



Strategic offences among youth in the 2010s

and factors of significance for desistance from crime

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English summary of Brå report 2021:5

Summary

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) has once again been instructed by the government to study so-called strategic offences – i.e. the offence types in a debut conviction that best predict continued high-frequency offending. Brå has conducted similar studies on two previous occasions (Brå 2000, Brå 2011). The government has also instructed Brå to present a summary of the existing research concerning factors that improve the opportunities for individuals to desist from a criminal career, with a special focus on young people.

Register study of convictions among 15-17-year olds

In order to study strategic offences, Brå has examined register data for all 15-17-year olds who were convicted for the first time during the period 2010-2014. These youths have been followed up in Brå's convictions register until 2019. The analysis shows that a total of just over 37,000 youths had been convicted for the first time between 2010 and 2014 (29 percent were female, 71 percent male). Among the males, 6 percent had been convicted nine times or more during the follow-up period. These are referred to as high-frequency offenders.

Only 62 of the females (0.6 per cent) had been convicted nine times or more during the follow-up period, and for this reason the threshold for females to be defined as high-frequency offenders was lowered to four or more convictions. A total of 7 percent of the girls had been convicted at least four times during the follow-up period. For both females and males, the proportion of high-frequency offenders was greater the younger they were at the time of their debut conviction. A separate analysis also showed that having a large number of convictions during the follow-up period was most common among youths who lived in so-called socially vulnerable areas¹.

The most strategic offences are robbery among males and violence or threats against a public servant among females

The previous studies conducted by Brå have shown that the types of offences that may be regarded as strategic change over time. The current study shows that the most strategic offences among males during the 2010s were robbery, gross theft, and violence or threats against a public servant. Of the males with a debut conviction for robbery or gross theft, 18 percent were convicted nine times or more during the follow-up period; the corresponding figure for

¹ The term socially vulnerable areas refers to areas that have been designated by the Swedish Police as having low socio-economic status in combination with criminals having an impact on the local community.

violence or threats against a public servant was 17 per cent. This can be compared with the misuse of documents and drink-driving, where 1 per cent and 2 percent respectively of the males with debut convictions for these offences were convicted nine times or more during the follow-up period.

Among the females, violence or threats against a public servant and drug offences were the most strategic offences in the 2010s. Of those with a debut conviction for such offences, 21 and 17 percent respectively were convicted four times or more during the follow-up period. Among females, too, the misuse of documents (1 per cent) and drink-driving (2 per cent) were the debut offences associated with the lowest risk of being convicted four times or more during the follow-up period.

In socially vulnerable areas, robbery was even more clearly a strategic offence. Of the youths living in such areas with a debut conviction for robbery, 22 percent were convicted nine times or more during the follow-up period; the corresponding proportion for the rest of the country was 15 percent.²

High-frequency offenders are often drug users

A separate analysis has been conducted of the offending among high-frequency offenders during the follow-up period. This shows that almost all of the high-frequency male offenders had been convicted for minor drug offences, and almost half for driving while under the influence of drugs. Among the females, too, the majority had been convicted for minor drug offences. In other words, it is clear that many high-frequency offenders are drug users.

Besides drug offences, various types of thefts and violent crime were also common. Although serious offences do feature, less serious thefts and violent crimes were most common. Various road traffic offences were also common, and almost three-quarters of the high-frequency male offenders had been convicted for driving without a license during the follow-up period.

Separate follow-up of youths from the previous study

Within the framework of the crime register study, a follow-up has also been conducted of youths included in the previous Brå study of strategic offences (Brå 2011). The follow-up shows that the high-frequency offenders from 2001-2010 largely continued to be convicted for new offences during the extended follow-up period (2011-2018), whereas the majority of those who

² Since the socially vulnerable areas are quite small, and a relatively small part of the population lives in such areas, it has not been possible to conduct separate analyses by gender.

had only had a single conviction during the period 2001-2010 had no new convictions between 2011 and 2018. This applies to both females and males.

With regard to the strategic offences featured in the previous study, it was primarily males with a debut conviction for robbery who were convicted on several additional occasions during the extended follow-up period.

High excess mortality among high-frequency offenders

The follow-up of youths from the previous study found a remarkably high level of excess mortality among the high-frequency offenders. Among the males, 11 percent had died by the end of 2018, as had 10 percent of the girls. This refers to males and females who would have been aged 28-34 in 2018. The expected mortality rate for the equivalent age group in the population as a whole during the same period was 1 per cent among males and 0.4 per cent among females. This represents a mortality rate that is 25 times as high as expected among high-frequency female offenders and 11 times as high among high-frequency male offenders.

Brå has also obtained data from the National Board of Health and Welfare's cause of death register for all the deceased high-frequency offenders. As many as half of these had died as a result of various types of poisoning or overdose. A total of 12 percent had committed suicide, and the same proportion had been the victims of homicide. Among the remaining quarter, most had died as a result of illness or traffic accidents.

