



Australian Government
Australian Institute of
Family Studies



Patterns and precursors of adolescent antisocial behaviour

TYPES, RESILIENCY AND ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES
October, 2003



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE SECOND REPORT

from the collaborative partnership between the Australian Institute of Family Studies and
Crime Prevention Victoria, Department of Justice

AUSTRALIAN TEMPERAMENT PROJECT

A study of development from infancy to adulthood



Executive summary

This is the Second Report from the collaborative partnership between the Australian Institute of Family Studies and Crime Prevention Victoria examining the development of antisocial behaviour within a representative sample of Victorian adolescents. The research draws upon data collected as part of the Australian Temperament Project.

This longitudinal community study has followed the development and wellbeing of a group of Victorian children from infancy to young adulthood. The initial sample comprised 2443 infants (aged 4-8 months) and their parents, who were representative of the Victorian population. Thirteen waves of data have been collected, via annual or biennial mail surveys. Parents, teachers and the young people themselves have completed questionnaires at various stages during the project.

The Second Report focuses on four specific issues related to adolescent antisocial behaviour:

- 1) Are the precursors and pathways for violent and non-violent adolescent antisocial behaviour similar or different?
- 2) What factors or characteristics prevent 'at-risk' children from engaging in later adolescent antisocial behaviour?
- 3) Do the characteristics of local areas influence engagement in adolescent antisocial behaviour, and if so, how?
- 4) How common is antisocial behaviour at 19-20 years of age and does the nature and frequency of antisocial acts change over the adolescent years?

A more comprehensive account of the study may be found in the Second Report of the project. Appendices containing details of the statistical analyses conducted are also available. For copies, contact Crime Prevention Victoria or access Crime Prevention Victoria's website: www.crimeprevention.vic.gov.au

Precursors of violent and non-violent adolescent antisocial behaviour

The broad question explored was: to what extent are the pathways and precursors similar for violent and non-violent adolescent antisocial behaviour, and do the risks for each type of behaviour emerge at similar or different ages?

Three groups of 17-18 year old antisocial adolescents were identified:

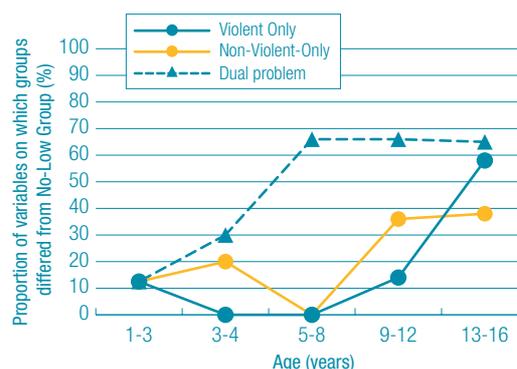
- (i) a primarily violent group ('*Violent-Only*', n = 40, 65 per cent male)
- (ii) a primarily non-violent group ('*Non-Violent-Only*', n = 80, 54 per cent male)
- (iii) a group who engaged in high levels of both types of antisocial behaviour ('*Dual-Problem*', n = 34, 85 per cent male).

These groups were compared to a '*Comparison*' non-antisocial group (n = 1048, 42 per cent male) to: a) identify the age (or stage of development) at which each group began to differ from a 'normal' developmental pathway, and b) to explore the pattern of risks displayed by each group. The *Non-Violent-Only* antisocial group was also compared to the two violent antisocial groups (*Violent-Only*, *Dual Problem*) to further understand how similar or different the risks were for violent and non-violent antisocial behaviour. The most notable findings are:

1 Several developmental pathways were found

The three antisocial groups began to diverge from the 'normal' developmental pathway of the *Comparison* group at different ages (Figure 1). The *Dual Problem* antisocial group was first noticeably different in early childhood, the *Non-Violent-Only* antisocial group was consistently different from mid- to late- childhood, and the *Violent-Only* antisocial group in adolescence. These findings have implications for crime prevention strategies, particularly in deciding upon the optimal times for early intervention and prevention efforts directed at differing types of antisocial behaviour.

Figure 1 Developmental pathways of the three antisocial groups



2 There were specific precursors for violent and non-violent adolescent antisocial behaviour

All three antisocial groups were more problematic than the *Comparison* group on a range of characteristics, although as noted previously, difficulties tended to emerge at different ages in each group. Precursors common to all three antisocial groups were aggression, difficulties in persevering with tasks and activities, school adjustment difficulties, and lower social skills.

