

English summary

Theft, drugs and violence among ninth grade boys and girls.
Results from three self-report surveys.

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This study is based on cross-sectional self-report surveys of delinquency, carried out among ninth grade pupils in 1995, 1997 and 1999. The objectives of the report are to describe the prevalence of delinquency among ninth grade boys and girls as well as developments over time (1995-1999) in the proportions of pupils reporting participation in such behaviours. The study also aims to illustrate the extent to which the pupils are themselves victimised and to examine the association between delinquency at the individual level and various background conditions traditionally regarded as risk factors in the criminological literature.

The first survey was administered to a sample of 247 school classes. In December 1995, a total of 5,618 pupils anonymously completed a questionnaire. In December 1997, with a sample of almost the same size, 5,263 pupils filled in the questionnaire and in 1999 the questionnaire was completed by 6,003 pupils. The response rate was over 90 per cent for the first two surveys and was slightly lower (85 per cent) for the most recent. The majority of the pupils were 15 years of age.

The prevalence of crime and problem behaviours

Generally speaking, minor theft offences such as shoplifting, thefts from school and from an individual's home are relatively common. Over half of the

youths report having committed some form of theft-related act during the preceding twelve months. Similarly, problem behaviours such as the consumption of alcohol, fare dodging and truancy seem also to be quite common. More serious theft offences and acts of direct violence against the person are more rare, as is drug use.

Boys commit offences more often than girls. Differences between the proportions participating are small however with regard to the more common offence types and problem behaviours, becoming increasingly marked the more serious or uncommon the activity in question. Narcotics consumption constitutes an exception to this rule. As regards participation rates among boys and girls in 1999 in the umbrella categories of theft, vandalism, violence against the person and narcotics:

- slightly over six in ten boys have committed some form of theft as against five in ten girls
- just over four in ten boys have engaged in some form of vandalism as compared with three in ten girls
- three in twenty boys have engaged in an act involving violence against the person, as compared with one in twenty girls
- one in ten boys reported some form of involvement with illicit drugs, as did slightly less than one in ten girls.

On the whole, it is not unusual to have committed offences, but few have participated in the different activities on a large number of occasions. It is estimated that approximately five per cent of the youths are responsible for half of the offences committed. In general, those engaging in violent or drug related activities have also been involved in thefts and vandalism.

Developments over time

The behaviours showing the clearest changes over time are those associated with vandalism, in that fewer and fewer report having engaged in acts of vandalism or graffiti. Participation in acts of vandalism has fallen successively from the first survey by almost ten percentage points (from 46 to 37 per cent). Reductions are also observed in the proportion who have engaged in a total of more than five acts of vandalism. There is also something of a reduction in the total level of participation in theft (from 66 to 59 per cent). This is primarily the result of a drop in the proportions reporting that they have engaged in shoplifting or have stolen something from school. This pattern is similar for both sexes. No marked changes are observed however for participation in acts of violence or for those involving narcotics, nor for the other problem behaviours.

Victimisation levels for theft, threats and violence

The results show that pupils more often fall victim to acts of theft than to acts of violence. The proportion falling victim to serious violence during the preceding twelve months lies at around six per cent for the three years of the study. The proportion falling victim to acts of theft is five times as great at approximately 30 per cent.

The studies show that around:

- four in twenty boys have had a cycle stolen as compared with three in twenty girls
- one in twenty boys has had his wallet stolen as has one in twenty girls
- two in ten boys have been the victim of some other form of theft, as have two in ten girls
- one boy in ten has been threatened, as has one in ten girls
- just under one in ten boys (8 per cent) has been on the receiving end of an act of serious violence as compared with just under one in twenty girls (4 per cent).

Those who often commit offences themselves also get victimised more often than more well-behaved pupils, particularly with regard to violence.

Which youths commit more offences than others?

An analysis of the youths committing more offences than others was carried out on the material from the 1999 survey.²⁷ Those committing many offences tend to a larger extent than the average to come from broken homes and to have parents with a low socio-economic status or an immigrant background. The most marked of these associations is that between high levels of offending and a broken home. These associations are without exception weak however. As expected, gender is associated with the level of delinquent activity, but the strength of this association is not particularly high either, since most boys (as is the case with most girls) do not engage in intensive delinquency.

When compared with their less delinquent counterparts, pupils in the group of highly active delinquents are more often generally extroverted and disposed towards sensation seeking (risk-taking, restlessness, impulsiveness). The more delinquent pupils also tend to exhibit problems of one kind or another in relation to their situation at home and at school and are more likely to have a poor relationship with their parents. In addition, their parents are more often unaware of what the youth does during his or her free time, and these youths are more likely to feel that their parents do not react particularly strongly to prob-

²⁷ Since a number of similar analyses had already been carried out on the material from the earlier years, this analysis can to some extent be regarded as a replication study (Ring 1999).

lem behaviour. These youths tend to be less happy in school and their schoolwork is on average poorer. Highly delinquent pupils commonly spend time with friends who are themselves highly tolerant towards and experienced in offending. In a similar vein, the more delinquent pupils themselves often have a more tolerant attitude towards offending, truancy and getting drunk.

The analysis shows that if a young person presents many of these factors, then it is very likely that he will report having committed offences, usually on a number of occasions. The higher the number of risk indicators present, the higher the level of delinquency tends to be. With the help of an index made up of ten such risk factors, it is possible to identify a high-risk group of individuals responsible for the majority of the offences reported.

Conclusions

Seen in their entirety, the results from the three surveys give a fairly stable impression of how youths, through their answers to the questionnaire, describe their participation in crime. As regards developments over time, one should not draw too many far-reaching conclusions, particularly where differences between the years of the study are small. The indications are, however, that there has been some reduction in delinquency among the pupils as compared with the situation in 1995. For certain common types of theft- and vandalism-related offences, as well as for the level of total participation in crime, the figures for 1995 tend to be the highest.

With regard to the associations between crime and other factors presented in the report, it should be mentioned that the question of which of these factors may have causal significance is a difficult one to answer definitively on the basis of this analysis. The objective here was rather to see to what extent it would be possible to present a more general characterisation. The results may nonetheless have relevance from the perspective of choosing measures to combat delinquency. Without knowing which factors are often related to delinquency it is difficult to prepare effective prevention strategies. This is true for both the individual citizen and for the authorities. Other results presented here should also be of use in the area of crime prevention. One example is the insight that almost half of the acts of violence to which youths in the ninth grade fall victim take place on school premises, an area where the opportunities open to a society for testing crime preventative measures are relatively good.

In many respects, the results from this study constitute a foundation on which to build further, in part by means of supplementary analyses of the material collected, but also in other types of study looking at the effect on future delinquency of attempts to influence relevant factors. As regards the second principle objective of the study, to examine developments over time in this particular age group, the value of the surveys will increase in line with their continued repetition, providing a longer and longer time series for analysis.