



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

May 1996

Delinquency in China: Study of a Birth Cohort

A Summary of a Presentation by Marvin Wolfgang, Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania

The dramatic rise in crime in China became evident to the world when the country initiated a crackdown on offenders in 1983. Data provided by China indicates that serious crime—robbery, rape, homicide, aggravated assault, theft, and fraud—grew tenfold between 1979 and 1990. Drug-related offending has become one of China's more serious concerns, with 11,000 drug trafficking cases uncovered and 2,000 kilograms of heroin seized in 1991 alone. Although these figures are small compared to those in the United States, China's policy of severe punishment for serious criminals has apparently led to applying the majority of its death sentences to drug offenders.

Thus, Chinese criminologists, like their Western counterparts, have begun to examine how and why individuals become criminals by analyzing delinquency. The study is based on analysis of a birth cohort—a group of people all of whom were born in 1973 in a district of Wuhan, a major city. The preliminary finding of a less than 2 percent rate of delinquency by age 17 is much lower than that found in comparable studies conducted in other countries. When nondelinquents in China were compared to delinquents, the latter had less education, lower levels of employment, fathers who were more likely to be “workers” than professionals, and families that quarreled. Delinquents were more interested in goals of power and money, while nondelinquents indicated they were interested in knowledge and morality.

Collecting data

Initially the study focus has been on over 5,000 individuals born in 1973 in the Wuchang district of the city of Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province and a major port. The research, first aiming to identify delinquents in the

birth cohort at age 17, proceeded in some ways that would be familiar to Western criminologists and some that would not be.

Because the Chinese census data, which includes such standard information as date of birth, sex, occupation, education, race, and number of people in the household, are just beginning to be stored on computers, the researchers had to search records manually. Then, to obtain information about juvenile offending, a large team of research assistants searched police records and followed up with visits to schools and “neighborhood committees” to find out if anyone born in 1973 had committed delinquent acts not reported to the police. Members of the birth cohort, as well as their parents, were also interviewed.

The neighborhood committees were a unique source of data. These institutions, which function as a social support/social control mechanism, are repositories of detailed information about virtually every aspect of people's lives, even the menstrual cycle of women of child-bearing age (presumably as a means to monitor birth control).

Low delinquency rates

Of the 5,341 people born in the Wuchang district of Wuhan in 1973, less than 2 percent had a record of delinquency by age 17. Of the 81 who were delinquent, the overwhelming majority (76) were males (their delinquency rate was 2.8 percent). The level of delinquency is far lower than what was found in other studies, including those in Philadelphia, Racine (Wisconsin), Stockholm, and London, which generally identified rates of about 30 percent.

Differences between delinquents and nondelinquents

The researchers compared these 81 members of the birth cohort found to be delinquent with a control group of the same number of nondelinquents. They looked at how the two groups differed on such factors as education, employment, and family life. Other factors that might be less familiar to Western researchers were also studied, among them individual life goals.

The researchers found striking differences in school department, achieved level of education, school dropout rate, type of employment, and unemployment rate; in such intangibles as attitude toward learning and goals in life; and in a number of qualities defined by the neighborhood committees, including “bad individual habits” and “family harmony.”

Education. In school, many delinquents (26 percent) received disciplinary punishment and 4 percent were expelled, but no nondelinquents were either disciplined or expelled. The two groups also differed in their attitude toward learning, with almost twice as many delinquents as nondelinquents showing no interest in reading. About three times more delinquents than nondelinquents were likely to indulge in such “bad habits” as playing cards, smoking, drinking alcohol, and fighting.

More nondelinquents than delinquents (54 compared to 34) were able to learn under pressure. Almost twice as many delinquents as nondelinquents dropped out of school. None of the delinquents were college students, compared to 16 percent of the nondelinquents. The educational level of delinquents’ parents was also lower than that of nondelinquents.

Employment. Given the higher education level of the nondelinquents’ parents, it is no surprise that their fathers were more likely to have attained a higher occupational level. Thus, 16 fathers of nondelinquents were employed in science and technology, compared to only 3 for delinquents. By contrast, the fathers of the delinquent group were more likely to be classified as “workers” than fathers in the nondelinquent group.

By age 22, many more nondelinquents than delinquents held professional positions (45 compared to 29), while many more delinquents were unemployed (31 compared to 11 of the nondelinquents). More members of the delinquent group were self-employed, though in China this job category often means street vending—selling American cigarettes and other Western products. Of the delinquents, 66 said they did not want to work, compared to 37 nondelinquents.

Family cohesiveness. The quality of family relations, a factor taken into account in Western studies of delinquency, was also measured in the Wuhan study. The researchers found that on all three specific measures the delinquent group did less well: living “in harmony” (defined as not causing disruption that would be noticed by the neighborhood or mediation committees), quarrelling frequently, and having a broken family.

Life goals. In China, concepts rooted in Confucian philosophy define the value system. On life goals judged to be desirable in this context, the delinquent group did less well than the comparison group. Delinquents tended to select the pursuit of power, money, enjoyment, entertainment, and a social life; while the nondelinquents chose knowledge, career/enterprise, and an upright personality. In view of the recent changes in China, it may be no surprise that the pursuit of “money” was also selected by about half the nondelinquent group as a goal in life.

Future of the study

The study is expected to continue through the year 2000 and will extend to the entire city of Wuhan, which has a population of more than 3.4 million (compared to 722,600 in the Wuchang district). Plans are also to expand the study to other regions of the country and include a self-report delinquency study. If and how the crime wave now engulfing China will affect the behavior of the 1973 birth cohort remains to be seen.

This summary is based on a presentation by Marvin Wolfgang, Ph.D., director of the Sellin Center for Studies in Criminology and Criminal Law at the University of Pennsylvania. He has been participating in the research, which is using a method similar to the one he applied to his groundbreaking study of delinquency in the 1945 Philadelphia birth cohort.

As part of NIJ’s Research in Progress Seminar Series, Dr. Wolfgang discussed the study in China with an audience of researchers and criminal justice professionals and practitioners. A 60-minute VHS videotape, “Crime in a Birth Cohort: A Replication in the People’s Republic of China,” is available for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and other countries). Please ask for NCJ 153271.

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