Crime prevention strategies aimed at improving these types of skills and attributes have the potential to benefit the majority of young people who engage in antisocial behaviour, regardless of whether they are prone to violent or non-violent behaviour.

There were also some aspects on which the two violent antisocial groups, but not the *Non-Violent-Only* antisocial group, were problematic. Both violent groups (*Violent-Only*, *Dual Problem*) were more attracted to sensation seeking, were more 'reactive' (were more volatile and had difficulties controlling emotions), and experienced more difficulties in interpersonal relationships than the *Non-Violent-Only* group. Furthermore, some precursors were specific to the *Dual Problem* group only, such as a less advantaged family environment, parental perception of the child as 'difficult', and early language delay in one-in-five individuals.

3 *Violent adolescents were a diverse group*

Adolescents involved only in violent antisocial behaviour were rather different from those who engaged in both violent and non-violent antisocial behaviour. Problems among the *Dual Problem* group were evident from early in life while problems among the *Violent-Only* group tended to emerge in adolescence. Many risks were common to both groups, such as aggression, a volatile temperament style, low perseverance, less optimal parenting, and friendships with antisocial youth. However, some specific risks were also found, such as delayed language development, hyperactivity, parent-child relationship difficulties and a less advantaged family environment among the *Dual Problem* group; and anxiety and poor peer relationships among the *Violent-Only* group. It was also noticeable that the frequency of problems among *Dual Problem* group individuals was much greater than among the *Violent-Only* group individuals.

4 *The Dual Problem group was much more problematic than the Violent-Only and Non-Violent-Only antisocial groups*

The *Dual Problem* group was much more problematic than the two single problem antisocial groups, with higher rates of difficulties on a wider range of characteristics and from earlier in life. These findings highlight the importance of providing intervention and assistance for susceptible young people and their families, such as those in the *Dual Problem* group, before problems become entrenched. The most appropriate time for this group appears to be in the pre-school years, as these children tended to display numerous and enduring difficulties from the primary school years onwards.

Resilience from adolescent antisocial behaviour: the role of personal attributes and the family, peer and school environment

While there has been much research into risk factors for, and precursors of, adolescent antisocial behaviour, much less is known about the factors and processes that protect vulnerable young people from engaging in such behaviour. To determine the role of individual, family, school and peer factors in promoting resilience, two groups of children who were 'at-risk' at 11-12 years were compared. Individuals were classed as being 'at-risk' if they possessed three or more individual characteristics identified by the current study and other research as risk factors for persistent adolescent antisocial behaviour, such as aggression, lower social skills, or a difficult temperament style.

The groups were:

- (i) an 'at-risk' group who engaged in little or no subsequent antisocial behaviour (*Resilient*, consisting of a random sample of 100 of the 286 children identified as 'high risk' who were not subsequently antisocial, 60 per cent male),
- (ii) an 'at-risk' group who were persistently antisocial during adolescence, ie engaged in high levels of antisocial behaviour at two or more timepoints (*Antisocial*, n = 78, 72 per cent male).

Both groups were compared to a third, low risk group who comprised the remainder of the sample, to provide a normative comparison (*Comparison*, n = 1108, 48 per cent male).

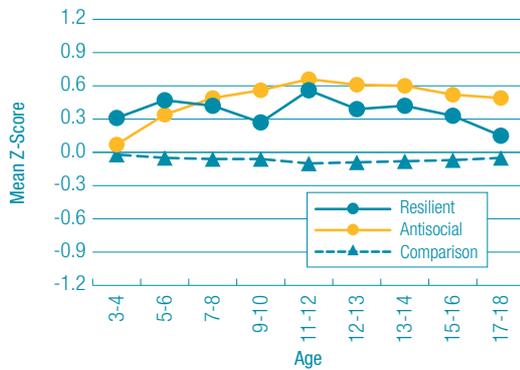
The aim was a) to describe the developmental pathways of these three groups, b) to identify changes in pathways, and c) to determine whether there were personal and/or environmental characteristics that consistently differentiated the *Resilient* from the *Antisocial* group, which may have provided protection from a progression to persistent adolescent antisocial behaviour. The key findings arising from the research are:

