a single parent or a step-parent, but not to those moving between families. Youths living with foster-parents or in care tend to have weaker social bonds, self-control, pro-social values,

and shaming than other youths, although the differences are not great.

Adolescents' ethnic background does not have much impact on their offending, with one main exception, and that is a substantially lower rate of offending (and victimisation) for girls (but not boys) from Asian families. Asian girls tend to have much stronger individual protective factors than others. However, our analysis focused on comparing native and Asian youths, while the remaining youths with other ethnic backgrounds were grouped together in one heterogeneous category. There may be ethnic sub-groups within the group of youths with a non-Asian foreign background that have significantly higher or lower offending rates compared to natives.

There is no evidence for a social class or neighbourhood disadvantage-based adolescent subculture of anti-social values (i.e., of pro-crime values). The overwhelming majority of youths have strong pro-social values (do not think it is alright for youths of their age to engage in crime). There are no differences in this by family social class or by area of residence. This indicates that there are no social class or neighbourhood disadvantage-based "subcultures" of crime and delinquency. This is not to say that the degree of pro-social values a youth has is irrelevant to his or her offending. Youths with strong pro-social values are much less likely to offend. Youths who frequently offend are more likely to have peers who also frequently offend, and are likely to have more positive attitudes towards offending. However, it must be borne in mind that frequently offending youths are likely to have a wide range of individual and life-style risk factors. They are not simply a group with weak pro-social values. Perhaps positive attitudes towards offending in adolescence is a question of individual morality linked to life-style risk, rather than a question of belonging to a subculture of crime and delinquency.

Youths' social situation and dispositions are strong predictors of their risk of offending. Adolescents vary strongly in their dispositions (self-control and morality, the latter repre-

sented by pro-social values and shaming) and social situation (family and school bonds, and level of parental monitoring). Individual variation in all the studied aspects of dispositions and social situation are strongly related to individuals' prevalence and frequency of offending.

However, the two social bonds constructs lose their significance as predictors when controlling for the disposition constructs. This may mean that aspects of the individual closer to action (perception of alternatives and decision-making as regards choices whether to engage in a criminal act or not) have a greater direct importance than those that are more distant.

All the different disposition and social situation constructs are strongly correlated and may be represented as one risk-protective dimension. The more risk characteristics youths have, the more likely they are to offend, to offend frequently, to commit more serious crimes, and to be versatile in their offending. The reverse holds true for those youths who have more protective characteristics. Youths' propensity to offend is highly dependent on their risk-protective characteristics, as defined by their social situation and dispositions.

The youths' individual routines and the related life-style risks are strong predictors of offending. Adolescents vary widely in how they live. Adolescents vary in the degree to which their time use and activities centre on family, school, and peers. Variations in routine activities are strongly influenced by individual risk-protective characteristics, but also, to a lesser degree, by family and community (neighbourhood and school) structural characteristics.

Particularly youths with a high degree of peer-centred time use and activities, but also youths with a low degree of family-centred time use and activities, tended to be more involved in offending than others. The more activities were peer-centred, the more likely youths also had a strong life-style risk, as measured by time spent with delinquent peers, time spent in public high risk environments, and frequency of alcohol and narcotic drugs use. The offending level was particularly high for those whose

peer-centred time use and activities also included a strong life-style risk.

It seems a reasonable assumption that variations in the way youths live their lives mean that they are differently exposed to behaviour-settings that entail a higher situational risk for offending (e.g., through high levels of temptation or provocation). The Peterborough study provides empirical evidence for such a link. Youths with more peer-centred time use and activities *did* spend more time in high-risk situations than others, and, those who spent more time in high-risk situations *did* offend more often than others.

However, this analysis was restricted to time spent in a particular type of high-risk situation (where the subject was involved in or witnessed arguments or harassments or witnessed violence between others). Further analyses may reveal links between a broader range of different types of high-risk situations and offending levels.

Life-style has a stronger effect on offending for some groups of youths than for others. Adolescents' indi-

vidual risk-protective characteristics, and their individual routine activities/ life-styles are both strong independent predictors of their offending levels. The key new finding of this study, however, is the strong interaction effect between individual risk-protective characteristics and life-style risk, as table 2 shows.

