

Empathy training could reduce crime

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Research published in the journal *Psychology, Crime & Law* suggests a new, low-cost approach that could potentially reduce antisocial behavior and crime.

The study, carried out by Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) criminologist

Dr. Neema Trivedi-Bateman and her student research assistant Emma Crook, reviewed evidence from programs designed to improve [empathy](#) amongst children, young people, and adults.

Weak empathy is associated with subsequent weak shame and guilt, all of which play a primary role in moral decision-making when making behavioral choices. Multiple types of crime, including violent, sexual, and fraud-related offenses are found to be linked to weak empathy. This is found in various countries and settings, such as in school, prison, psychiatric institutions, and within communities.

Previous research by Dr. Trivedi-Bateman has identified a strong link between weak empathy and involvement in crime, with prolific, [violent offenders](#) having [empathy levels](#) 15% lower than less severe offenders and non-offenders. Other studies have shown that higher empathy is linked to lower levels of juvenile—youth aggression, weapon carrying, and gang membership.

For the first time, this new study stresses the merits of programs that attempt to strengthen empathy and outlines under which conditions they are found to be most effective, finding that these initiatives can may reduce both reoffending and first-time offending amongst children-in society.

In Germany, a 10-week classroom-based program was found to increase empathy and reduce cyberbullying behavior, while a bullying-focused empathy program in Turkey saw a reduction in bullying behavior of 40% amongst the primary school pupils who took part, with the control group showing no change in their bullying behaviors.

The research explains how empathy deficiency should be of central concern to criminal justice agencies and that it could be identified and addressed as early as in infancy.

By using a combination of universal empathy-training programs for the general population, including pre-natal training for parents to help them foster empathy from birth, social and emotional learning programs in schools, and specific offender-targeted programs beginning as early as mid-childhood, Dr. Trivedi-Bateman believes that offending rates could be reduced.

Dr. Trivedi-Bateman, senior lecturer in criminology at Anglia Ruskin University, said:

"Empathy is crucial for supporting law-abiding behaviors and decisions, and traditional sources of empathy development, such as parents and teachers, are vital for the development of lawful behavior in children.

"Deficient empathy is a risk to all members of the community and can occur when children have inadequate or absent role models. If deficient empathy can be identified and addressed from infancy, we strongly believe that fewer incidents of harm and wrongdoing will occur in society.

"Our study highlights that targeted empathy training programs used in North America, Asia and Europe can be beneficial. We also show that repetition and rehearsal of the empathy strengthening techniques are key to successful and longer-term outcomes, while the use of virtual reality technology, placing participants in 'victim' and 'offender' scenarios, are beneficial when used in cases of bullying and domestic abuse.

"So far this has been a largely neglected area of crime policy focus but if the UK can adopt empathy training programs on a wider scale—involving parents, siblings, teachers, peers, and the criminal justice system, such as probation services—it could pave the way for a new and relatively low-cost approach to tackling [crime](#) in this country."

More information: Neema Trivedi-Bateman et al, The optimal application of empathy interventions to reduce antisocial behaviour and crime: a review of the literature, *Psychology, Crime & Law* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/1068316X.2021.1962870](https://doi.org/10.1080/1068316X.2021.1962870)

Provided by Anglia Ruskin University

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