

Young Offenders: Victims of Family Background?

Cristina Perez
London School of
Hygiene & Tropical
Medicine

Lynda Clarke
London School of
Hygiene & Tropical
Medicine

Renata Forste
Brigham Young
University, U.S.A.



FINAL CONFERENCE of the WELLCHI NETWORK

"How can the well-being of children in a knowledge-based society be ameliorated?"

Convergence and divergence patterns in a European perspective"

Barcelona, Spain Saturday, 10 February 2007

Aims of this Study



1. Examine the extent of violent behaviour reported by a population of young offenders, and its links to family background.
2. Measure their level of psychosocial health, and compare it to a non-imprisoned population.
3. Investigate the association between psychosocial health and family background, as well as other influencing factors.

Results of Previous Studies



- Nearly 90% of young male offenders in a (nationally-representative) UK study were affected by at least one mental disorder (Lader *et al.* 2003)
 - 52% of remand and 42% of sentenced young offenders showed signs of a neurotic disorder
- Mentally distressed young men are very unlikely to seek help (Biddle *et al.* 2004)
 - underlines the importance of a proactive approach

Description of Study



- Cross-sectional survey, fieldwork carried out in autumn, 2005
- Study of 103 young male offenders (aged 18-21) in a British prison
- Randomly selected sample of approximately 1/3 of the population in this institution



Data Collection



Two Broad Explanatory Categories:

1) Personal Factors

- a) **Socio-demographic & Personal characteristics**
 - Age, education
 - Self-perception (leader/follower; influenced by others)
 - Personal disposition (self-esteem; life control)
 - Self-reported violent behaviour
 - Suspension from school
- b) **Prison Factors**
 - Remand or sentenced prisoner
 - Time already served in prison

2) Family Background & Support

- c) **Background**
 - Neighbourhood type during adolescence
 - Living arrangements, age 14
- d) **Social Support**
 - 'Closeness' to family
 - Contacts outside of prison
- e) **Stressful Life Events**
 - Parental violence, prison history
 - Parents divorced

Description of Sample



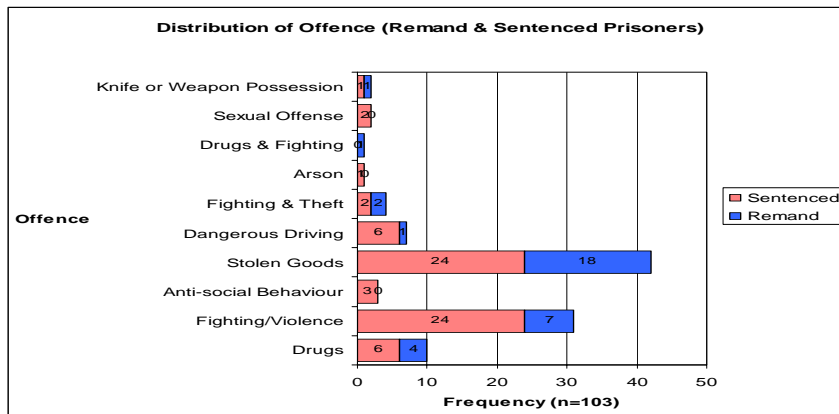
- The sample (n=103) included both sentenced and remanded prisoners:
 - 69 young offenders had been sentenced and 34 were on remand
- Most of the young men came from generally disadvantaged backgrounds:
 - 82% reported growing up in a 'bad' neighbourhood
 - At age 14, only 25% lived with both their biological mother and father
 - Almost half had no educational qualifications



Description (continued)



- Six in 10 of the young offenders had a self-reported drug habit, and just under half had an alcohol habit.
- 65% reported having been suspended from school more than once



Measures of Well-being



1. Self-reported violent behaviour
 - 'Yes' or 'no' question (binary measure)
2. Psychosocial health
 - Measured by the 12-Item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) (binary measure)
3. Self-esteem (continuous measure)*
4. Feeling of control over life (continuous measure)*

* Composite measures, based on a factor analysis of 6 questions drawn from the U.S. National Survey of Adolescent Males (NSAM)



1) Violent Behaviour

Prevalence of Violent behaviour:

- 54% of the young offenders reported violent behaviour
- More than half had been suspended from school for fighting

Multivariate analysis showed that self-reported violent behaviour was predicted by:

- Having an older sibling who is violent (nearly 5 times the odds of violence, $p < .05$)
- Having other violent relatives or friends (4.5 times the odds of violence, $p < .05$)

2) Prevalence of Psychosocial Health Problems



- There was a statistically significantly ($p < .001$) higher prevalence of neurotic disorder in the YOP sample than in the general population.