1 *Developmental pathways can change over late childhood and early adolescence, so intervention may still be successful at this age*

The 'at-risk' *Resilient* and *Antisocial* groups were similar to each other, and more problematic than the *Comparison* group, on a wide range of characteristics during toddlerhood and childhood. However, there was a marked change in the *Resilient* group over the early adolescent years that continued throughout adolescence. This improvement was so large that by the age of 17-18 years, the *Resilient* group resembled the



Figure 2 Group differences on task orientation/persistence over time



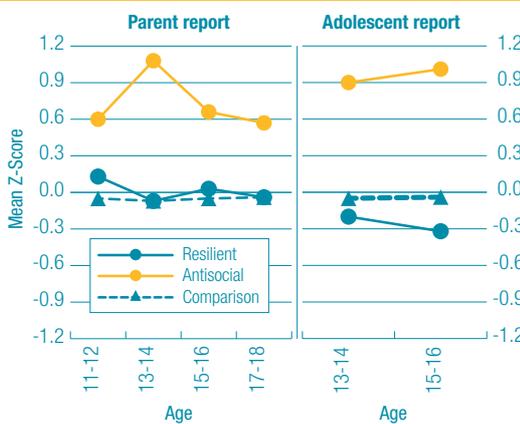
Comparison group on many attributes and characteristics (an example is shown in Figure 2).

This finding has important implications for intervention strategies aimed at preventing adolescent antisocial behaviour as it suggests that individuals who may be at risk for adolescent antisocial behaviour are still amenable to change during late childhood and early adolescence.

2 *The early adolescent years appear to be a crucial transition point in pathways to adolescent antisocial behaviour*

Between the ages of 12-13 and 13-14 years, clear differences between the 'at-risk' *Resilient* and *Antisocial* groups began to emerge. While our study cannot fully explain this trend, it is possible that factors associated with the transition from primary to secondary school, and/or developmental changes associated with the onset of puberty and the progression to adolescence, may have played a substantial role.

Figure 3 Group differences on association with antisocial peers over time



3 *Changes in temperament and their impact*

Temperamental characteristics are sometimes viewed as permanent, and not easily changed. While the two 'at-risk' groups were consistently rated as more volatile and less able to maintain attention on tasks than the *Comparison* group during childhood, there was a significant improvement among the *Resilient* group on these characteristics over adolescence (e.g. Figure 2). The *Resilient* group had also developed better management and control of their emotions by late adolescence. These findings suggest that individuals who display 'difficult' temperamental characteristics during childhood can develop, and can be supported in managing or moderating these traits, so that they do not become 'problem' adolescents.

4 *The potent role of peer relationships in preventing the development of persistent adolescent antisocial behaviour*

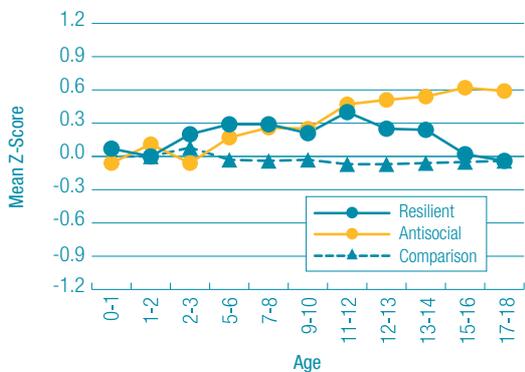
Peer relationships were found to play a very important role. Prior to adolescence, the only characteristic that differentiated the 'at-risk' *Antisocial* group from the 'at-risk' *Resilient* group was their tendency to have formed friendships with peers who engaged in antisocial activities (Figure 3). Since this difference was evident before the group trajectories began to diverge, it is possible that the *Resilient* group's lower involvement with antisocial peers may have protected them from later developing persistent antisocial behaviour.

Some other, less expected, peer-related characteristics were also associated with resilience against antisocial behaviour for 'at risk' adolescents, such as lower peer involvement, less positive peer relationships, and lower assertiveness. It is possible that the more reserved personal style of the *Resilient* group may have impeded and protected them from a progression to more serious and long-term behaviour problems.

