

Longitudinal analysis of the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey 2003–06

By Jon Hales, Camilla Nevill, Steve Pudney and Sarah Tipping

Key implications

- This report presents longitudinal analysis of self reported data on offending, drug use and anti-social behaviour amongst young people (initially aged 10 to 25) from the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey, which was carried out annually between 2003 and 2006.
- The analysis identifies a small group of young people described here as ‘prolific offenders’, who accounted for a disproportionate number of offences, including serious offences. This group should be a key target for policy intervention on youth crime. Youth crime policy needs to engage with this group at an early stage as the analysis shows that this group starts to offend earlier compared with others.
- Looking at the transitions that young people make into and out of offending behaviour, the analysis suggests that anti-social behaviour can be a precursor to offending for some young people. In some cases, early intervention that targets young people involved in anti-social behaviour may help to reduce the likelihood of offending later on.
- In order to intervene effectively at an early stage to prevent offending, awareness of risk factors is important to target interventions at those most likely to go on to offend. The analysis reported here highlights family, peer group and school factors as important influences on the behaviour trajectories of young people during their teenage years.
- Current youth crime policy, as set out in the Youth Crime Action Plan, already contains an emphasis on early intervention with families through programmes such as Family Intervention Projects. In addition, young people excluded from school are already likely to be involved in assessments of their needs.
- Further consideration could be given to enhancing schools’ disciplinary policies, given this report’s finding that weak school discipline is related to an increased likelihood of offending and drug use.
- The significance of peer groups, whether siblings or friends, as an influence supports previous findings emphasising co-offending as a feature of youth crime and raises the question of whether it would be possible to intervene to disrupt the spread of offending between peers.
- Further research and analysis on factors related to desistance is required to support policies to reduce re-offending among existing offenders.

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Keywords

Young people
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The Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS) was a self-report offending survey carried out annually between 2003 and 2006. Self-report offending surveys include coverage of incidents that did not come to the attention of the police or other agencies of the criminal justice system. The interviews also covered anti-social behaviour (ASB) and use of drugs.

This longitudinal analysis of the OCJS aims to describe the levels of change in offending behaviour, ASB and drug use within individuals. Although the first wave of the OCJS had a representative sample of those aged 10 to 65 living in private households in England and Wales, the longitudinal study focused on those aged 10 to 25, who were interviewed up to four times.

Prevalence of offending

These analyses build on a series of annual reports that have looked at each year's data in turn. The 2006 report (Roe and Ashe, 2008) showed that around 22 per cent of those aged 10 to 25 admitted committing one or more offences in the previous 12 months. Over a period of four years, more than twice as many sample members (49%) had committed at least one offence.

The percentage of sample members who committed offences each year was linked to their age. The likelihood of offending generally increased during the early teens, reaching a peak between the ages of 14 and 16 before declining. The decline could be sharp or more gradual depending on the behaviour. The four types of anti-social behaviour covered in the OCJS showed two quite distinct patterns: while graffiti and noisy and rude behaviour had an early peak and declined sharply in prevalence, nuisance

to neighbours and racist abuse were more persistent into later ages.

Over a period of four years, the very numerous sample members (82% of 10- to 25-year-olds) with a low propensity to offend accounted for around one-third (36%) of all offences. This is about the same proportion of all offending as that admitted by the small group (4% of 10- to 25-year-olds) described here as 'prolific offenders'¹ who committed a disproportionately large amount of offences (responsible for 32% of all offences).

Onset of offending

Onset of delinquent behaviour occurs at a relatively young age, often before the age at which such behaviour peaks in the population as a whole. For example, for theft from school the onset risk was highest from ages 13 to 15, after which it fell sharply but the peak of offending of this type occurred at age 15. On the whole, policies to divert young people from offending need to engage with people who are several years younger than those at the age when they are most likely to commit offences.

A key point about the group of 'prolific offenders' mentioned above is that they had a relatively younger age of onset of offending compared to other groups. This group of 'prolific offenders' is the target of policy measures aiming to ensure that 'early intervention' occurs with the young people who have the highest propensity to commit offences.

¹ The OCJS sample is likely to exclude the most serious or prolific offenders in the population, although this is unlikely to have a significant impact on overall offending or drug use estimates.

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The shape of the trend of increasing *onset risk* varies for different behaviours, such as the use of different types of drug. For example, risk of first-time use of cocaine, ecstasy and LSD peaked at age 19 while risk of first-time cannabis consumption peaked at age 16.

Changes in offending rates over time

The wide range of ages in the OCJS sample has been used to group together the sample members who were born over a period of several years into separate birth cohorts. Those at a particular age in Waves 1 or 2 of the OCJS (in 2003 and 2004) are compared with those who reached that age in Waves 3 or 4 (in 2005 and 2006). If the estimates of offending differ between the cohorts, this may show that there has been a change in the aggregate level of this type of crime.

For a number of types of crime, the OCJS suggests a decrease in levels of offending. For example, there was a reduction in the rate of committing deliberate damage to property apparent when comparing members of the sample born between 1992 and 1996 and those born between 1989 and 1991 when they each reached the ages of 12 or 13.

In the case of drug use, there was evidence that younger-age cohorts were less likely to use cannabis. On the other hand, cocaine showed no sign of a shift in the relationship between birth cohorts in the likelihood of usage. This reflects other cross-sectional survey evidence on trends in drug use.

Transitions

One of the analyses looked at short-term changes between one year and the next. The likelihood of such changes occurring was different for different groups of sample members. For example, those who did not offend, commit ASB or use drugs in one year were highly likely (78%) to remain in this category in the next year. At the other end of the scale, the 'drug-using offenders' in one year were very likely to continue offending and use of drugs (51%). About a quarter of those who committed ASB or used drugs in the initial year went on to offend (26% and 25% respectively).

Multivariate analysis

Questions were included in the OCJS that reflected previous research on the factors associated with criminality. This information was analysed to identify a series of 'risk factors' correlated with starting to behave in harmful ways and with pathways towards offending and drug use. A multivariate analysis allows the influence of each factor to be assessed independently of the others. Three separate analyses of risk factors are described in the report; however, the findings were consistent and are summarised together.

Among the findings were the following key points.

- Younger sample members were less likely to be offenders, but this reflected a shorter time 'at risk'.
- Female sample members were significantly less likely to have been offenders than males.
- Social class, ethnic group and religious participation were not significantly associated with increased or reduced likelihood of offending, ASB and drug use.

Family, peer group and school factors were found to be very important influences on the pathways of young people (but these data related only to sample members aged up to 16).

- Having a friend or sibling who had been in trouble with the police increased the likelihood of an offending or drug-use trajectory. This reflects previous evidence of the importance of co-offending among young people.
- Living in a family headed by a single parent reduced the likelihood of a non-offending or drug-free trajectory. Living with a parent with a new partner reduced this likelihood even further.
- Both liberal and authoritarian styles of parenting were associated with an increased likelihood of a non-offending or drug-free trajectory among young people, suggesting the key factor was probably consistency of parental influence.
- Finally, young people were asked about violence towards teachers, truanting and standards of behaviour at their school. Decreasing levels of school discipline increased the likelihood of an offending or drug-use trajectory.