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ABSTRACT

This brief pamphlet reports on a study of teenage delinquency outside cities. For seven years, the author followed the careers of all boys who were sophomores in 1964 in 14 high schools in one of Oregon's nonmetropolitan counties to see what patterns of delinquency developed in the group. By correlating his findings with those of a slightly later study of deviance among Philadelphia high school boys, he has conclusively shown that there are remarkable similarities between delinquency in town and cities. Patterns of delinquency included the finding that more than half (56 percent) of the juvenile deliquents continued to commit offenses after leaving high school. A predictor of adult criminal behavior was the timing of juvenile delinquencies, with 73 percent of those boys who committed offenses both before and after the first semester of their sophomore year going on to commit offenses as young adults. The report describes who, among the high school students, became an offender, and when, as well as those characteristics of delinquency within the group. (Author/PC)

Teenage Delinquency in small town America

Research Report-5

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH

The Center for Studies of Crime and Delinquency of the National Institute of Mental Health is interested in making available information gained from its research programs.

Research Report 5 is the fifth in a series of fliers designed to disseminate information to researchers, program administrators, and others who are involved in the fields of crime and delinquency and mental health.

The *Reports* provide brief descriptions of research projects supported by the Center and include the names and addresses of the researchers to help expedite the flow of information between researchers and research-users.

Research Report-5

CENTER FOR STUDIES OF CRIME AND DELINQUENCY

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH

Background

In the days when the United States was primarily a country of farms and small towns, it was generally believed that teenage delinquency was almost entirely confined to cities. Even today many people th[illegible] teenage boys who live outside metropolitan areas get into [illegible]ly less trouble than their city cousins, and that when the[illegible] scrapes are usually minor.

Perhaps surprisingly, studies made in recent years have shown that there is no basis for this common assumption—nonmetropolitan youths have just about as many run-ins with the law as metropolitan youths, and the causes of these confrontations are often of roughly equal seriousness in both towns and cities.

Dr. Kenneth Polk of the University of Oregon is one of the investigators who have studied teenage delinquency outside cities. For 7 years, together with several colleagues, he has followed the careers of all boys who were sophomores in 1964 in 14 high schools in one of his State's nonmetropolitan counties to see what patterns of delinquency developed in the group. By correlating his findings with those of a slightly later study of deviance among Philadelphia high school boys, he has conclusively shown that there are remarkable similarities between teenage delinquency in towns and cities.

For purposes of analysis, the Oregon investigators have divided their group of 1964 sophomores into three age periods. The first was 15 to 18 years, when the boys were still in high school and legally classified as juveniles, and the last two were 18 to 20 years and 21 to 23 years, the periods after they had left high school and during which they were subject to the justice of adult courts if they committed any crimes. Comparisons between the Oregon and Philadelphia youths could be made only to age 18, since Dr. Marvin E. Wolfgang and his fellow researchers in the Eastern city had not yet described the later careers of the youths they were studying when their Oregon colleagues drew up their findings.

Juvenile Delinquency

The most startling discovery in the Oregon study was the unsuspected amount of delinquency among the high school boys when they were 16 to 18 years old.

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"Fully one in four had an official record with the county juvenile department," Dr. Polk reports. "This statistic, even with minor traffic offenses excluded, is still considerably larger than one might have expected for rural and small city populations, and not much less than 35 percent reported for the Philadelphia cohort in which traffic offenses were included." The similarity was even greater when the nonwhite segment of the Philadelphia teenagers was excluded to match the racial characteristics of the two groups more closely: 25 percent of the Oregonians and 29 percent of the Philadelphians had some record of delinquency. Most of the delinquents in both areas committed their first offense at age 16.

Dr. Polk and his coworkers were equally astonished by the amount of recidivism, or repeated delinquencies, they found among the 16- to 18-year-olds they studied. Almost half of the Oregon teenage offenders (45 percent) and only slightly more than half of those in Philadelphia (54 percent) had committed offenses that entangled them with the law more than once.

When attention was focused on teenage recidivists who might be defined as chronic delinquents in that they had been referred to law enforcement agencies on five or more occasions, the differences between the Oregon and Philadelphia groups were somewhat greater. Only 11 percent of the Oregonians were chronic offenders, though they accounted for one third of the official contacts; in Philadelphia, in contrast, 18 percent of the boys were chronic delinquents and represented over half of their group's confrontations with the law.

How serious were the offenses the Oregon delinquents committed? The answer, if a serious offense is defined as a felony and not a misdemeanor, is serious enough. Fifty-six percent of the offenders were charged with committing one or more felonies before their 18th birthday. Because of definition differences in the two studies, no comparisons of delinquency seriousness could be made between the Oregon and Philadelphia teenage groups.

The final finding of interest is to the 16- to 18-year-olds whom Dr. Polk and his associates studied was that only 4 percent of the group were institutionalized as a result of their offenses (72 percent of the offenses charged to the group did not result in juvenile court appearances, which was quite similar to 65 percent in Philadelphia). But every one of the 11 Oregon youths who were institutionalized went on to commit at least one serious adult offense after their release.

Adult Deviance

The nontraffic offense rate among the 1964 Oregon sophomores increased slightly during the 5 years after they left high school. As opposed to the 35 percent of the group who were at one time or another regarded as delinquents while in high school, 28 percent committed one or more offenses between ages 18 and 23. Similarly, almost half of the 18-year-plus offenders (47 percent) were caught more than once, an increase of 2 percentage points over the juvenile recidivism rate.

