



## Characteristics of young offenders depending on the type of crime



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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to define a profile of juvenile offenders depending on the type of crime (against property or against persons), according to several socio-demographic variables, and a number of indicators of juvenile risk. Participants were 395 adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 with a criminal record in the juvenile court over a two-year follow-up period. Results showed that in property-related offences the offender is more likely to be male, from an Eastern European country, and with inconsistent parenting. On the other hand, crimes against persons would be committed mostly by girls, Latin American or African juveniles, and with individual factors such as aggressive behaviour, outbursts of anger, poor frustration tolerance, or little concern for others. These results may be useful in designing crime prevention and offender intervention programmes.

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### Características de los menores infractores dependiendo del tipo de delito

#### RESUMEN

El objetivo del presente estudio es determinar la existencia de un perfil diferencial de menores infractores acusados de haber cometido delitos contra la propiedad y contra las personas, según diferentes variables sociodemográficas y diversos indicadores de riesgo juvenil. Los participantes fueron 395 menores entre 14 y 18 años, con expediente judicial en el Juzgado de Menores, en un periodo de seguimiento de dos años. Los resultados indican que en los delitos contra la propiedad es más probable encontrar un menor infractor de género masculino, procedente de los países del Este, con pautas educativas parentales inconsistentes. Por su parte, los delitos contra las personas serían cometidos en mayor proporción por mujeres, de nacionalidad latinoamericana o africana, predominando como principales factores de riesgo la agresividad, ataques de cólera, baja tolerancia hacia la frustración o poca preocupación por los demás. Estos datos pueden ser importantes de cara al diseño de programas de prevención de los delitos e intervención con infractores.

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The study of young offenders has frequently been addressed from the paradigm of the protection and risk factors, without also taking into account more criminogenic aspects such as the type of crime and its relationship with a specific youth profile. Perhaps the principle of non-proportionality between the fact itself and the penalty that is followed in juvenile justice has pushed the variable *type of crime* somewhat into the background. Were this relationship to exist, it could be used to guide the design of intervention programmes that are tailored to meet the needs of youths, since the Spanish Organic Law of Criminal Liability of Minors 5/2000 already includes the principle of flexibility when it comes to adopting and executing the measures seen as the most appropriate under the circumstances of each

particular case. Accordingly, this study analyses the possible relation between the type of crime committed (against persons versus against property) and the different socio-demographic variables and risk factors of the minor.

In this work, the classification of crimes against persons and against property was chosen because it is one of the most widely used in the literature on young offenders. A number of studies have shown that the percentage is higher in the case of crimes against property (Capdevila, Ferrer, & Luque, 2005; Fernández, Bartolomé, Rechea, & Megías, 2009; Garrido, 2009; Iborra, Rodríguez, Serrano, & Martínez, 2011; Núñez, 2012), the most common being robbery, robbery with violence and intimidation, and burglary with forced entry (Bravo, Sierra, & del Valle, 2009; San Juan & Ocariz, 2009). Yet, in recent years there has been an increase in the number of violent crimes and sexual offences (Capdevila et al., 2005; Fernández et al.,

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2009), or violence that takes place in family or school settings (Benavente, 2009).

As regards the age of the young offender, the data indicate that the number of offences increases as minors get older (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2011). This tendency occurs both in offences against persons and against property, with figures rising from 1,075 at the age of 14 to 2,225 at 17 in the case of offences against persons and from 580 to 1,146 in those committed against property (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2011). On analysing the most common course followed by the young offender, that is to say, limited to adolescence with its highpoint at the age of 17, it can be seen that, generally speaking, crimes against property are more common than those against persons (Moffitt, Caspi, Harrington, & Milne, 2002). Nevertheless, no studies have been conducted to analyse particular age groups and their possible relationship with the type of crime.

The variable *gender* of the young offender is a classic result that appears persistently in the literature (Cuervo & Villanueva, 2013; Fernández et al., 2009; Moreira & Mirón, 2013; Ozen, Ece, Remzi, Tiraschi, & Goren, 2005). Males commit a greater number of crimes and offences than females, 26,527 versus 4,534 respectively (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2011), a tendency which remains constant across practically all kinds of crimes. According to these data, the number of offences against persons committed by male minors was 5,274 versus 1,557 committed by females. With regard to crimes against property, males committed 2,879 offences versus 692 in the case of females. In terms of the criminal typology, girls commit a greater number of crimes against persons (Capdevila et al., 2005), while boys are more likely to commit crimes against property (Vigna, 2012). Within crimes against persons, however, those related with family abuse are mostly committed by boys, with figures of 74% versus 26% for girls (Iborra et al., 2011).