Knowledge on the desistance process

Brå has also conducted a review of the research on factors that can facilitate or complicate the process of desistance – i.e. the process whereby active offenders come to desist from crime. This field of research is less-well established than quantitative treatment research with a focus on evidence-based measures to reduce the risk of recidivism among young offenders. Nor should desistance research be viewed as an alternative to treatment research, which must be regarded as providing the basis for the choice of specific evidence-based actions and treatment measures for young offenders. The desistance research can however complement the treatment research by contributing new perspectives, concepts and insights.

This research field features the concepts of primary, secondary and tertiary desistance. Primary desistance simply means that no offences are committed during a certain period, while secondary desistance also incorporates a change in the self-perception of an individual who has engaged in the desistance process.

Tertiary desistance is only possible when those in the individual's surroundings also confirm that the individual is no longer viewed as an

“offender”. Studies of primary desistance do not explain the factors underlying the desistance process, so Brå’s overview has focused on the factors that are associated with secondary and tertiary desistance. To ensure that the knowledge presented is as up to date as possible, Brå has in the first instance included research from 2010 or later.

Various circumstances facilitate or complicate desistance

Brå’s review of the research literature has identified a range of different factors that have been shown to make it easier for a person who wants to desist from criminal behaviour.

A few examples include ageing, psychological maturity, spending time with non-offenders, relationships with a partner or parenthood, and various forms of pro-social participation (e.g. school, organised sports, voluntary work, etc.)

Another type of factor involves events that bring about a change in an individual’s routines, such as getting a job or moving to another town or neighbourhood. Routine-changing events can also involve events that perceived as negative, such as losing one’s liberty as a result of being placed on remand or receiving a custodial sentence, being the victim of crime, having a near-death experience, the death or loss of a close friend or relative. According to the research, such events can lead individuals to reassess their lives and feel that they want to make a change.

There are also a range of factors that can make desistance more difficult, such as having experienced school problems, social exclusion, spending time with offenders, addiction, psychological problems and neurological vulnerabilities.

Thought patterns that complicate or facilitate desistance

Desisting from crime involves a decision that is affected by both pushes and pulls. Pushes are factors that are perceived as negative aspects of involvement in crime, and that increase the motivation to leave the criminal lifestyle. Pulls are instead the positive aspects associated with the idea of living a different, more conventional life in the future. Both these types of factors can contribute to an individual wanting to leave a criminal situation or environment and to desist from crime.

In studying the literature, Brå has identified four key thought patterns that are linked to the decision to desist from crime. Two of these make desistance more difficult – distrust and negative self-confidence – while two make it easier – hope and acceptance of responsibility.

Distrust and negative self-confidence are associated with failure at school, psychological problems, addiction, actual or perceived exclusion, and a distrust of legal and social authorities. These lead to offenders perceiving themselves as failures in conventional society, and to feeling that they therefore have to continue with their criminal lifestyle. On the other hand, hope and the acceptance of responsibility involve a belief that it is possible to lead a life that does not involve crime, and assuming responsibility both for one's previous actions and for a future change.

Brå's assessment

Developing knowledge about strategic offences was originally intended as a tool for the social services to use in their assessments. Brå's first study from 2000 showed that one-third of all 15-17 year olds whose first conviction was for car theft subsequently came to belong to the small group that was together responsible for more than half of all convictions for crime. Car theft therefore constituted a strategic offence in as much as it was strategically correct to target actions against youths who committed this offence if there was a desire to reach those who were most at risk of becoming high-frequency offenders. Today, however, robbery has become the most strategic offence among young males, together with gross theft. Among girls, too few were convicted of robbery in connection with their debut conviction for this type of crime to be included in the analysis.

Robbery, which is the most common of the strategic offences, is characterised by the perpetrator not only stealing but also being prepared to use violence in order to obtain another person's property. In this sense, robbery is a more 'advanced' offence than theft, because it is committed by youths who have passed an emotional/moral threshold for what they are prepared to do at a relatively early age. Similarities also exist with regard to violence and threats against a public servant, as well as gross theft, where one of the legal prerequisites is that the offence is of a particularly dangerous or ruthless nature.

As regards the capacity of the strategic offences to genuinely predict high-frequency offending, it must be borne in mind that only a relatively small number of offenders go on to develop a long and active criminal career, regardless of their debut offence. Even among those youths with debut convictions for robbery, the proportion who had no subsequent convictions was as large as the proportion that went on to become a high-frequency offenders.

Drug offences are a problematic indicator

Among females, minor drug offences were the second most strategic offence, and 16 per cent of the girls whose first conviction was for minor drug offences went on to become high-frequency offenders. At the same time, however, almost half (47 per cent) of those with a first conviction for minor drug offences received no further convictions during the follow-up period.

Drug offences, and particularly minor drug offences involving personal consumption, constitute offences that are for the most part only detected in the course of policing activities, and trends in registered drug offences therefore reflect the prioritisations of the criminal justice system and not the actual level of drug-related crime in society at large (Brå 2016).