Youths with high individual risk factors tend to offend regardless of their level of life-style risk (although very few of them have a low life-style risk), while youths with high individual protective factors offend only occasionally if they have a higher life-style risk (figure 1). The group in-between, those with balanced risk-protective factors, seem to be the most influenced by life-style (figure 1). For this group, the level of offending increases with increased life-style risk.

Crime Prevention

Crime prevention implications differ for the three groups of offenders: propensity-induced offenders, life-style dependent offenders, and situationally limited offenders.

The prevention of adolescent offending should focus on strategies targeting the background to and circumstances of different groups of adolescent offenders' criminality. This is not a crime prevention study. It is a study of basic patterns of adolescent offending and some of their possible causes. It may, however, provide a foundation on which to develop adolescent crime prevention strategies, and focus efforts on areas and measures likely to have a significant effect on adolescent offending. One major lesson is that different types of adolescent offenders warrant different strategies of prevention. Life-style and situationally oriented prevention approaches may work best for *life-style dependent offenders*, while it is less likely that these approaches, at least in isolation, would have any great prospects for *propensity-induced offenders*.

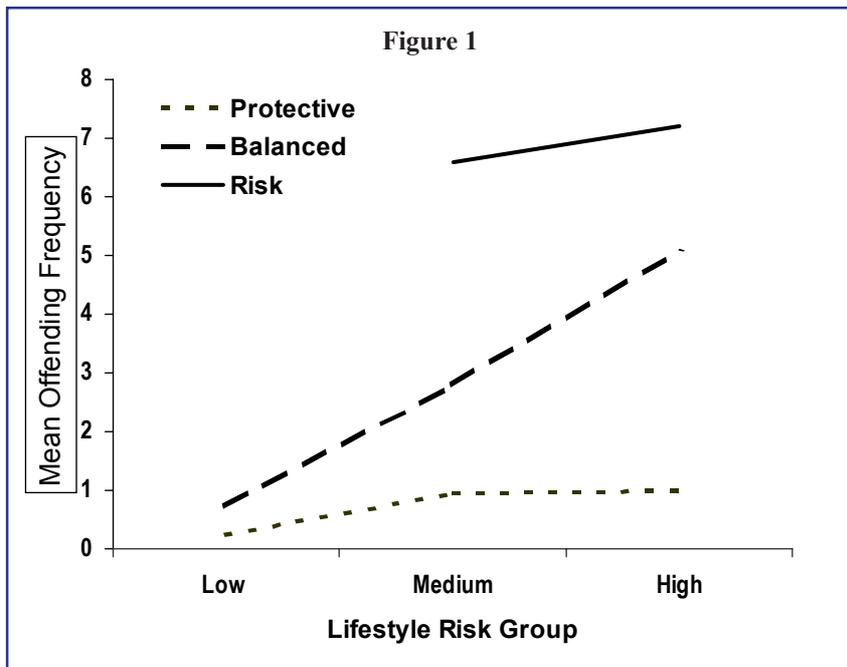
The findings stress the great potential role that parents and teachers can play in crime prevention. Adolescents spend most of their time in the family

TABLE 2: OLS multiple regression. Frequencies of overall offending, serious theft, shop-lifting and aggressive crimes by gender and key explanatory factors

