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Young Offenders: Victims of Family Background?

The rapidly increasing numbers of young men in prison is a topical policy issue. Imprisonment is not only a problem for these young men but also their families and wider society. Successful policies to support the reintegration into families and communities require insights into the background and circumstances of these youths. It is important to understand more about what leads to this outcome as well as the effects that prison may have on the rest of their lives and the lives of their families. This paper addresses the family background and psycho-social health of young male offenders interviewed in 2005 in a British prison.

Most of these young men came from disadvantaged backgrounds and there was a high level of family disruption and dissolution: 82% reported coming from 'bad' neighbourhoods, and only 25% were living with both parents at age 14. Over 4 in ten reported that one or both parents had been to prison, and 45% reported that one or both parents had violent behaviour. There were also factors in their families which might be seen as posing challenges for children as many had a history of parental violence and imprisonment.

It was found that these young men were highly likely to be suffering from adverse psycho-social health. Forty percent of them had a neurotic disorder which compares with only 8% of young men of the same age in a community sample. Experience of family violence or imprisonment was found to be significantly associated with adverse mental health. In addition to this, the young men had higher levels of low self-esteem and feelings of a lack of control over their lives than a comparable general population sample of young men. Fifty-four percent reported that they themselves had violent behaviour, which was significantly associated with violence in older siblings, other relatives and friends. These results indicate the importance of family background factors on behavioural patterns and mental well-being for children. The implications for intervention and support are evident.

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