

## **Delinquency and Crime**

### ***Some Highlights from the Denver Youth Survey***

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#### **Introduction**

This chapter summarizes some of the findings over the past ten years from the Denver Youth Survey. This study is a prospective longitudinal study of delinquency, drug use, victimization, and mental health that focuses on both antisocial and successful development during childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. The aim of the study is to identify social conditions, personal characteristics, and developmental patterns that are linked to sustained involvement in delinquency and drug use, and to examine the relationship of these developmental patterns and behaviors to mental health and victimization. The research project is thus focused on the identification of both risk and protective factors that may initiate, sustain, terminate, or, perhaps more importantly, prevent delinquency and problem drug use across the lifespan. The project includes extensive focus on female delinquency, neighborhoods, school environment, mental health issues, gang involvement, problem drug use, and victimization.

The Denver Youth Survey (DYS) is based on a probability sample of households in “high-risk” neighborhoods of Denver, Colorado. The neighborhoods were selected on the basis of a social ecology analysis of population and housing

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characteristics associated with delinquency. Only those socially disorganized neighborhoods that had high official crime rates (in the upper one third) were included. The survey respondents include 1,527 children and youth (806 boys and 721 girls) who were 7, 9, 11, 13, or 15 years old in 1987, and one of their parents, who lived in one of the more than 20,000 randomly selected households.

This sampling procedure resulted in the inclusion of a large number of African American, Hispanic, and other minority youth and includes both "in-school" and "drop-out" youth. Over 92% of the households originally sampled were successfully screened for the presence of eligible children. The screened households contained an estimated 1,794 eligible children of which 1,527 (85%) completed the first year's interview. Completion rates were 91–93% of the first year respondents for the second through fifth annual data collection periods (1989–1992), which is notably high by prevailing standards. Due to a gap in funding for data collection, there was a two-year gap in data collection that resulted in difficulties tracking the highly mobile survey respondents. As a result, the completion rate was a constant 80% for the 1995–1998 period, although the project has continued to interview over 90% of those located each year.

The DYS has, in most regards, met the requirements of the model research design developed by the NIJ-MacArthur Foundation program of research on crime and delinquency (Farrington, Ohlin, & Wilson, 1986; Tonry, Ohlin, & Farrington, 1991), including the use of a multi-cohort accelerated longitudinal design, the use of a household sample, the inclusion of both younger and older cohorts, and a large interdisciplinary measurement space. Each child or youth, and one of their parents, were interviewed annually from 1988 to 1992 and from 1995 to 1999, thus covering the ages from 7–26. Respondents who moved anywhere in the United States or overseas in the military and those in jails or prisons continued to be included in the survey.

The DYS is part of OJJDP's Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency involving three projects located in Denver, Pittsburgh, and Rochester, NY. In its initial stage, the three projects of the Program worked collaboratively in creating a sequence of core measures used in at least two and usually all three sites. This development served to enhance the overall measurement space of each project. In addition, each project developed measures specific to the individual site. For the DYS, this combination of core and specific measures resulted in a large measurement battery for child, youth, young adult and parent interview schedules. Some of the scales and measures are adaptations from previous studies, especially from our own previous survey work (e.g., the National Youth Survey, Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985; Elliott, Huizinga, & Menard, 1989) and others were developed specifically for this survey.

Although the list of variables is large, it is not an eclectic list. The selection of variables is guided by the problem behaviors and by the rich mix of variables provided by a conceptual model that guides the study. This model is based in an

integrated theoretical model, designed as an explanation for adolescent delinquency that synthesizes strain, social control, and social learning perspectives (Elliott et al., 1985). For the DYS, this model was expanded to incorporate effects of neighborhood social disorganization, biological history including perinatal events, childhood experience and socialization, personality and mental health, formal and informal secondary (external) controls, and rational choice.

Included among the measures are (1) measures of delinquency and drug use, as well as other problem behavior and psychopathology; (2) family demographics; (3) neighborhood social characteristics and family integration and support within these neighborhoods; (4) family variables, including parenting, the child's involvement in and attachment to the family, marital discord, parents' domestic violence, and self-reported parental drug use and criminality, as well as arrests of family members; (5) child/youth involvement in school, community activities, religious activities, and work; (6) personal and psychological characteristics of the child/youth; (7) personal and psychological characteristics of parents; (8) medical history, including birth trauma, family medical and behavioral problems, developmental and learning problems as well as current physical characteristics and nutrition; (9) involvement with and the delinquent/drug use orientation of peers, including a special section on gangs; (10) educational, occupational, and current social strain; (11) secondary controls and rewards for drug use and delinquency, including risk of arrest and juvenile justice system processing; and (12) use of drug treatment and mental health services by focal child/youth respondents and other family members.

Based on our prior experiences with the National Youth Survey, the project developed new self-report drug use and delinquency measures, which we believe are substantial improvements over earlier measures. The drug use measure includes items about the use of both prescription and illicit nonprescription drugs and collects information about frequency of use, amounts used, location of use, and other follow-up information. The delinquency measure attempts to eliminate reporting of trivial events and the potential double counting of events and obtains information about physical location, nature of offense, and other follow-up information. Based on our earlier work and in collaboration with the Pittsburgh project, the DYS developed child measures of delinquency and drug use that mirrored the adolescent measures but which were suitable for children as young as seven years of age. In addition to self-reports of delinquent behavior and drug use, official arrest data from the Denver Police Department for all respondents in the longitudinal survey were obtained, covering all arrests and contacts of survey respondents through 1992.

