

Chronic adolescents and young offenders: An overview of research findings

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SUMMARY. **Aims** – The present paper is an overview of studies examining chronic, persistent offending and recidivism in adolescents and young offenders. **Methods** – The review focused on published papers dealing with chronic offending of adolescents and young offenders. **Results** – The paper provides the picture on definition on juvenile delinquency, definition of recidivism, measurement and operationalisation of recidivism, definition of chronic offenders, correlates and predictors of chronic offending, differences and similarities between chronic and non-chronic offenders, possible genetic influences in chronic offending, proportion of criminal activity attributed to chronic young offenders, factors differentially associated with initiation, escalation, persistence and desistance in juvenile offending. **Conclusions** – Overall the boundaries of the sociological approach to the study of chronic offending are stressed and the possible advantages of employing a social psychological approach to the study of chronic offending are noted.

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INTRODUCTION

Research regarding juvenile delinquency has shown that there is a small proportion of recidivists chronic offenders who are responsible for a disproportionate high percentage of criminal activity (Tarling, 1993). This fact leads to the need to study this subpopulation of offenders in order to see in what ways they differ from the general population of offenders. Early identification of recidivists chronic offenders could lead to a considerable amount of reduction of criminal activity either by means of intervention or incapacitation (Rutter *et al.*, 1998). However the need to intervene early could be better informed by assessing criminogenic needs of adolescents and young offenders, which leads to the need of applying a social psychological approach to chronic offending and recidivism, as it seems that the sociological approach to the study of chronic offending and recidivism has come to its limits (Andrews & Bonta, 1984).

DEFINITION OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

Rutter *et al.* (1998) noted the difficulties of providing a precise definition of juvenile delinquents or young offenders to refer to young people who are offending. Rutter *et al.* (1998) argued that in general juvenile delinquents, in terms of age, are defined in a way that “the lower limit is set by the age of criminal responsibility and the upper limit by the age when young people can be dealt with by courts for adult offenders” (ibid: 2). Rutter *et al.* (1998) also noted that a precise definition of juvenile delinquents is further complicated by variations in these limits between different countries, over time and for different kinds of offences. Rutter *et al.* (1998) reported that the age when a young person can be prosecuted by the criminal justice system varies considerably from the age of 7 (e.g. Ireland, USA) to the age of 18 (e.g. Belgium, Peru, Syria) while in most European Countries the median age is 14-15 years. While similar variations exist in terms of the age when a young person can be dealt with by the adult criminal justice system, which is usually the age of 18, it is common for young people between the ages of 18-21 to be dealt with modified procedures in comparison to the adult criminal justice system. For these reasons Rutter *et al.* (1998) proposed that a review of the literature about issues of young offenders

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should rather loosely and more realistically focus on those between the age of 10 and 20. It should be kept in mind that development does not stop at the age of 20, rather it is extended up to the age of 25. Finally, antisocial behaviour starts in childhood before the age of legal prosecution, and that research extending over this period of age might be informative in studying issues of juvenile delinquency in general.

DEFINITION OF RECIDIVISM

Recidivism has been defined in a number of ways usually incorporating, as a core notion, the re-offending of the subjects within a given time frame. Myner *et al.* (1998) defined it as the number of convictions of 138 convicted juvenile males starting from their first conviction until they were eighteen years old and under juvenile jurisdiction. Hanson *et al.* (1984) defined recidivism as the juveniles' total number of arrests divided by their age to get an index of their recidivism level. Ganzer & Sarason (1973), in a study comparing non-recidivists and recidivists, defined the latter as those juveniles who have been held in juvenile rehabilitation institutions and have re-offended during the 20 months after they have been released from a centre. Knight & West (1975) in a similar study comparing juvenile delinquents with those that continue their antisocial activities after entering adulthood, defined continuous delinquents or recidivists as those individuals who, as adults, have received at least one criminal conviction and/or admitted on a self report inventory (West & Farrington, 1973) that they have been engaged in at least one offence. Niarchos & Routh (1992) defined recidivism in terms of a return to court or detention within 1 year of the data collection, and recidivism was based on arrests that were referred to Juvenile Court excluding any arrests that were resolved, in any other way, by local police stations.