5 *The importance of parenting and the family environment*

Parents of 'at-risk' *Resilient* children consistently reported supervising their children's activities to a much higher extent than parents of 'at-risk' *Antisocial* children, and reported an improvement in their relationship with their child over the adolescent years (Figure 4). Furthermore, *Resilient* children were more likely to belong to an 'intact' family unit and their parents reported a more optimal family environment (a higher sense of family unity, lower levels of marital conflict and lower levels of family stress) than parents of *Antisocial* children.

Figure 4 Group differences on parent-child relationship difficulties over time

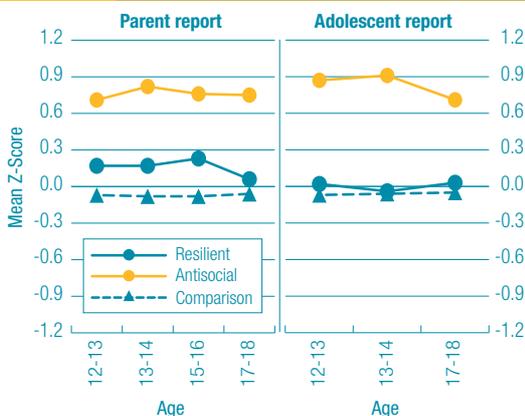


While it is difficult to determine whether these differences (e.g. higher parental supervision, more positive parent-child relationship) contributed to the improvement in the *Resilient* group, or occurred as a result of it, interventions aimed at improving relationships between ‘at-risk’ children and their parents, and assisting parents to develop effective parenting skills, would appear highly worthwhile.

6 *The powerful influence of attachment to school and achievement*

The ‘at-risk’ *Resilient* group experienced fewer school adjustment difficulties than the ‘at-risk’ *Antisocial* group over the secondary school years, and *Resilient* adolescents reported feeling more attached to school, and had more positive attitudes to schooling than those in the *Antisocial* group (Figure 5). These findings highlight the positive role that schools can play in promoting the psychosocial development of young people.

Figure 5 School adjustment/achievement difficulty over the secondary school years



7 *Pathways to adolescent antisocial behaviour are diverse and complex*

Importantly, about three-quarters of children identified as being ‘at-risk’ of developing persistent adolescent antisocial behaviour did not go on to become persistently antisocial. It was also noteworthy that approximately a third of individuals who engaged in persistent antisocial behaviour during adolescence had not been identified as ‘at-risk’ at 11-12 years (to be investigated in the upcoming Third Report).

These findings suggest that there are a number of pathways to adolescent antisocial behaviour, and that a wide range of personal and environmental factors may influence an individual’s progression along particular pathways. More research is needed to further specify the mechanisms and processes which impede or facilitate the development of adolescent antisocial behaviour.

Location effects on adolescent antisocial behaviour

It has been suggested that local area or community characteristics, such as poverty and high unemployment, may directly impact on adolescent antisocial behaviour by motivating an individual to offend. An alternative view is that characteristics such as socio-economic disadvantage may impact on antisocial behaviour more indirectly, for instance, by interfering with parents’ ability to appropriately discipline, supervise or nurture their children. The relationship between locality characteristics and rates of self reported adolescent antisocial behaviour was explored, as was the question of whether such characteristics exerted an impact directly or indirectly.

Location effects were measured in terms of Victorian local government area (LGA) characteristics. The location characteristics included were: unemployment rates, average weekly income, recorded crime rates, growth rates, proportion of lone-parent families, relative socio-economic disadvantage, economic resources, education and occupation, and metropolitan-regional-rural location. The frequency of *Persistent*, *Experimental* and *Low/non* antisocial behaviour among adolescents in disadvantaged, and non-disadvantaged, localities was investigated. The findings from this investigation are:

1 *No direct locality effects were found*

Rates of *Persistent*, *Experimental* and *Low/non* antisocial behaviour were similar among adolescents living in disadvantaged areas (LGAs that were ranked among the most problematic 20 per cent in the state on a characteristic) by comparison with those living in



less disadvantaged areas. A 'total disadvantage index' was developed (the sum of the number of disadvantaged characteristics), and again, self-reported rates of antisocial behaviour were not significantly higher among those from more disadvantaged localities. Rates of adolescent antisocial behaviour were similar across metropolitan, regional or rural locations. Similarly, the frequency of adolescents' contact with the criminal justice system was generally not related to the type of locality in which they lived.

