



An Australian Government Initiative



NATIONAL COMMUNITY CRIME PREVENTION PROGRAMME

Young people and crime prevention

Adolescence and early adulthood are times of change when young people face new challenges, growth and increased vulnerability. Young people who offend early are more likely to go on to be adult offenders. Their offending behaviour can also be very visible and be a matter of concern to their families, to local residents, and the wider community. Young people are also vulnerable to being victims of crime, and they may need support to reduce the likelihood of victimisation and increase reporting to police. Crime prevention with and for young people can be an important part of a community safety initiative.

Why target young people?

Adolescence and early adulthood are crucial times in an individual's life. It is when young people face new challenges, learn new skills and coping mechanisms, and lead more independent lives.

During adolescence risk taking behaviour is more common. While many young people exhibit some risk taking behaviour only a minority engage in multiple risk taking behaviour that is persistent.

In their teens young people may experiment with illicit drugs, drink alcohol while underage, or drive vehicles without a licence and before reaching the legal age limit. Young people may also congregate in public places and on public transport and engage in behaviour that is anti-social or a public nuisance.

While such behaviours can be a source of concern to their families and to the local community, it is important to determine the objectives of any community safety initiative and consider whether:

- Is a crime being committed?
- Are the young people or person at risk of victimisation?
- How will the response affect young people and how might they react to the response?

Offending by young people

There is a well documented peak in juvenile offending in mid adolescence (Baker 1998). There is also some evidence that those convicted of offences before the age of 16 are more likely to be convicted as adults than those convicted of a first offence after the age of 16 (Farrington 1996).

More recent Australian research shows that those young people who appear in a children's court before the age of 15 are the most likely to reappear in court regularly (Chen et al. 2005). Those who are male and those who are Indigenous are more likely to appear in an adult court than females or non-Indigenous juvenile offenders. Also, those who appeared in a children's court under 15 years, and those who appeared multiple times in a children's court, were more likely to receive a custodial sentence within the eight year period the study covered.

Australian data shows there has been a decline in juvenile offending particularly amongst those aged between 10 and 17 years (AIC 2007). The recent decrease applies to both boys and girls. However, there has been a slight rise in the proportion of girls amongst juvenile offenders.

Risk factors

Research has found associations between offending and:

- substance use
- early school leaving
- gender (boys are more likely to offend than girls)
- abuse—especially abuse during the transition to high school (Stewart 2006)
- peer influence
- unemployment
- lack of supervision
- individual characteristics (boys with difficult temperaments in childhood were more likely to be serious offenders in adulthood (Moffit et al 2002).

In assessing the needs of communities for interventions to help prevent juvenile offending, local indicators of risk could include:

- high rates of detected youth offending
- a high proportion of young people who leave school before the end of year 12
- a high proportion of unemployed young people
- high levels of substance abuse
- a lack of structured and supervised youth activities

Victims of crime

Although some young people are perpetrators of crime, many young people are also victims of crime. A recent report about the experiences of Australian young people found that a third of study participants had experienced victimisation in the previous 12 months, mainly threats of violence and theft (Smart et al 2005).

A link was found between those reporting antisocial behaviour and victimisation. Two thirds of those reporting antisocial behaviour also reported victimisation in the last 12 months and victimisation was also associated with being violent. However, it was also found that the majority of those who experienced victimisation at the age of 19 to 20 years had not engaged in high levels of antisocial behaviour.

Australian statistics on recorded crime indicate that young people are at the highest risk of becoming victims of assault (AIC 2007). The age group 15 to 24 years has the highest rate of assault, with males the most likely to be victims.

With recorded sexual assault the majority of victims are females. The highest rate of sexual assault that was reported is for girls in the 10 to 14 age group.

References and further reading

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