Patterns and precursors of adolescent antisocial behaviour

OUTCOMES AND CONNECTIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE THIRD REPORT

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

This is the third and final report from the partnership between the Australian Institute of Family Studies and Crime Prevention Victoria. The report, entitled *Patterns and precursors of adolescent antisocial behaviour: Outcomes and connections*, further explores adolescent antisocial behaviour and outcomes arising from it. The research draws upon data collected as part of a unique Australian study – the Australian Temperament Project.

The Australian Temperament Project is a large, longitudinal study that has followed the development and adjustment of a community sample of children from infancy to early adulthood. The study began in 1983 with the recruitment of a representative sample of 2,443 infants and their families living in urban and rural areas of Victoria. Approximately 65 per cent of the sample is still participating in the project in 2004.

Thirteen waves of data have been collected over the first 20 years of the children’s lives, using mail surveys. Parents, teachers and the children have reported on the children’s temperament style, behavioural and emotional adjustment, social skills, health, academic progress, relationships with parents and peers, and family structure and demographic profile.

**Themes and methods**

The Third Report (December 2004) focuses on six distinct issues:

- The transition to early adulthood, and the continuation, cessation and commencement of antisocial behaviour.
- Connections between antisocial behaviour and victimisation.
- The role of substance use in the development of adolescent antisocial behaviour.
- The development of persistent adolescent antisocial behaviour: Why do some low risk children become antisocial adolescents?
- Connections between motivations to comply with the law, attitudes, and antisocial behaviour.
- Concordance between official records and self-reports of offending and victimisation.

Many of the findings in the Third Report describe the progress of the three groups identified in the First Report (October 2002) who displayed differing patterns of antisocial behaviour across adolescence. The groups were:

- **Low/Non antisocial group** (N = 844, 41 per cent male). These adolescents consistently exhibited no or low levels of antisocial behaviour from 13-14, 15-16 to 17-18 years.
- **Experimental antisocial group** (N = 88, 43 per cent male). These adolescents exhibited high levels of antisocial behaviour at only one point in time during early-to-mid adolescence and then desisted.
- **Persistent antisocial group** (N = 131, 65 per cent male). These adolescents reported high levels of antisocial behaviour at two or more time points from 13 to 18 years, including the time point of 17-18 years.

The findings concerning victimisation and motivations to comply with the law compared two newly identified groups who displayed distinct patterns of antisocial behaviour at 19-20 years of age. These groups were:

- **Highly antisocial group** (N = 177, 67 per cent male). These adolescents had engaged in three or more different types of antisocial acts in the past 12 months.
- **Low/Non antisocial group** (N = 963, 45 per cent male). These adolescents had engaged in fewer than three different types of antisocial acts in the past 12 months at this age.

This Executive Summary highlights some of the most important findings emerging from the Third Report. A more detailed account can be obtained from the full report. For copies, contact the Australian Institute of Family Studies or Crime Prevention Victoria (contact information and websites are listed on the back page of this summary).

**Transitions to early adulthood and stability and change in antisocial behaviour**

While population trends show that rates of antisocial behaviour tend to decrease from adolescence to early adulthood, less is known about individual trends. To what extent do young people who consistently engage in antisocial behaviour during adolescence continue their involvement in antisocial behaviour in adulthood? Do individuals who display particular
types of adolescent antisocial behaviour differ in their later opportunities, experiences and wellbeing? Is there a late onset pathway to antisocial behaviour that commences in early adulthood? These questions were investigated.

**Did persistently antisocial adolescents maintain this behaviour in early adulthood?**

The majority of individuals who had engaged in persistent antisocial behaviour during adolescence continued to display antisocial behaviour at 19-20 years (55 per cent). The considerable minority who did not maintain high levels of such behaviour (45 per cent) often reported some continuing lower frequency involvement. It did not seem that this decreasing involvement in antisocial behaviour was associated with any particular life experiences or circumstances, individual characteristics or interpersonal relationships.

**Could a late-onset group be identified?**

A small late onset antisocial group was found (N = 68, 69 per cent male) who had not engaged in high levels of antisocial behaviour during early or mid adolescence, but began to display this type of behaviour for the first time in late adolescence or early adulthood. This late onset antisocial group was compared to three groups to explore the factors that might have contributed to the onset of antisocial behaviour in early adulthood: the low/non antisocial group who never displayed high levels of adolescent antisocial behaviour; the persistent antisocial group; and the experimental antisocial group who engaged in antisocial behaviour in early adolescence and then desisted.

