

Attentiveness and trust are especially effective in combating juvenile crime

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The researchers from Münster and Bielefeld emphasize that attention and trust towards juvenile offenders are often more effective than harsh sentences. Credit: Papaioannou Kostas - Unsplash

Although coming from a disadvantaged background, experiencing violence within the family, having a negative school environment or consuming violent media such as films and computer games have little or no direct influence on potential criminal behaviour among adolescents and young adults. These factors do often result in young people

regarding violent acts as harmless and spending their time with friends with similar attitudes—and this, in turn, is clearly linked to crime.

These are two of the most important results of the long-term study "Crime in the modern City," headed by criminologist Prof. Klaus Boers (University of Münster, Germany) and sociologist Prof. Jost Reinecke (University of Bielefeld, Germany). The study—funded over a period of almost 20 years by the German Research Foundation (DFG)—is the only long-term study in Germany, and one of the few internationally, to examine delinquent behaviour from late childhood through to early adulthood. The study differs from previous ones predominantly inasmuch as the latter included one-off interviews which provided 'snapshots' but said nothing about the development of criminal behaviour.

Between 2002 and 2019 the researchers questioned around 3,000 people in Duisburg aged from 13 to 30—initially every year, and later every two years—not only on crimes they had committed themselves, but also on attitudes, values and lifestyles. The researchers gained insights into the dark field of crime as a result of the young peoples' reports of offences which do not appear in any official statistics. In addition, they evaluated (light-field) data relating to convictions and cases which were dismissed. The information and the data contained in the study relate exclusively to Duisburg—although the researchers are convinced that many of the results can be applied to other German cities.

Overview of the most important results

Occasional acts of theft or low-level violent crime are not unusual, especially in boys, from late childhood (28 percent) to mid-teens (25 percent) - but they are also committed by girls (22 percent and 14 percent respectively for the two age groups). However, from the end of adolescence onwards, most of the young people no longer display

delinquent behaviour—with girls stopping earlier than boys. "This sharp reduction in [juvenile crime](#) is normal, and its success is due to standard educational processes and socialization," says Klaus Boers. "With attentiveness on the part of parents and teachers, and with the youngsters being among friends and in clubs, things sort themselves out in the end."

Young people accept [social norms](#) especially when society reacts in a pedagogically appropriate way to any infringements of the rules, says Boers. For this reason, he adds, something that is welcome and which makes sense is the fact that criminal law relating to juveniles allows for public prosecutors and courts to give priority to the corrective efforts undertaken by parents, teachers and other groups and to drop cases involving short-term offences committed by young people. This is one reason, Klaus Boers says, why, since the first decade of this century, crime amongst juveniles has decreased by one-third, and violent crime by as much as one-half. "A so-called zero-tolerance strategy—in other words, convictions for minor first offences—would counteract such positive developments," comments Jost Reinecke.

It's a small group of habitual offenders that are the problem. They account for five to eight percent in their respective age groups and commit half of all offences and three-quarters of all violent crimes in these [age groups](#). Habitual offenders are active predominantly in adolescence, but the vast majority of them leave delinquency behind them at the end of this period of their lives. Nor does being an habitual offender in early years necessarily lead to a development of long-term delinquency. Half of such offenders active in late childhood commit noticeably fewer crimes in adolescence. These findings—which have been confirmed in international studies—support the theory that [preventive measures](#) and treatment programmes can also make habitual offenders turn their backs on [crime](#).

What is especially helpful, says the report, are good relationships, based

on attentiveness and trust, between schoolchildren, teachers, family members and friends. In contrast, only rarely does any contact with the police or the courts which ends in leniency have an immediate effect on adolescents' further behaviour. In the case of more drastic measures, the solidarity provided by cliques—with their particular attitudes—may be strengthened. Anyone who is known to the judicial system, the report continues—regardless of the actual extent of any offences they go on to commit—runs a higher risk of again being the focus of attention.

According to the report, adolescents who are the children of immigrants do not commit more theft than young Germans. Girls with a Turkish heritage—a group for which the researchers in Duisburg had a good quantity of data available—commit fewer offences than German girls. In the 1990s, however, male adolescents from immigrant families committed substantially more violent crimes and they were more frequently habitual offenders. It was only in the first decade of this century, however, that no significant differences could be observed any longer between male juveniles with a German, Turkish or eastern European background. This could be attributed to successful integration of third-generation immigrants into the education system. Moreover, as regards young Germans who have social deficits comparable to those of youngsters with a Turkish heritage, both groups show similar levels of violence.

Conclusion

Even problematic offenders frequently stop committing offences—and, especially, violent crimes—at the latest when they reach early adulthood. This positive development can be supported by means of pedagogical measures and appropriate reactions on the part of the police and the courts. There is a good chance that these [young people](#) can build positive ties and attitudes in later life.

More information: Boers, Klaus & Reinecke, Jost (ed.). 2019.
Delinquenz im Altersverlauf. Erkenntnisse der Langzeitstudie
Kriminalität in der modernen Stadt. Münster: published by Waxmann

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