Over its twelve-year history, the Denver Youth Survey (DYS) has benefited from the combination of major funding for the project from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). The DYS was originally funded as a study of the causes and

correlates of delinquency over the 1986–1992 period by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, which also supported analyses and other research efforts during the 1993–1994 period. Supplemental funding from NIDA was provided from 1988–1992 to increase the drug use focus of the study and to permit a special study of the peers of a sample of the child and youth respondents of the main survey. During the 1995–1999 period, support for the main survey was provided by NIDA, with OJJDP providing supplemental funding for analyses and other research efforts.

In addition, the MacArthur Foundation supported an increased focus on neighborhoods within the main survey and a separate survey of the full city of Denver, using similar and, for the most part, identical instrumentation to that of the main survey over the 1989–1991 period. Funds supporting a collaborative international study of the transition from school to work, as that transition affects delinquency and drug use, which is based on the sample of the DYS and a similar sample in Bremen, Germany, was funded by the German-American Academic Council for the 1997–1999 period with matching funds from OJJDP.

Given the breadth of the DYS, it is difficult to select specific important or key findings to include in a summary such as this, since what is important varies by the orientation of different audiences. Nevertheless, we hope that the selection provided includes topics of interest for many readers. The topics have been grouped into general sections about (1) the epidemiology of delinquency, drug use, and victimization, and the co-occurrence and interrelationship between these problem behaviors; (2) information about gangs and peers; (3) explanatory, risk, and protective factors; (4) the influence of arrest on subsequent behavior; and (5) help-seeking for youth.

## **Epidemiology of Delinquency, Drug Use, and Victimization**

### ***Over-Time Changes in Delinquency and Drug Use: The 1970s and the 1990s***

Much has been said about the changing nature of delinquency and drug use over the past two decades. To examine these changes, equivalent measures of delinquency and drug use from the National Youth Survey in 1979 and from the DYS in 1991 were compared. The particular years examined were selected because both surveys were then in their fourth years and matching drug use data was available. The samples were matched on age (14–18), urbanicity, and social class (Huizinga, 1997a). Although these samples are not perfectly comparable, one being a subset of a national sample and the other a specific city sample, it would be expected that major trends or differences over time would be indicated

in data from the two matching samples. Differences in delinquency rates, if any, would be expected to be higher in the Denver data given its high-risk sample.

The prevalence rates of various kinds of delinquency (percentage of persons involved in a given type of offense), for both males and females are given in Table 1. For status offenses, serious property offenses, and for serious violence, there are essentially no differences in the prevalence rates over the 13-year period. Public disorder, minor property, and drug sale offenses all show substantial decreases. However, for males, gang fights show a substantial increase over this period, with the rate doubling from 8% to 16%.

Although the prevalence rates for serious violence are similar across these years, changes in the seriousness of violent offenses, as indicated by the level of injury and use of weapons, is also of interest. Examination of level of injury from assaults indicated that the level of injury has changed over time, with the prevalence of victims of violence being left in need of hospitalization or unconscious almost doubling, from 33% to 58%, across the 1979 to 1991 period. Correspondingly, the prevalence of weapons use has changed. While in 1979, 31% of serious assaults involved a weapon, in 1991 this rate had risen to 82%; and for gang fights, the rate had risen from 42% to 58%.

In contrast to delinquency, and as reported in other research, the prevalence of drug use has decreased substantially over the 1979 to 1991 period. For both genders, the use of alcohol is lower in 1991 (from about 80% to about 53%); the use of marijuana has been reduced by about half, from around 40% to around 20%; and the use of hard drugs has dropped from about 19% to 4%. Given these findings of few changes in the rates of serious delinquency and substantial decreases in the rates of drug use, a question arises of whether the often-reported relationship between

**Table 1. Prevalence of Delinquency and Drug Use By Type of Delinquency and Gender: 1979 and 1991**

| <i>Delinquency</i> | <i>Total Sample</i> |             | <i>Males</i> |             | <i>Females</i> |             |
|--------------------|---------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
|                    | <i>1979</i>         | <i>1991</i> | <i>1979</i>  | <i>1991</i> | <i>1979</i>    | <i>1991</i> |
| Status Offenses    | 58                  | 59          | 63           | 62          | 52             | 57          |
| Public Disorder    | 44                  | 26          | 46           | 29          | 41             | 23          |
| Minor Property     | 27                  | 17          | 38           | 21          | 16             | 13          |
| Serious Property   | 10                  | 10          | 15           | 15          | 05             | 05          |
| Serious Violence   | 12                  | 12          | 16           | 17          | 07             | 06          |
| Drug Sales         | 12                  | 05          | 17           | 07          | 08             | 02          |
| Gang Fights        | 07                  | 11          | 08           | 16          | 06             | 05          |
| <i>Drug Use</i>    |                     |             |              |             |                |             |
| Alcohol            | 80                  | 53          | 80           | 55          | 79             | 51          |
| Marijuana          | 41                  | 18          | 40           | 21          | 43             | 16          |
| Hard Drugs         | 19                  | 04          | 18           | 04          | 19             | 03          |

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