Another important variable in the study of young offenders is nationality. According to Capdevila et al. (2005), the number of foreign young offenders has grown exponentially in comparison to the number of Spaniards over the last five years, while also displaying higher rates of recidivism and its occurrence at earlier ages. Several studies (Capdevila et al., 2005; Cuervo & Villanueva, 2013; Iborra et al., 2011) yield percentages of Spanish young offenders ranging between 70% and 80%. The remaining 20–30% would be made up of North African, Romanian, or Latin American youths, depending on the province in which the study is conducted. Capdevila et al. (2005) performed a specific analysis of the most numerous groups of foreign minors in Catalonia, namely those from North Africa, who were found to commit more crimes against persons and more serious crimes. Nevertheless, few studies have analysed this relationship between the type of crime and nationality, and it is therefore an issue still to be determined.

On analysing the relationship between recidivism and type of crime, first it should be noted that the rates of recidivism in the Spanish juvenile penal system stand at between 14% and 40.6% (Acosta, Muñoz de Bustillo, Martín, Aragón, & Betancort, 2012; Bravo et al., 2009; Capdevila et al., 2005; Contreras, Molina, & Cano, 2011; De Armas, García, & Castro, 2008; García-España, García, Benítez, & Pérez, 2011; Graña, Garrido, & González, 2006; San Juan & Ocariz, 2009), which are similar percentages to those found by Jennings (2002) in the United Kingdom or by Cain (1997) in Australia. On matching these rates with the type of offence, crimes against property are found to be the ones with slightly higher rates of recidivism than in the case of crimes against persons (Winner, Lanza-Kaduce, Bishop, & Frazier, 1997), although other studies find no significant differences (Cuervo & Villanueva, 2013; García-España et al., 2011).

The minor's risk factors are also related to the crime. The greater the presence of these factors, the more likely the occurrence of a situation involving juvenile delinquency (Fergusson & Lynskey, 1996; Smith, Thornberry, Rivera, Huizinga, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2000). These juvenile risk factors have been classified for the most part into

two groups: factors of a more individual nature and those related to the different settings surrounding the minor, such as family, school, peers, and so forth. The more individual factors include low empathy and little concern for others, impulsiveness, lack of remorse, non-acceptance of responsibilities, scarce self-control, or sensation-seeking (Aguilar & Godoy, 2013; Bush, Mullis, & Mullis, 2000; Vilariño, Alves, & Mohamed-Mohand, 2013). In contrast, the contextual factors include problematic families, negligent or permissive parenting styles, behavioural problems at school, relationships with delinquent peers, inappropriate use of leisure time, substance abuse, migration experiences, and low family income, among others (Contreras, Molina, & Cano, 2010; Cottle, Lee, & Heilbrun, 2001; Hoeve, Semon, Gerris, van der Laan, & Smeenk, 2011; Kelly, Macy, & Mears, 2005; Ozen et al., 2005). Yet, as far as we know, to date no studies have been conducted that relate these individual and contextual risk factors with the type of crime committed. Only Wikström and Loeber (2000) analysed this relationship using the severity of the offence as their criterion. These authors highlight the low relevance of the socio-economic context of the neighbourhood versus other risk factors in the more serious crimes committed by minors.

Hence, the aim of this work is to determine whether the profile of young offenders charged with committing crimes against property and against persons varies according to different socio-demographic variables (gender, age, nationality) and different indicators of juvenile risk. It is expected that crimes against persons will be committed in a higher proportion by older adolescents, girls, and foreign minors (mainly North African). Individual factors will be more related to crimes against persons. The study addresses the issue by combining data from interviews and court records, together with an objective, standardised instrument: the YLS/CMI Inventory, built on evidence-based practice (Guy, Packer, & Warnken, 2012; Henggeler, 2004). Likewise, it should be noted that this study also draws on a two-year prospective follow-up period with official data on recidivism.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were all minors from a province in the Valencian Region in Spain, who had committed a crime or offence for which they had appeared in the Juvenile Court within the period 2008–2010. The sample included a total 395 minors altogether, 74 of whom were females and 321 males (18.7% and 81.3%), with ages ranging between 14.3 and 19.3 years, the mean age being 16.08. In 203 cases (51.4%) the type of crime committed was against persons and in 192 cases (48.6%) they involved property. In terms of nationality, 303 were Spanish (76%), 36 were from countries in Eastern Europe (9.1%), 31 were Latin Americans (7.8%) and 25 came from African countries (6.3%).

### Instrument

The instrument that was used in the study was the Youth Level of Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI) of Hoge and Andrews (2002), which was translated by Garrido, López, Silva, López, and Molina (2006) as the *Inventario de Gestión e Intervención para Jóvenes* (IGI-J). The purpose of the inventory is to assess the minor's risk of recidivism based on information provided from different sources.

The 42 items, or risk factors, of the inventory are grouped into 8 areas: 1) prior and current offences/adjudications; 2) family circumstances/parenting; 3) education/employment; 4) peer relations; 5) substance abuse; 6) leisure/recreation; 7) personality/behaviour; and 8) attitudes, values, beliefs. The sum of all the items present in the minor provides us with a level of risk of recidivism, both by area and overall.

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