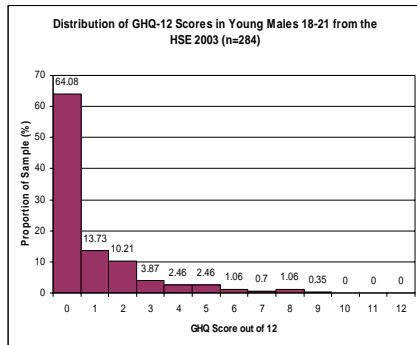
Table 1: Prevalence of psychosocial health problems in young offenders and in the general population.

	Grouped GHQ Score (out of 12)	Young Offenders			General Population Sample
		Remand (%)	Sentenced (%)	All Prisoners (%)	Total Eligible (%)
No Problem	0 to 3	20 (59)	42 (61)	62 (60)	261 (92)
Problem	4+	14 (41)	27 (39)	41 (40)	23 (8)
	Total	34 (100)	69 (100)	103 (100)	284 (100)

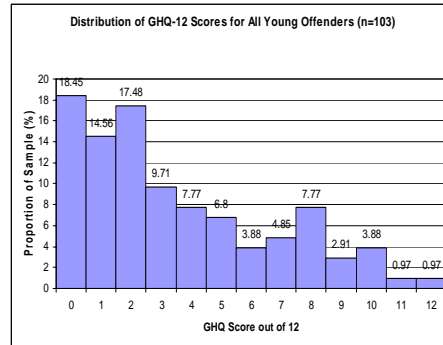
Distribution of GHQ-12 Scores



1) Distribution of GHQ Scores (0-12) in the non-imprisoned population



2) Distribution of GHQ Scores (0-12) the sample of young offenders



Factors Associated with Psychosocial Health Problems



Research Methods:

- Multivariate logistic regression models were formulated to assess the association between probable neurotic disorder (measured by an elevated GHQ-12 score) and:
 1. personal characteristics
 2. prison factors
 3. stressful life events
 4. social support

Factors Associated with Psychosocial Health Problems (Continued)



Results:

- Personal characteristics (*self-perception*) were most significantly associated with neurotic disorder ($p < .05$).
- This was followed by family background (*stressful life events*):
 - The combined effects of *parental prison history* and *parental violence* were significantly associated with neurotic disorder ($p < .05$) – increased odds two-fold, compared to those without a history of parental prison or violence
 - 45% reported a history of parental violence from one or both parents, and 4 in 10 reported that one or both parents had been to prison
- Increasing *time served* in prison was associated with decreasing odds of neurotic disorder ($p < .05$)
- *social support* had little association with mental health status

3) Factors Associated with Low Self-Esteem



Research Methods:

Multivariate linear regression models were tested to assess the relationship between self-esteem and:

1. prison factors
2. personal characteristics
3. social support

Results:

- Increasing *time served* in prison showed a significant $p < .05$, positive correlation with self-esteem.
- Personal factors (GHQ-12 score) were also significantly associated with self-esteem.
 - Lower self-esteem was associated with neurotic disorder, measured by a high GHQ score ($p < .05$)
- *Social support* had no significant effect on self-esteem level

4) Factors Associated with Feeling of Control over Life



Research Methods:

The same methods were used to analyse feeling of control over life as for self-esteem.

Results:

- *Social support* had the greatest influence on feelings of control over life:
 - more support was positively correlated with a greater sense of control ($p < .01$)
- *Age at school leaving* was also significantly related to feelings of control (increasing *age at school leaving* was associated with greater feeling of control over life), followed by prison factors (length of *time served* and *remand* status)

Conclusions



1. Violent family surroundings were an important influence on violent behaviour in young offenders themselves.
 2. Poor psychosocial health was most strongly predicted by self-perception, although the influence of family background (parental violence and prison) was not negligible.
 3. Self-esteem level was most significantly associated with time served in prison and the existence of neurotic disorder (GHQ-12).
 4. Feelings of life control were influenced most by social support and structural factors (age left school; prison-related characteristics).
- Family background is thus an important influence on well-being, but not a simple one:
 - interacts with personal, social, and structural factors differently for each measure

Implications and Recommendations



What do the above results mean?

- Point to a need for support, to help manage violent family surroundings and behaviour from an early stage.
- The increased burden of psychosocial health problems in imprisoned young men indicates a need for the identification and support of vulnerable individuals in this environment.
- The association between social support and feelings of control over life are an interesting finding
 - could help foster prisoner well-being

Thank You for Listening



For further information, contact:

Cristina Perez
cristina.perez@lshtm.ac.uk

or

Lynda Clarke
lynda.clarke@lshtm.ac.uk