



OJJDP FACT SHEET

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Highlights of Findings From the Denver Youth Survey

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The Denver Youth Survey, a longitudinal study of urban youth, is one of three coordinated projects supported by OJJDP since 1986 through its Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency (Causes and Correlates). The Denver study has been following 1,527 boys and girls from high-risk neighborhoods in Denver who were 7, 9, 11, 13, and 15 years old in 1987. The primary goal of the study is to identify social conditions, personal characteristics, and developmental patterns linked to sustained involvement in delinquency and drug use. The findings highlighted in this Fact Sheet are based on those presented in "Some Not So Boring Findings From the Denver Youth Survey" (Huizinga et al., 1998).

Changes in Delinquency and Drug Use

The Denver study explored changes in the nature of delinquency and drug use from the 1970's to the 1990's. Researchers compared equivalent measures of self-reported delinquency and drug use from matched samples of the National Youth Survey¹ in 1979 and the Denver Youth Survey in 1991.

- ◆ Overall, there was little change in the prevalence rates of delinquency, including serious delinquency and serious violence; however, the prevalence rate of gang fights among males doubled (from 8 percent to 16 percent).
- ◆ The level of injury from violent offenses increased substantially. The prevalence of victims of violence in need of hospitalization or being left unconscious almost doubled (from 33 percent to 58 percent). This increase corresponded to an increase in the use of weapons.
- ◆ The prevalence of drug use decreased substantially: alcohol from 80 percent to 50 percent, marijuana from 41 percent to 18 percent, and other drug use from 19 percent to 4 percent.

- ◆ The relationship between drug use and delinquency has changed. A smaller percentage of serious delinquents are using hard drugs (other than marijuana) (from 48 percent to 17 percent) and a greater percentage of hard drug users are serious offenders (from 27 percent to 48 percent).

The Impact of Arrest

Denver Youth Survey findings suggest that many high-risk youth are arrested and have contact with the juvenile justice system. More than half (53 percent) of the youth in the study ages 11 through 15 in 1987 were arrested over the next 5 years. The arrest rate was high for both genders (64 percent for males and 41 percent for females). For many youth, arrest and juvenile justice system processing did not have the desired effect of deterring future delinquent involvement. When the delinquent behavior in the year following arrest for first-time arrestees was compared with that of a matched control, the majority (about 75 percent for status offense arrests and 92 percent for serious offense arrests) of first-time arrestees displayed similar or higher levels of delinquency.

Risk and Protective Factors

Denver Youth Survey researchers examined risk and protective factors associated with positive adolescent development, or "successful adolescence." The study defined successful adolescence as minimal involvement in serious delinquencies, minimal problems resulting from drug use, age-appropriate grade in school or graduation from high school, and good self-esteem/self-efficacy.

- ◆ By the fifth year of the survey, when the three oldest cohorts were ages 15 through 19, less than half (39 percent) of these youth would be considered a success by these criteria.
- ◆ The best predictors of success were having conventional friends, having a stable family and good parental monitoring, having positive expectations for the future, and not having delinquent peers.

¹The National Youth Survey was a longitudinal survey of youth conducted by Delbert Elliott and David Huizinga from 1976 to 1993.

- ◆ When the number of risk factors exceeded the number of protective factors, the chance of a successful adolescence was very small. The chance of a successful adolescence was not high until the number of protective factors far exceeded the number of risk factors.

Victimization

In addition to problem behavior, the Denver Youth Survey examined victimization experienced by this high-risk sample of youth.

- ◆ Over a 5-year period (1987–91), 85 to 87 percent of the youth (ages 7 through 19) were victims of violent offenses or theft. About one-fourth of the youth were victims of serious violent offenses.
- ◆ Two-thirds of the youth were chronic multiple victims, meaning they were victims in more than 1 year and also victims of multiple offenses in at least 1 year.
- ◆ Most youth were both victims and perpetrators of crime.
- ◆ The best predictors of annual prevalence and frequency of victimization were delinquent behavior of the victim's friends; the victim's own delinquent behavior, especially injury-inflicting offenses; being male; and frequency of alcohol use.

Multiple Etiological Pathways to Delinquency

Among both minor and serious delinquents, researchers found substantial variation (in terms of individual, family, and peer characteristics), meaning that each group included youth from different backgrounds with different factors related to their delinquent involvement. This suggests that there are multiple types of offenders with quite different developmental sequences associated with involvement in delinquency.

For Further Information

Summaries of the findings of the companion projects in OJJDP's Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency (the Pittsburgh Youth Study and the Rochester Youth Development Study), and a report describing the methodology used in all three studies, are being developed. Future publications about the Causes and Correlates research will address such issues as the impact of family transitions on delinquency and protective factors for youth in high-risk neighborhoods.

For additional information about the Denver Youth Survey, contact David Huizinga, Ph.D., University of Colorado at Boulder, Institute of Behavioral Science, Campus Box 442, Boulder, CO 80309.

To obtain copies of OJJDP publications, contact the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, 800-638-8736 (phone), 301-519-5212 (fax), puborder@ncjrs.org (e-mail), www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org (Internet).

Reference

Huizinga, D., Weiher, A.W., Menard, S., Espiritu, R., and Esbensen, F. 1998 (November). Some not so boring findings from the Denver Youth Survey. Paper presented at the American Society of Criminology meeting, Washington, DC.

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