**Did groups with distinct profiles of antisocial behaviour differ in early adulthood?**

Comparisons of the progress of these four groups revealed that the experimental antisocial group closely resembled the low/non antisocial group at 19-20 years, and both groups appeared to be faring well. The late onset antisocial group did not appear to experience a more difficult transition to adult life in terms of their participation in work and study, but more frequently experienced interpersonal and adjustment difficulties. The persistent antisocial group was less likely to have completed secondary schooling and to be undertaking further study by comparison with the other three groups. This group also more frequently displayed long-standing adjustment and interpersonal relationship difficulties, highlighting the long-term impact of persistent adolescent antisocial behaviour and the desirability of prevention and early intervention efforts to avert its development.

**Connections between antisocial behaviour and victimisation**

As well as being responsible for more offences than older individuals, young people also experience high rates of victimisation, and there may be links between engagement in antisocial behaviour and the experience of victimisation. Factors implicated in the occurrence of victimisation are thought to include lifestyle characteristics and activities, and interpersonal characteristics.

**How many young people experienced victimisation?**

Approximately one-third of the 19-20 year olds surveyed had experienced victimisation during the previous 12 months. Young men had more often been victims of crime than young women. The most frequent types of incidents reported were threats of violence, followed by theft from a motor vehicle, other theft, and violence.

**Were antisocial behaviour and victimisation connected?**

Two-thirds of those who engaged in high levels of antisocial behaviour at 19-20 years had experienced victimisation. Furthermore, those who engaged in violent antisocial behaviour were also very likely to experience violent victimisation. However, looking at the total group of young people who experienced victimisation, the majority had not displayed high levels of antisocial behaviour at 19-20 years. The relationship between antisocial behaviour and victimisation is shown in Figure 1.
What factors were associated with victimisation?
Lifestyle factors and specific social contexts appeared to increase the risk of victimisation. Thus highly antisocial young people who experienced victimisation were more likely to have friendships with other antisocial youth, engage in binge drinking, and/or were less likely to be involved in a romantic relationship than highly antisocial youth who had not been a victim of crime. Low/non antisocial youth who experienced victimisation tended to have a poorer quality relationship with parents, and/or use marijuana more often than low/non antisocial youth who had not experienced victimisation. These findings help to identify lifestyle factors and social contexts that may increase the risk of victimisation.

Was victimisation reported to police, and what were the reasons for not reporting?
About half the victimisation incidents had been reported to police. The main reasons for not reporting such incidents were their perceived lack of importance, negative attitudes towards the police, or a belief that the incidents were private matters. The implications for crime prevention were highlighted by these findings and suggested that a focus on victimisation could have dual benefits in reducing both antisocial behaviour and victimisation.

Connections between adolescent substance use and antisocial behaviour
Adolescent substance use is associated with a wide range of difficulties in personal and social functioning, such as decreased educational attainment and mental health problems. It is also strongly associated with engagement in antisocial behaviour in adolescence as well as later in adulthood. The overlap between antisocial behaviour and substance use was investigated, as were the role of substance use in the development of antisocial behaviour, and the influence of substance using and/or antisocial peers.

Did substance use and antisocial behaviour co-occur?
Strong links between adolescent substance use and antisocial behaviour were revealed. There was a considerable overlap between the occurrence of antisocial behaviour and substance use at the same point in time. In addition, individuals who engaged in persistent antisocial behaviour from early to late adolescence had the highest rates of all types of substance use, followed by those who engaged in experimental antisocial behaviour, while adolescents who did not engage in antisocial behaviour had the lowest rates of substance use (see Figure 2 for an example).

Was early substance use a risk for later antisocial behaviour?
Investigation of across-time pathways between substance use and antisocial behaviour revealed strong bi-directional pathways between these two types of behaviours. However, the pathway from early substance use to later antisocial behaviour was quite uncommon, while the pathway from early antisocial behaviour to later substance use was almost four times more common. Peers’ levels of involvement in antisocial behaviour and/or substance use were closely linked to adolescents’ own engagement in such behaviours.

This powerful association between antisocial behaviour and substance use highlights the fact that antisocial adolescents frequently experience a wide range of difficulties, underlining the need for broad-based intervention programs that assist these young people in a number of areas of their lives.
Why do some low risk children become antisocial adolescents?

