Young offenders in Victorian times were much less likely to re-offend than today

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Young offenders in late Victorian times were much less likely to go on to commit other crimes after serving a sentence in an institution than their counterparts today, new research shows.

A study of the lives of 500 children committed to reformatory or industrial schools over a century ago showed that only 22% re-offended during the rest of their lives after their release. This compares with today's figure of 73% of young people re-offending within a year after release from custody.

Professor Pamela Cox told the British Sociological Association's annual conference in Glasgow today [Wednesday 17 April] that among the reasons for the low re-offending rate could be that when the offenders were released they were all put on supervised apprenticeship-type schemes for at least three years.

Professor Cox, of the University of Essex, is working with Professor Barry Godfrey and Dr Zoe Alker, University of Liverpool, and Dr Heather Shore, Leeds Beckett University, on a three-year project to analyse the life courses of offenders aged 7-14 from across the UK who were sentenced to institutions in Merseyside and Cheshire between 1870 and 1910.

Their work is the first historical analysis of re-offending rates for a large group of young people.

Typically the offenders were boys from poor backgrounds or broken homes who had committed relatively minor offences such as petty theft, vagrancy or public disorder, and who were put into industrial and reformatory schools until 16. Upon release some went into apprenticeships such as hat or shoe making, railway work or the military.

Recent digitisation of records made it possible for the first time to carry out a cradle-to-grave study of the experiences of the children passing through the English juvenile reformatory system. The four researchers traced court records, census forms and other information to see their work history, marriages and other life events. The study also tracked the deaths of the young offenders - some fought and were killed in the first world war.

The researchers studied the Stockport Industrial School, the Bradwall Reformatory, and two training ships moored in the Mersey where boys learnt skills to prepare them for the navy. All were run by charities rather than directly by the state.

Professor Cox, who has presented two TV series on servants and shop girls, told the conference: "By the end of the 19th century, thousands of children had passed through a wide range of different homes.

"We still know very little about the practical workings or long-term impacts of the early English juvenile justice system but by using innovative digital methods we have reconstructed the lives, families and neighbourhoods of 500 young offenders.

"For the first time, we followed these children on their journey in and out of reform and though their adulthood and old age. To date, no-one has used historical evidence on this scale to assess the effectiveness of juvenile justice policy and practice.

"We found that the rate of re-offending among the young people coming out of these institutions in Victorian and Edwardian times was dramatically less than it is today.

"This wasn't because it was harder to catch offenders in those days - we know from other studies that the re-offending rate among adults released from prison during Victorian times was 80%, for example.

"In part at least it seems it is connected with the requirement that all those leaving the industrial and reformatory schools go into some kind of apprenticeship, or into the military. This set them up with a skill and gave them the routine of working that stood them in good stead in the future. Even among the 22% or so who did reoffend, only 6% were persistent criminals."

It could also be partly due to the fact that their crimes were typically less serious than those in young offenders institutions today.

She said that the fact that despite their very similar backgrounds some did well and some re-offended also told the researchers that it was very difficult to predict precisely people's progress in life from their family backgrounds, as some criminologists believed today.

More information: The British Sociological Association's annual conference takes place at Glasgow Caledonian University from 15 to 17 April 2015.

Provided by British Sociological Association

offend-today.html