MEASUREMENT OF RECIDIVISM

Recidivism has been assessed in a number of ways including parole failure, re-arrest, re-conviction, re-custody and reconviction for serious offending (Thornton, 1985). The indices of re-offending vary in the way they tap into the problem behaviour and this is evident when comparing re-arrest, sensitive to the rate but not the seriousness of an offence, and re-custody, which is more sensitive to seriousness than to rate. Deciding which one to use leaves an aspect of recidivism untapped and any decision about the definition of recidivism is to be based on

what the research is about, mainly interested in frequency or seriousness, and given that the two are negatively correlated it is expected that an indicator will have sensitivity only to one or other (Thornton, 1985).

The different ways of assessing recidivism imply certain methodological issues that need to be taken into consideration in both applying research in this area or evaluating existing literature. According to Thornton (1985) there may be sources of bias in the results obtained depending on the supervision that released inmates are subject to. The author continues that, results derived by different ways of assessing recidivism are not easily generalised as certain indices tap frequency or seriousness of re-offending often one at the expense of the other as is the case with re-conviction or re-custody which reflects a problem of sensitivity as well.

DEFINITION CHRONIC OFFENDERS

Loeber *et al.* (1998) noted that while obviously chronic offenders can be differentiated from non-chronic offenders in terms of frequency of offending, they nevertheless noted the difficulty of defining chronic offenders as there is not a widely acceptable consensus of the cut-off point that could differentiate the two groups. Operationalisation of chronic offenders varied in terms of number of offences committed, the data source employed in research, either officially recorded offences such as police arrests and/or court referrals or self-reported offences. Reliance on self-reported data produced higher numbers of chronic offenders in comparison to officially recorded offences, in terms of persistence of offending over time, and the time frame employed for re-offending (Loeber *et al.*, 1998).

Hagell & Newburn (1996) noted the difficulties of studying the extreme end of juvenile delinquency and that much of that difficulty derived from the lack of a consensus of the definition of chronic offenders, resulting in a variability of operational definitions of chronic juvenile offenders thus making the comparability and integration of existing findings of different studies rather difficult. They reported that for the description and identification of those young re-offenders who are responsible for a disproportionate number of offences, several terms have been used as "frequent", "chronic", "serious" "persistent". Hagell & Newburn (1996) also argued that frequency of offending does not necessarily mean seriousness, as many frequent offenders do not commit serious offences, rather, they limit their criminal activities in less serious forms of offending.

Loeber *et al.* (1998), however, argued that offence frequency, seriousness and variety used as criteria for classification of mainly juvenile offenders are often correlated. Homogeneous and exclusive categories of offenders are not easily identified and a considerable overlap is expected between serious, violent and chronic offenders. Loeber *et al.* (1998) cited the results of the Pittsburgh Youth Study, based on police records and highlighted that "...about a third (35.6%) of the chronic offenders (with three or more serious offences) were also violent offenders, but just under half (44.8%) of the violent offenders were also chronic offenders. Moreover, a third (35.1%) of the serious offenders were also chronic offenders" (ibid: 18).

Similar results are reported by Snyder (1998) based on analyses of the court records of 151,209 young people, that is, about one third of chronic offenders were violent offenders, half of violent offenders were chronic offenders (defined as those juveniles with four or more juvenile court referrals). Loeber *et al.* (1998), concluded that there is considerable overlap between violent, serious and chronic offenders and these results overall are indicative of juvenile delinquency patterns of offending. Loeber *et al.* (1998) however argued that for those young people who have not gone through their criminal careers, these patterns might not apply to younger populations of delinquents who are at the beginning or in the middle of their criminal career.