The Second Report (October 2003) showed that while most persistently antisocial adolescents had a history of childhood problematic behaviour (the high risk persistently antisocial sub-group, N = 89, 72 per cent male), a small low risk persistently antisocial sub-group (N = 42, 57 per cent male) had relatively problem-free childhoods and first began to display difficulties during early adolescence. The low risk sub-group’s progression to persistent adolescent antisocial behaviour was unexpected, and could not have been predicted from their earlier development. Their across-time pathways, and the factors that may have contributed to a change in pathways, were investigated. These individuals were also followed into early adulthood to investigate whether antisocial behaviour persisted or ceased, and their subsequent adjustment and wellbeing.

When and how did the low risk and high risk persistently antisocial sub-groups differ from the low/non antisocial group?

The first differences between the low risk persistently antisocial sub-group and the low/non antisocial group emerged during early adolescence, at 12-13 years (Year 7 for the great majority). Differences became more widespread during adolescence and peaked at 15-16 years of age (see Figure 3), although numerous differences were still evident at 19-20 years. During the early secondary school years, the low risk antisocial sub-group was notably more involved with antisocial peers and less attached to school than the low/non antisocial group. They also began to display more difficult traits and behaviour as well as lower social skills.

By mid adolescence there were more extensive differences between these two groups. As the low risk antisocial sub-group became more differentiated from the low/non antisocial group, it became increasingly similar to the high risk persistently antisocial sub-group. However, generally the high risk antisocial sub-group displayed more severe and diverse difficulties than the low risk antisocial sub-group, and thus appeared to be faring worse at this age.

Were there differences in early adulthood?

The majority of individuals from both antisocial sub-groups (low risk and high risk) continued to engage in high levels of antisocial behaviour in early adulthood (19-20 years). The differences between the low risk antisocial and low/non antisocial sub-groups found in adolescence were again evident in early adulthood. Thus, the low risk antisocial sub-group more frequently engaged in problematic and risk-taking behaviours such as substance use and risky driving. Fewer had undertaken further education. They were more often involved in friendships with antisocial peers.

The low risk antisocial sub-group continued to be very similar to the high risk antisocial sub-group on these characteristics, but otherwise displayed a more limited, and generally less severe, range of difficulties in early adulthood. Overall, there were similar rates of antisocial behaviour in early adulthood among individuals progressing along these differing pathways to persistent adolescent antisocial behaviour, regardless of the age of onset.

Motivations to comply with the law, attitudes, and antisocial behaviour

Connections between motivations to comply with the law, attitudes toward police and the courts, and engagement in antisocial behaviour were explored. Two types of motivations were investigated: the perceived risk of apprehension if an offence is committed; and a sense of community
attachment or civic mindedness. The attitudes towards police and courts of those who did, or did not, engage in antisocial behaviour were also examined.

**Perceptions of the risk of apprehension and civic mindedness?**

Perceptions of the risk of apprehension were found to be inversely related to involvement in antisocial behaviour at 19-20 years of age. Only one of the three aspects of civic mindedness, trust in organisations, differentiated between highly antisocial and low/non antisocial young adults. Overall, perceptions of the risk of apprehension appeared to be more strongly related to engagement in antisocial behaviour than civic mindedness.

**Did highly antisocial and low/non antisocial individuals differ on attitudes towards the police and courts?**

In general, most young adults held positive attitudes toward the police and courts. Across a range of aspects, an average 63 per cent of young people indicated that they had some or a great deal of confidence in the effectiveness of these agencies. Most low/non antisocial young people who had reported a victimisation incident to police expressed positive attitudes toward police and the courts, perhaps reflecting satisfaction with the way these agencies had responded to their needs. However, those who were highly antisocial and/or had contact with police and courts for offending, were less positive in their attitudes towards the police and courts. Reasons for the lower confidence of these individuals were discussed, as were approaches for inhibiting the development of such attitudes (for example, through police school visiting programs, and community and mentoring programs).

**Official records and self-reports of offending and victimisation**

The similarities and differences between self-reports of offending and the official records maintained by police were investigated. Official records and self-reports were compared on criminal acts, contact with police and courts for offending, and contact with police regarding victimisation. The similarities and differences in the profiles of individuals identified by official records and self reports were also explored.

The analyses were restricted to the individuals who gave permission for access to official records (74 per cent). There were no differences between those who consented and those who did not on family socio-economic background and community/local area characteristics. However, those who consented had less often engaged in antisocial behaviour and were more likely to be females than those who did not consent. However, a considerable number who did consent had engaged in antisocial behaviour and/or self-reported contact with police or courts for offending.