2 *No indirect locality effects were found*

The local area characteristics included in the analyses (socio-economic disadvantage and high recorded crime rates) did not appear to have an indirect effect on antisocial behaviour. That is, living in a disadvantaged or high crime area did not appear to interact with characteristics of the peer and family environment (a non-intact family unit, low levels of parental supervision, or frequent association with antisocial peers) to increase the likelihood that an individual would engage in persistent adolescent antisocial behaviour.

These findings suggest that local area characteristics had little association with self-reported adolescent antisocial behaviour. However, some qualifications are necessary. Even with the relatively large sample used in the analyses ($n = 970$), only a small number of individuals were found to have several of the characteristics investigated (disadvantaged locality, non-intact family, low parental supervision, antisocial peer friendships). Thus a comprehensive investigation of indirect effects was not possible. Additionally, the measure of location used (LGA) may have been too broad to detect area differences. Future research into this issue would appear worthwhile.

Patterns of antisocial behaviour at 19-20 years of age

Research has shown that rates of antisocial behaviour tend to be highest in mid-adolescence and then decline with age. The question of whether antisocial behaviour declined further after the completion of secondary school and the transition to adult life was investigated. Patterns of antisocial behaviour at 19-20 years of age were explored, and compared to the trends found at earlier ages. The key findings are:

1 *Levels of antisocial behaviours at 19-20 years*

As part of the thirteenth data collection wave, at 19-20 years of age, participants were asked about their engagement in antisocial behaviour over the past year (or month for substance use). The most frequent type

of antisocial behaviour, by far, was substance use, such as alcohol consumption (89 per cent had consumed alcohol within the past month), and tobacco and marijuana use (38 per cent and 22 per cent respectively). Few reported using illicit drugs such as heroin or ecstasy (approximately 1 per cent).

Other common antisocial acts were: being drunk in a public place (two-thirds of young people), and avoiding payment for services (38 per cent). Violent and property acts were less common, with the most frequent types being involvement in a physical fight (16 per cent) and damaging property (13 per cent). Just over 20 per cent had been in contact with the police for driving offences during the previous 12 months, but only 5 per cent had been in contact with the police for other types of offences.

Overall, engagement in antisocial behaviour was relatively common, with 46 per cent reporting having committed one or more types of antisocial acts during the previous year. However, most young people were involved in a small number and range of antisocial acts. For most types of behaviour, very few engaged in the behaviour on more than one occasion. Only 15 per cent engaged in high levels of antisocial behaviour (involvement in three or more different types of antisocial behaviour).

2 *Comparison of antisocial behaviour among males and females aged 19-20 years*

Substance use was the most common type of antisocial behaviour across both sexes. Similar proportions of males and females had consumed alcohol, smoked cigarettes and been drunk in a public place. Rates of evading paying for services were also similar among young men and women. There were also several gender differences.

For males, involvement in physical fights was relatively common (one-in-four), while one-in-five reported engaging in property damage. A relatively high proportion of males had been in contact with the police for driving offences (32 per cent), engaged in computer-related antisocial acts (8-13 per cent), buying or selling stolen goods (14 per cent), and shoplifting (12 per cent). Between 5 and 10 per cent reported selling illegal drugs, carrying a weapon, stealing from a house, police contact for non-driving offences, and being charged by police.

For females, a relatively high number reported police contact for driving offences (13 per cent), while rates of physical fights, shoplifting, buying or selling stolen goods, and damaging property were between 6 and 8 per cent.

3 *Across-time patterns of antisocial behaviour from early adolescence to adulthood*

Comparison of the rates of antisocial acts at 19-20 years with rates of antisocial behaviour at earlier time points (13-14, 15-16 and 17-18 years) revealed that the frequency of most property and violent acts continued to decrease from a peak at 15-16 years (see Figure 6). However, engagement in selling illegal drugs, shoplifting and substance use at 19-20 years remained at similar levels to that at 17-18 years of age.

The number engaging in high levels of antisocial behaviour (three or more different types of antisocial behaviour in the previous year) also declined. At 19-20 years, 15 per cent had engaged in 3 or more different antisocial acts, by comparison with 20 per cent at 15-16 and 17-18 years, and 12 per cent at 13-14 years.