Two in five of the young adult offenders (41 percent) were charged with a felony, a decline of 15 percentage points from the juvenile serious offense rate. Three-quarters of the group committed their first adult offense during the 3 years before they reached their 21st birthdays. Sixty-eight percent of this three-quarters did not commit a recorded offense during the following 2 years, but the remainder (32 percent) did and were joined by the other 22 percent of the offenders who were charged with their first adult crime while they were 21- or 22-year-olds.

Dr. Polk cautions that no lessons can be derived from these findings for several years more. "At the most recent data collection the cohort members were just 23 years old and not yet out of the period of high offense activity," he says. "Conclusions will only be warranted after the cohort has passed through the deviancy-prone twenties."

Patterns of Delinquency

What patterns formed among the Oregon high school sophomores as they grew older, graduated from high school, and entered young adulthood? Did the delinquent segment go on to commit adult crimes, or did they mend their ways? Did the nonoffenders continue their crimeless lives? The Oregon investigators say they were surprised when they learned the answers to these questions.

The first finding of importance in the study was that more than half (56 percent) of the juvenile delinquents continued to commit offenses after leaving high school. And in contrast to the 72 percent of the offenses charged to delinquent boys that did not end

up in court, 84 percent of those charged to the now young adult offenders did result in court appearances.

Another unexpected finding was the number of youths—one in five—who passed through their deviance-prone middle teens without being charged with an offense, only to be so charged as young adults.

Analysis of the study's results produced more surprises when the researchers looked into the young adults' criminal histories.

"One might have expected a large majority of the adult offenders to have had decidedly deviant adolescent careers, but the data revealed that a bare majority of the young adult offenders (51 percent) had had no recorded delinquencies," Dr. Polk says. "Thus not , have our data called into question the common notion of problematic histories evaporating with the onset of adulthood, but also the common assumption that adult deviance is largely the outgrowth of juvenile misbehavior. Hardly surprising, on the other hand, is the fact that as many as 85 percent of those without adult records were also without juvenile records."

The possible assumption that the adolescent who commits a serious juvenile offense is the one likeliest to become an adult criminal was not borne out by the study's findings. Instead, teenage boys charged with a felony were only slightly more likely than those charged with misdemeanors to commit any adult offense (58 and 51 percent, respectively), and not at major risk of being charged with an adult felony (28 percent).

A better predictor of adult criminal behavior was the timing of juvenile delinquencies. The researchers found that 73 percent of the boys who committed juvenile offenses both before and after the first semester of their sophomore year in high school went on to commit offenses as young adults, but that only 53 percent of those who committed juvenile offenses after their first sophomore semester and 36 percent of those who committed such offenses before that semester later became young adult offenders.

Two age-related patterns impressed Dr. Polk and his associates most forcefully. "First and most generally," he says, "a larger proportion of youth in this cohort have been charged with an adult offense (28 percent) than were charged with a juvenile delinquency (25 percent). This is true despite the considerably more serious implications of the latter for a normal adjustment to the adult world and the fact that our young adult period at present only ex-

tends to age 23. Second, nearly half of those charged with an adult offense were apprehended during the post-21 period when the act could be expected to have the most serious implications for their future and . . . [their offenses occurred] in the span of only 2 years."

Characteristics of Delinquency

Dr. Polk and his colleagues have tried to learn not only who among the high school sophomores became an offender and when but also the characteristics of delinquency in the group.

Constructing a fourfold typology of reformed youths (former delinquents with no adult offenses), "late" reformed youths (juvenile offenders who also committed adult offenses between the ages of 18 and 21 years only), "emergent" adult offenders (young men with no prior juvenile offenses), and "career" offenders (juvenile delinquents who also committed adult offenses at least during the ages of 21 and 22 years), the investigators found that incidence of deviance increased from category to category in the order they are listed.

One noticeable difference among the four categories was in their interest in friendships, or "peer commitment." "The most deviant categories are much more peer-oriented than the least deviant ones, and the major difference holds through time," Dr. Polk says. "Compared to the least deviant and nondeviant types, approximately twice as many of the most deviant spend substantial amounts of time with friends, enjoy 'cruising around to see what is going on,' have friends 'who could get in trouble with the police,' and perceive themselves as troublemakers."

"Again, the most deviant groups reveal a much weaker commitment to family life. They are only half as often married as the less deviant groups, and have consistently preferred to spend an evening with friends in preference to a wife or girl friend."

The amount of schooling and expectations about education also differed from category to category. In general, the greater the subjects' delinquency, the less schooling they had. The most deviant were two or three times more likely to drop out of high school and

skip college or, if they did attend college, they were several times more likely to be interested in vocationally rather than academically oriented education.

Over the 7 years of the study period, youths in the most deviant categories drank, smoked, and experimented with drugs at about twice the rate of youths in the least deviant ones, and the incidence of consumption of these substances roughly doubled for all groups.

Finally, the investigators found differences among the four categories with regard to the most serious adult offense committed. The most deviant category—the career offenders—included almost no one whose most serious offense was relatively insignificant, and about half of the offenses committed by youths in the category were felonies and about one-fifth concerned drug use. The "late" reformers—the least deviant category—committed many more insignificant "most serious" adult offenses and far fewer felonies.

Dr. Polk and his associates welcome inquiries about their research and findings. Requests should be directed to:

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