

Childhood Predictors of Male Criminality: A Prospective Population-Based Follow-up Study From Age 8 to Late Adolescence

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To study childhood predictors for late adolescence criminality. **Method:** The follow-up sample included 2,713 Finnish boys born in 1981. Information about the 8-year-old boys' problem behavior was obtained from parents, teachers, and the children themselves. The follow-up information about criminal offenses was based on the national police register between the years 1998 and 2001 when the subjects were 16 to 20 years old. **Results:** According to the national police register, 22.2% of boys had at least one criminal offense other than a minor traffic violation during the 4-year study period. Living in nonintact family, low parental education level, parent reports of conduct problems, and teacher reports of hyperactivity problems when the child was 8 independently predicted a high level (more than five) of offenses. Living in nonintact family at age 8 predicted all types of criminal offenses. Low parental education level and parent or teacher reports of conduct problems independently predicted violence, property, traffic, and drunk driving offenses. Teacher reports of hyperactivity problems independently predicted all types of criminal offenses except drunk driving. Self-reports of bullying others independently predicted violent offenses. **Conclusions:** Living in a broken home, low parental education level, conduct problems, and hyperactivity in middle childhood predict criminal offenses in late adolescence. Efforts to prevent later criminality already in childhood are emphasized. *J. Am. Acad. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry*, 2006;45(5):578-586.

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Few population-based longitudinal studies have been reported on developmental associations between early childhood emotional and behavioral problems, and adolescent or early adulthood criminality. In the Dunedin Longitudinal Study in New Zealand, undercontrolled temperament (restless, impulsive, with poor attention) at age 3 predicted self-reported delinquency and convictions at ages 18 to 21 (Caspi, 2000). Several studies have shown that conduct problems in childhood predict later delinquency and crime. In the birth cohort study from Christchurch, New Zealand, including about 1,000 children, conduct problems in middle childhood predicted self-reported crime in early adulthood, even after control of confounding factors (Fergusson et al., 2004). In the Seattle Social Development Project, a longitudinal study of about 800 elementary school students from high-crime neighborhoods in Seattle, several

childhood behavioral problems reported by parents, teachers, and children at ages 10 to 11 predicted early adulthood violence (Mason et al., 2004). In the Pittsburgh Youth Study, the strongest childhood correlates for teenage early-onset offenders were physical aggression, oppositional defiant disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), truancy, peer delinquency, and poor parental supervision (Loeber et al., 1991). The strongest predictor for young adult violence was self-reported conduct problems. Farrington et al. (1990) found that ADHD-type problems predicted juvenile offending independently of conduct problems. Other predictors for adolescent delinquency or criminal convictions are low IQ and low school achievement, poor parental supervision, inconsistent discipline, child neglect, harsh or punitive discipline, parental separation and single parenthood, large family size, delinquency among family members, low socioeconomic status, peer rejection, bullying, attending a high delinquency-rate school, and living in a high-crime neighborhood (for reviews, see Farrington, 2004; Rutter et al., 1998; Smith, 1995).

Criminality is a challenging phenomenon to study because it evades scrutiny. The three main methods of collecting data on criminal behavior are self-reports of offending, victim reports, and official police or court statistics. None of these methods give a complete picture of crime. The main problem with the self-report and victim report method is how to reach the research subjects and get them to commit themselves to responding. We chose to use the police register instead of the criminal records because the latter only capture those convicted, whereas the police register covers a larger number of suspected offenders.

The present study investigated the relationship between family factors and childhood emotional and behavioral problems at age 8 and the number of offenses, as well as specific types of offenses in late adolescence. Furthermore, the aim is to compare the relative strength of different informants of children's problems to criminal offenses. Only few studies have examined the assessment of child emotional and behavioral problems collected from different informants as predictors for criminal activity in adolescence and early adulthood. For early intervention purposes, it is valuable to study which informants have the highest predictability for later criminal offenses.

METHOD

Subjects

This investigation is a part of a nationwide "From a Boy to a Man" study, a follow-up study included in the Epidemiological Multicenter Child Psychiatric Study in Finland (Almqvist et al., 1999). The study design and material were described previously in this journal (Sourander et al., 2004, 2005a, b). As described previously, the original study sample was drawn from the total population of Finnish children born during 1981 ($N = 60,007$). The original representative sample consisted of 6,017 children, which was 10% of the basic population. Of the selected 6,017 children, 5,813 (96.6%) took part in the study in 1989. Of the 5,813 children, 2,946 were boys. Because of missing identification numbers, police register information was obtained for 2,713 males (92.1% of the original study group at age 8). When the group of children with no information available at follow-up was compared with the rest of the sample, no significant differences were found in living in intact/nonintact family, parental education level, or being "screen positive" in parent or teacher Rutter total scores at age 8.

Criminal Offenses at Follow-up

Data on the cohort's criminal behavior were gathered through the Finnish National Police Register. This is a nationwide electronic database kept by the administration of the Finnish Police. Access to the register was granted by the Police Department, Ministry of the Interior.

A nationwide police register was created after the reform of county administration in 1997. The register includes all suspected offenders caught by the police. However, mere admonitions are not usually covered by the register. Furthermore, municipal parking fines are not included in the register. The present study is limited to acts registered during the years 1998–2001. Data are removed from the police register according to a certain schedule, pertaining to the limitation of prosecution by lapse of time. Data were collected from the register at two time points (in the beginning of the years 2000 and 2002) to ensure that the information concerning offenses during the years 1998–2001 is complete. Register information of the year 1997 was not included because of missing data. Minor traffic offenses have been excluded from the analysis as trivial. Within the 4-year period, there were 3,052 registered (other than minor traffic) offenses.

According to information obtained from the police register, subjects were classified into four groups: those who had (1) no registered offenses during the 4-year period; (2) one or two offenses; (3) three to five offenses; and (4) more than five offenses, indicating a high level of criminal acts. To study different crime types, criminality was divided into five categories: drug, violent, property, and traffic offenses and drunk driving. In this classification, the subject could belong to more than one offense group. There were 193 registered drug offenses, all of which are included in the data. These refer to various kinds of drug-related activity: producing, importing, exporting, delivering, selling, purchasing, or merely possessing illegal drugs, which are forbidden in Finland. The 193 drug offenses were classified by the police in three specific categories: unlawful use of narcotics (14 cases), narcotics offense (171), and aggravated narcotics offense (8). According to law, drug offenses can be categorized, for example, according to the quality and quantity of the drug. However, on the basis of these classifications made by the police, the exact

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