Constructs*	Overall offending		Serious theft		Shop-lifting		Aggressive crimes	
	Beta	Prob	Beta	Prob	Beta	Prob	Beta	Prob
Female	-0.09	0.001	-0.09	0.000	0.08	0.0002	-0.14	0.000
Area Risk	0.00	ns	-0.01	ns	-0.03	ns	0.02	ns
School Risk	0.05	0.030	0.02	ns	0.07	0.017	0.03	ns
Family Risk	-0.03	ns	-0.03	ns	-0.03	ns	-0.02	ns
Individual Risk	<u>0.26</u>	0.000	<u>0.12</u>	0.000	<u>0.20</u>	0.000	<u>0.24</u>	0.000
Life-Style Risk	<u>0.23</u>	0.000	<u>0.07</u>	0.029	<u>0.16</u>	0.000	<u>0.24</u>	0.000
Area & School Risk	0.01	ns	-0.01	ns	0.04	ns	0.03	ns
Area & Family Risk	0.01	ns	-0.06	0.039	0.04	ns	0.00	ns
Area & Individual Risk	0.02	ns	-0.03	ns	0.02	ns	0.03	ns
Area & Life-Style Risk	0.00	ns	-0.03	ns	-0.02	ns	0.00	ns
School & Family Risk	0.01	ns	0.05	ns	-0.03	ns	0.01	ns
School & Individual Risk	0.07	0.033	0.06	ns	0.05	ns	0.05	ns
School & Life-Style Risk	-0.04	ns	-0.04	ns	0.01	ns	0.05	ns
Family & Individual Risk	-0.05	ns	-0.04	ns	0.01	ns	-0.06	ns
Family & Life-Style Risk	0.01	ns	-0.04	ns	-0.03	ns	0.06	ns
Individual & Life-Style	<u>0.24</u>	0.000	<u>0.36</u>	0.000	<u>0.10</u>	0.001	<u>0.15</u>	0.000
Multiple R ² x 100=		39		22		16		33

NOTE Significant coefficients underlined. Interaction terms was calculated by first centring each of the two variables and then multiplying them.

* For a description of each of the included constructs, see Wikström (2002).



and at school. What parents and teachers do, and do not do, can make a real difference. For example, poor parental monitoring and adolescent truancy from school are both strong correlates of offending risk. This raises questions about how to motivate and engage parents and teachers in the fostering, monitoring, and social education of youths, and about kinds of social and economic support needed to achieve this, and for whom. Social and economic support needs to be targeted on those parents (families) and teachers (schools) operating in more disadvantaged contexts. Strategies to influence the day-to-day activities of the family and the school should be the cornerstone of a local crime prevention strategy.

However, it is less likely that strategies for involving parents and teachers will have any major impact on the criminality of *propensity-induced offenders*, adolescents with the highest individual risk characteristics. For this group, it may be a question of addressing more fundamental problems arising from their developmental history (their social heritage) and their current (family and school) social situation. This may involve anything from neuropsychological problems needing treatment, to current situations of substance abuse. It is less likely that situationally oriented crime prevention strategies (such as CCTV, street lighting, or target hardening) will have much impact on this

group's criminality (which is not to say that situational crime prevention is not effective in protecting specific targets).

One may question whether deterrence is an effective strategy to deal with this group's criminality. This group generally reports experiencing the least degree of shame if caught, and perceives the detection risk to be low, and the consequences if caught to be not very serious. They also tend to have personality characteristics, like low self-control, that make them less likely to consider the future consequences of their behaviour. In addition, they may have substance abuse problems that further diminish their ability to consider whether their acts would have any future negative consequences for them. This is not to say that criminal justice measures should not be part of dealing with this group's offending. Some repressive measures may be necessary to manage and control the more serious aspects of this group's offending.

However, to tackle this group's criminality fundamentally, there is much to favour developing early prevention strategies (with a strong focus on family conditions, parenting styles, and the early educational system) to attempt to reduce the number of youths ending up with high individual risk characteristics and a high-risk life-style in adolescence (see Wikström & Torstensson 1999).

For the *life-style dependent adolescent offenders* (those with balanced

risk-protective characteristics who may offend more frequently if living a more risky life-style), it may be another story. Measures to involve parents, for example, in promoting more effective monitoring of leisure activities outside the home, and teachers, for example, in better supervising what goes on in the school during break-times and free lessons (given that a lot of crime takes place in the school environment), and to develop measures against truancy and bullying, may stand a better chance of reducing this group's involvement in crime. This group may be more influenced by levels of formal and informal social control in their neighbourhoods and in non-residential public spaces (like city centres). It is more likely that situational crime prevention measures may influence this group's offending.

Prevention strategies should address the potential role that high frequency offenders might play in the criminality of youths with balanced risk-protective characteristics, since their offending behaviour appears particularly related to peer delinquency. For example, the level of offending by youths with balanced risk-protective characteristics may be strongly influenced by a high risk life-style bringing them into contact with more "experienced" adolescent or older offenders.

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