**Did individuals with an official record also self-report the behaviour or incident?**

The great majority of individuals who had an official record for offending also reported that they had engaged in the behaviour in question. Additionally, official records concerning victimisation incidents were matched quite closely by self-reports, with almost four-fifths of individuals with an official record for such an incident reporting that they had contacted police regarding the incident. These findings suggest that self-reports tend to be relatively accurate and reliable.

**How often were self-reports recorded in official reports?**

Only a minority of those who self-reported offending were found to have an official record. Among the reasons why self-reported offending may not have been recorded are: an offence may not have taken place; it may not have been detected; there may have been insufficient evidence for further action; or, it may have been dealt with unofficially. These findings are consistent with other research on this issue. Several explanations for the findings were offered. Agreement between self-reports and official records was also relatively low for victimisation incidents.

**How similar were the profiles of offenders identified by official records and self-reports?**

The socio-demographic profiles of the group of offenders identified by official records and the group of persistently antisocial adolescents identified by self-reports were compared and found to be similar. There were no significant differences on any aspect, including gender ratio, family socio-economic background, residence in a metropolitan, regional or rural location, and characteristics of the local area in which these young people lived (for example, unemployment rates, economic
resources, crime rates). Thus, there was no evidence that the profile of offenders identified by official records was unrepresentative or atypical.

**Implications**

Reflecting on the findings from all three reports from this collaborative project, several important implications were highlighted. It should be noted that while occasional, limited engagement in antisocial behaviour was found to be relatively common, only a minority of young people (never more than 20 per cent) were involved in high levels of antisocial behaviour at the separate time points, or persistent antisocial behaviour across time points. Nevertheless, the social and psychological costs of antisocial behaviour to the individual, his/her family, community and society can be extensive, and the benefits of curtailing antisocial behaviour are also significant.

**The diversity of pathways to antisocial behaviour**

A number of distinct pathways to antisocial behaviour commencing in early childhood, early adolescence and early adulthood were revealed. There appeared to be few differences in the later outcomes of individuals traversing these separate pathways, regardless of the age of onset.

However, somewhat differing clusters of risk factors were identified for the alternate pathways. The pathway commencing in early childhood was the most common. Fewer individuals followed the pathways that began in early adolescence and early adulthood.

Considerable capacity for a change in pathways both in childhood and adolescence was demonstrated. Several important transition points were identified that coincided with periods when major life changes were occurring. Key transition points at the entry to primary and secondary schooling may provide particularly promising opportunities for interventions, when individuals are especially amenable to change.

**The co-occurrence of problem behaviours**

Antisocial behaviour frequently co-occurred with other types of problem behaviours – for example, substance use. One likely consequence of the overlap in problem behaviours is that strategies aimed at preventing the development of one type of problem behaviour may have a wide impact, preventing or ameliorating the development of other problem behaviours.

However, there was considerable variability among young people who engaged in antisocial behaviour and not all highly antisocial young people displayed multiple problem behaviours. Differing intervention strategies may be needed to cater for multi-problem, and single-problem, youth.

**Intervention implications**

The findings are a reminder that to be “high risk” merely increases the likelihood but not the inevitability of a problematic outcome. Similarly, to be “low risk” decreases the likelihood of an adverse outcome, but is not a guarantee of a positive one.

The environmental contexts in which children’s development takes place, especially the family, peer and school contexts, were found to be powerful influences on whether antisocial behaviour develops. For some children, these environments appeared to provide a buffering or protective influence which assisted them to move onto more positive developmental pathways. For others, less optimal environmental influences may have been influential in diverting them from a positive pathway.

Consequently, a mix of community-based and school-based initiatives, together with more individualised approaches, are likely to provide the most effective means of preventing or reducing the development of antisocial behaviour.

**Conclusions**

This Third Report concludes the very productive collaboration between the Australian Institute of Family Studies and Crime Prevention Victoria. The findings contained in these three reports, which offer data from a unique study of Victorian children and families, provide an extensive analysis of the patterns and precursors of adolescent antisocial behaviour. Taken together, they can significantly contribute to the evidence base and guide policy making and practical interventions aimed at preventing the development of antisocial behaviour in young Australians.
For further information about
“Patterns and precursors of adolescent antisocial behaviour”

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ISBN 0 642 39518 7