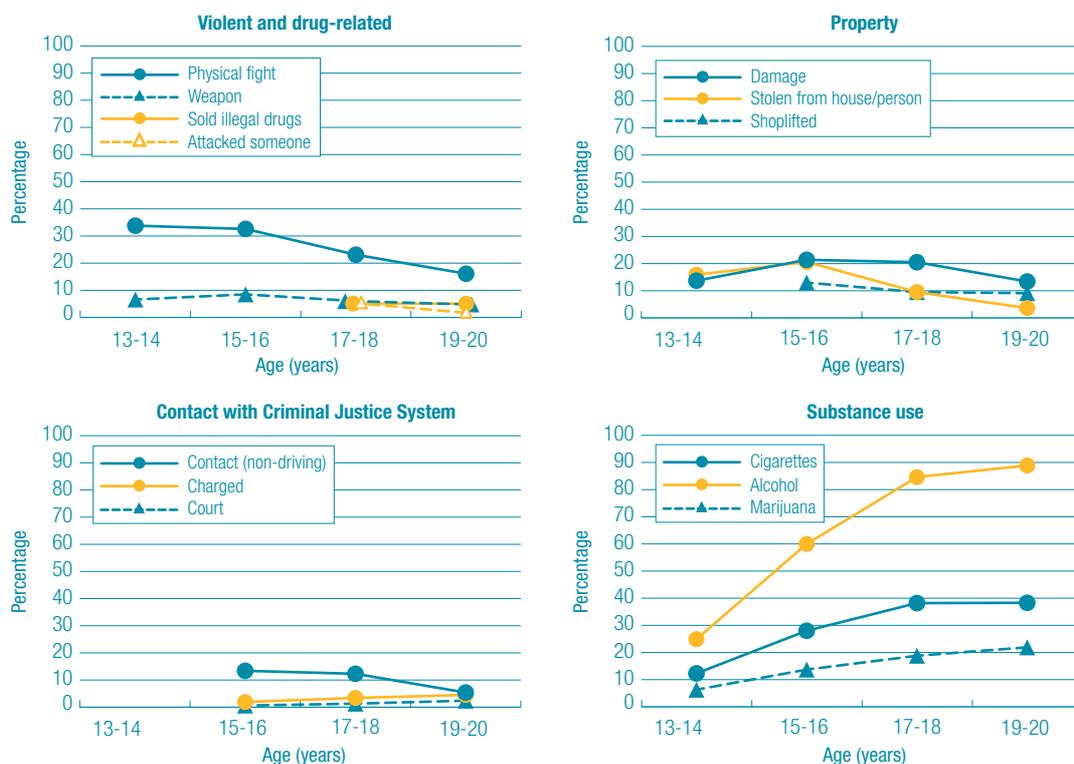
In summary, while almost half the young people had been involved in some antisocial behaviour at 19-20 years, the overall sample's rate of engagement in most types of antisocial acts was very low, and fewer than one in five individuals had frequently engaged in high levels of antisocial behaviour. The across-time trends revealed that rates of most types of antisocial behaviour continued to decline

from a peak at mid-adolescence, although substance use increased steadily until late adolescence and remained constant from that time.

Conclusions

The findings of this Second Report build upon those from the First Report to increase our understanding of the development of antisocial behaviour among a community sample of young Victorians. Distinct developmental pathways and risks for violent and non-violent adolescent antisocial behaviour were identified. A range of personal and environmental factors were shown to influence an individual's progression along particular pathways, and to divert 'at risk' children from a problematic pathway. Effects of local area characteristics on involvement in adolescent antisocial behaviour were not found, but the study's ability to investigate this issue was somewhat limited. In terms of trends across time, rates of most types of antisocial behaviour continued to decline as the young men and women entered adulthood, although some remained relatively high. Overall, the findings of the First and Second Reports provide valuable insights into the development and continuation of adolescent antisocial behaviour, and provide significant Victorian evidence for early intervention and prevention strategies.

Figure 6 Across-time trends in adolescent antisocial behaviour.





For further information about

**“Patterns and precursors of
adolescent antisocial behaviour”**

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ISBN 0-9750413-3-9