It could be noted that while it is not clear whether frequency of offending is related to seriousness it could be argued that the two aspects represent different dimensions of delinquent involvement. Even if there is an overlap between the two, as Farrington (1994; 1996) has suggested, that frequent offenders are more likely to commit serious and violent offences simply because they commit more offences, it is still possible to measure and examine the two aspects of offending either separately or in combination. This would depend on the focus of interest, while keeping in mind that findings regarding frequency of offending are not readily applied to seriousness of offending and vice versa.

PROPORTION OF CRIMINAL ACTIVITY ATTRIBUTED TO CHRONIC YOUNG OFFENDERS

Tarling (1993) summarised results of frequency of offending from longitudinal cohort studies to examine the extent of chronic offenders and the percentage of total criminal activity attributable to them. Tarling (1993) argued that this kind of information could only be derived from longitudinal cohort studies and not cross-sectional ones as the total sample is at the same age and every indi-

vidual at the same point of their criminal career. Tarling (1993) presented data from the Wolfgang *et al.* (1972) cohort study of boys (cited in Tarling, 1993), followed-up at age 18, showing that 52 % of the total arrests could be attributable to 6.3% of the boys with five or more arrests who were identified as the chronic offenders of the sample. Tarling (1993) continued with the Home Office Research and Statistics Department cohort study of males born in 1953 and showed that 7% of the boys with 6 or more offences were responsible for 65% of the total number of convictions of the cohort.

Similarly, Farrington & West (1993) reported that from the 411 boys participating in the Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development, 24 boys, that is 5.8% of the sample, accounted for 48.8% of the total number of convictions of the sample up to the age of 32. Tarling (1993) argued that chronic offenders should be better considered as a proportion of offenders rather than the general population, since while around one third of the males of the 1953 cohort were convicted at least once, the vast majority of two thirds were not. If chronic offenders are seen as a proportion of offenders they represented around 18 % of the offenders in comparison to 7% of the entire cohort.

Rutter *et al.* (1998) argued that while not many studies have examined specifically chronic offending there are several conclusions that can be inferred, with the first and obvious fact, from a statistical point of view, that a small proportion of delinquent youth account for a large proportion of criminal activity. According to Rutter *et al.* (1998) this fact is not surprising and it well established as well as rather expected, if involvement in delinquent activities is normally distributed in a population.

This point was further advanced by Rutter *et al.* (1998) in discussing recidivism crime and they noted that, as crime is actually distributed in a J-shaped way in the population, it is statistically obvious that a very small proportion of individuals engaging in higher rates of criminal activity, would account for most of the offences in the population. What is not well established according to Rutter *et al.* (1998), is the exact percentage of criminal activity that can be attributed to chronic or persistent offenders and this mainly reflects the heterogeneity of the operational definitions of chronic offenders that have been employed in the literature.

NEED FOR EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF CHRONIC YOUNG OFFENDERS

A further point highlighted by Rutter *et al.* (1998), is that in terms of policy decision making, the identification

of a small number of young people responsible for many offences early in their careers, would result in a considerable reduction of criminal activity if those individuals could be identified and be selectively incapacitated and/or be the focus of intervention. Rutter *et al.* (1998) argued that the identification of such a group is much easier when followed up longitudinally for research purposes than the prediction, identification and selection of those individuals likely to be persistent offenders in their life by the justice system early in their careers. “[R]elying simply on frequency of offending as a distinguishing feature means that, for any given moment during their adolescence, it will be very hard to tell which offenders will be recidivists over long periods of time and which will engage only in a short period of adolescence-limited repeated offending” (ibid: 122). The implication would be that as persistence of offending does not necessarily mean seriousness of offending prolonged incarceration would not be easily justified.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHRONIC AND NON-CHRONIC JUVENILE OFFENDERS

