



OJJDP FACT SHEET

Shay Bilchik, Administrator

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Highlights of Findings From the Rochester Youth Development Study

by Katharine Browning, Ph.D., Terence P. Thornberry, Ph.D., and Pamela K. Porter, M.S.E.

The Rochester Youth Development Study, a longitudinal study of 1,000 urban adolescents, is 1 of 3 coordinated projects supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) since 1986 through its Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency (Causes and Correlates). The Rochester study is investigating the causes and consequences of adolescent delinquency and drug use by following a sample of high-risk urban adolescents from their early teenage years through their early adult years. The findings highlighted in this Fact Sheet are based on those presented in "Taking Stock: An Overview of Findings From the Rochester Youth Development Study" (Thornberry et al., 1998).

Family Influences on Delinquency

The Rochester study examined the quality of parent-child relationships to determine the impact of family process factors (such as attachment, involvement, and supervision) on delinquency. Researchers found that:

- ◆ Attachment and involvement were both significantly related to delinquency. Children who were more attached to and involved with their parents were less involved in delinquency.
- ◆ The relationship between family process factors and delinquency was bidirectional—poor parenting increased the probability of delinquent behavior and delinquent behavior further weakened the relationship between parent and child.
- ◆ The impact of family variables appeared to fade as adolescents became older and more independent from their parents.

School Factors

The study examined the relationship between educational factors and delinquency and drug use and found that:

- ◆ Weak school commitment and poor school performance were associated with increased involvement in delinquency and drug use.

- ◆ School success was associated with resilience. High-risk youth who avoided delinquency and drug use were more attached to school and teachers and had better performance scores than high-risk youth who were involved in delinquency and drug use.
- ◆ Involvement in delinquency reduced commitment to school; involvement in drug use increased the chances of dropping out of school.

Peer Influence on Behavior

The Rochester project also explored the relationships among associating with delinquent peers, holding delinquent beliefs, and engaging in delinquent behavior. Holding delinquent beliefs refers to the youth's assessment of how wrong it is to engage in a variety of delinquent acts. The study found that associating with delinquent peers was strongly and consistently related to delinquency, in part because peers provide positive reinforcements for delinquency. Delinquent beliefs also increased involvement in delinquency. In turn, engaging in delinquent behavior had strong reciprocal effects, increasing associations with delinquent peers and the formation of delinquent beliefs.

Researchers examined the social network characteristics of alcohol and marijuana users and found that, compared with nonusers, users were more socially active and chose their friends from the neighborhood rather than from school. Users reported being closer and more intimate with their friends. However, the friendship networks of users were less stable over time.

Gang Membership and Delinquency

The results of the study demonstrate that there is a strong relationship between gang membership and delinquent behavior, particularly serious and violent delinquency.

- ◆ Although they represented only one-third of the Rochester sample, gang members accounted for 86 percent of serious delinquent acts, 69 percent of violent delinquent acts, and 70 percent of drug sales.

- ◆ Gang members had higher rates of violent offenses when they were active gang members than either before they belonged to the gang or after they left the gang. This suggests that the norms and group dynamics of the gang facilitated delinquent and violent behavior.
- ◆ Gang membership had a strong impact on the incidence of violent behavior, even when other risk factors (such as poverty, prior involvement in violence, and association with delinquent peers) were held constant. This indicates that the high rates of violence by gang members were not simply the result of the accumulation of risk in their backgrounds.

Structural Position

The study found that structural position, such as social class and community of residence, had important effects on delinquency. Children from underclass backgrounds (as indicated by persistent, high-level poverty) were more involved in delinquency, especially serious delinquency. Economic hardship and stressful life events led to a lack of parent-child involvement, attachment, and control over adolescents. In turn, these parenting variables were significantly associated with increased delinquency.

Youth Involvement With Guns

The study examined several aspects of adolescent involvement with guns, including gun ownership and gun carrying. Boys who owned guns for sporting purposes tended to own rifles and long guns and were no more delinquent than boys who did not own guns. Boys who owned guns for “protection” owned pistols, sawed-off rifles, and sawed-off shotguns and were much more likely to engage in a wide array of criminal behaviors. Although a noticeable percentage of adolescent boys carried guns (6–10 percent, depending on age), most illegal gun carrying was transient. Illegal gun carrying was associated with peers who own illegal guns, gang membership (for younger boys), and drug selling.

Consequences of Delinquent Behavior

The Rochester project investigated the adverse developmental consequences of delinquency and drug use. Delinquent behavior

and gang membership in adolescence significantly increased the chances for young men to become teenage fathers. Early substance abuse was related to teen parenthood and premature independent living for females, and to impregnating a girl during adolescence and to dropping out of school for males.

For Further Information

Summaries of the findings of the companion projects in OJJDP’s Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency (the Denver Youth Survey and the Pittsburgh Youth Study), and a report describing the methodology used in all three studies, are being developed.

For additional information about the Rochester Youth Development Study, contact Terence P. Thornberry, Ph.D., School of Criminal Justice, University at Albany, 135 Western Avenue, Albany, NY 12222.

To obtain copies of OJJDP publications, contact the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, 800–638–8736 (phone), 301–519–5212 (fax), puborder@ncjrs.org (e-mail), www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org (Internet).

Reference

Thornberry, T.P., Krohn, M.D., Lizotte, A.J., Smith, C.A., and Porter, P.K. 1998 (November). Taking stock: An overview of findings from the Rochester Youth Development Study. Paper presented at the American Society of Criminology meeting, Washington, DC.

Katharine Browning is the Program Manager for the Rochester Youth Development Study in OJJDP’s Research and Program Development Division. Terence P. Thornberry is the Principal Investigator for the Rochester Youth Development Study. Pamela K. Porter is the Research Coordinator for the Rochester Youth Development Study.

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