Brå's first study of strategic offences showed that 32 per cent of all 15-17 year olds whose first convictions were for drug offences came to belong to the group that was prosecuted nine times or more during the follow-up period. In the second study, this proportion had declined to 11 per cent, while in this study it had declined further, to 6 per cent (for males and females combined). The first study followed a cohort born in 1960, which means that the 15-17 year olds' debut convictions had taken place during the second half of the 1970s, at which time possession for personal consumption had not been criminalised. It may thus be assumed that they were convicted for other, more serious forms of drug offences. This provides a reasonable explanation for the dramatic decline noted between the first and second studies. The difference between the second study and this study may be due to the fact that the number of compulsory drug tests performed by the police in connection with a suspicion of minor drug offences related to personal consumption quadrupled during the 2000s. Self-report studies show that this increase did not reflect a corresponding increase in drug use, but was an effect of changes in the prioritisations of the criminal justice system (Brå 2016).

Registered drug offences therefore constitute a problematic indicator of youth crime, possibly for females in particular.

One-third of the youths who report drug use in self-report studies are females, while females only account for one-tenth of the young people who are convicted of drug offences.

At the same time, the analyses conducted in the current study show that high-frequency offenders are drug users to a very great extent. This was also the case in Brå's previous study. This finding was reflected in both the analysis of registered offending and in the excess mortality of high-frequency offenders as a result of narcotics or pharmaceutical overdoses.

Strategic offences are less “strategic” than they used to be

Brå’s three studies on strategic offences show that the explanatory value of such offences has declined over time – the strategic offences have become less “strategic”. It seems that today’s high-frequency offenders are “generalists” to a greater extent, in the sense that there is a greater variety in the offence types that constitute the principal offence in their debut convictions. At the same time, however, it is clear that the risk of a high level of criminal activity is greater among those with an early debut in crime and whose offending is more advanced than it is among other offenders of the same age. Brå’s research review also shows that children who are exposed at a young age to risk factors across several different domains, and who lack protective factors, are at greater risk of developing a criminal identity (Lacourse et al. 2003, Brå 2011).

A criminal lifestyle as an alternative to conventional responsibility

When youths are convicted for the first time, they are often still minors and are not viewed by society responsible adults. During the second half of their teenage years, however, young people are faced with an increasing number of demands to perform within the framework of conventional life situations: first in the form of consequential performances and decisions during their schooling, and thereafter in the form of demands to become independent adults who are capable of providing for themselves. It is during this phase of life that individuals begin to perceive the demands that will be placed on them as adults.

According to the research literature, those youths who end up living a criminal lifestyle find it hard to cope with the demands that society makes on adults. For the purposes of choosing measures that may assist in the desistance process, it may therefore be beneficial to regard these youths as having chosen an alternative path to independence and self-sufficiency.

Important to provide support that strengthens and maintains motivation in the desistance process

One of the most important results presented in the desistance research is that there are rarely only one or two events that lead a person to leave a criminal lifestyle. Instead, desistance involves a longer process towards a conventional, non-criminal life. Criminological research shows clearly that there is not only one route into a criminal lifestyle, and Brå’s review of the desistance research shows that there is not only one way out. Supportive measures need therefore to be adapted to the individual and to where he or she is located in the desistance process, and then revised or replaced as the individual’s needs change.

One particularly important element in the desistance process is the motivation for change. Those who work to provide care and support to young offenders must therefore be aware of signs indicating that the young person is beginning to reassess his or her situation. The focus of care and support work should, among other things, focus on reinforcing the factors that are motivating a young person to change and those that strengthen the individual's capacity to implement this change, while at the same time weakening those factors that make it more difficult to desist from crime. The factors that are important will vary from individual to individual, depending on their life situation.

It is also important to help these young people to set individual and realistic goals for the future – particularly because failures themselves constitute one of the factors that make desistance more difficult.

Many people with a criminal lifestyle begin the desistance process at a time when they lack both social and financial resources. For these, it is particularly important to receive education, training, and to find work and meaningful leisure-time activities in order to develop their own resources and gain access to social resources. With these resources, it becomes easier for the individual to maintain their motivation for change and, with time, to replace their criminal behaviour with meaningful, conventional and income-generating activities.

Many will commit further offences and experience setbacks during their move away from a criminal lifestyle and towards a conventional life. To ensure that these young people continue to believe that change is possible, they must be provided with support to process these setbacks so they do not merely serve to confirm an already negative self-image.

Gender differences in the need for support

Research shows that the factors that influence the desistance process are largely the same for both genders. However, the importance of different factors can vary between women and men, which means that support measures will need to be adapted accordingly.

Swedish research has also shown that female offenders generally have a more problematic life situation than male offenders, and that those young women who continue to commit offences as adults have poorer links to the labour market and less stable family conditions, and that they suffer from a higher degree of social exclusion than the corresponding group of men. The support provided during the desistance process must therefore also take account of gender differences with regard to among other things social norms, the division of parental responsibilities and opportunities in the labour market. Involvement in crime also produces a greater social stigma for women, and

their path away from crime and towards a place in conventional society is therefore often even more difficult than that experienced by men.