Farrington & West (1993), based on data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, a longitudinal study of 411 males, described the penal and criminal histories of 23 participants, who by the age of 32, had committed half of the offences of the whole sample as measured by official records. Those who by the age of 24 had been convicted for six or more offences, according to conviction records, had been identified as chronic offenders. These 23 chronic offenders represented 17.4% of the total sample yet they were responsible for 49.1% of the total number of officially recorded convictions and for about one third of self-reported offences, such as burglaries and motor vehicle thefts. In a later analysis Farrington & West (1993) identified, as chronic offenders, those males who by the age of 32 had committed nine or more offences. They were 24 participants who represented 5.8% of the sample and 15.7% of the offenders and similarly accounted for almost half of the recorded offences (48.8%). Farrington & West (1993) noted that direct comparability of the chronic offenders derived from the Cambridge Study is not possible since at different phases of the study the definition of chronic offenders differed. However, 19 out of the 24 males identified as chronic offenders by the age of 32 were among those 23 that were identified as such by age of 24, suggesting a rather considerable overlap in the group of people identified as chronic offenders even though different definitions of persistent offending were employed.

Chronic offenders did not commit more serious offences in comparison to non-chronic convicted offenders, even though chronic offenders averaged 13.9 offences and non-chronic offenders 2.7%, the average age of commitment of offences did not differ between the two categories and the peak period of the frequency of offences for chronic offenders was between 14 and 20. The period similarly identified as reflecting a peak for the number of offenders overall. In addition chronic offenders were not specialised in any kind of offending as they were quite versatile.

Knight & West (1975) explored the factors that could discriminate young offenders who continue to be delinquents and young offenders who stop their delinquent acts by entering adulthood. The data were derived from the Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development and focused on the 83 most delinquent boys of the general sample, according to both self-reported and official delinquency indices and constituted the fifth most delinquent boys of the sample. From those 83, one group of 33 boys was defined as temporary delinquents who “up to the time when they were interviewed at age 18-19 had acquired no criminal convictions since turning 17 and, ... denied that they had committed any such offence in the previous year” (ibid: 43) and a second group of 48 boys was defined as continuing delinquents if they as adults had been convicted or admitted committing an offence. Two of the 83 boys could not be interviewed. As expected the continuing delinquents had more convictions as juveniles in comparison to temporary delinquents, consistent with the view that past offending is predictive of subsequent offending. However, this factor could be spuriously related to the rest of the findings in the analysis so it was taken into account by matching temporary and continuing delinquents on number of previous convictions as juveniles, resulting in 27 matching pairs. Temporary delinquents said that they committed their offences because they were exciting, significantly more than continuing offenders, were less involved in delinquent groups in comparison to continuing delinquents, had less family members, on average, convicted before they were ten years old, and come from less deprived backgrounds, in terms of social handicaps in comparison to continuing delinquents.

Several psychological variables such as IQ and aggression, while predictive of delinquency, failed to further discriminate between temporary and continuing delinquents. Further temporary delinquents admitted that custodial experience in juvenile years had a deterrent effect on their subsequent behaviour. Continuing delinquents said that custodial sentences did not influence their

behaviour later, suggesting a differential effect of penal measures to different groups of juvenile delinquents. The picture emerging from research on persistent and less persistent young offenders suggests that, mainly, the variables that have been found predictive of delinquency in general can further differentiate groups of juvenile or young offenders in terms of persistence of offending, with the most persistent groups showing even more disability and disorganisation. The difference seems to be one of degree and/or accumulating effects of several risk factors in the more persistent groups. However at the same time other variables, generally predictive of delinquency, did not differentiate between persistent and transient juvenile or young offenders mainly due to the interrelations among the variables associated with juvenile delinquency where independent effects are more difficult to find.

Rutter *et al.* (1998) in summarising the literature on persistent young offenders concluded that, broadly, they do not differ substantially from other offenders who commit offences at a lower rate, and that in general the same risk factors that differentiate offenders from non-offenders distinguish persistent offenders from non-chronic ones. Chronic offenders usually score higher on measures of adversity, suggesting that the difference between the two groups is one of degree of the same criminogenic factors, and there are no factors specifically related to chronic offending that are not associated with less frequent offending. Thus persistent offenders are just more deviant in terms of both social and individual characteristics in comparison to one time offenders.

GENETIC INFLUENCES IN PERSISTENT OFFENDING

Farrington (1995), in summarising key findings from the Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development, a prospective longitudinal study of delinquent development and antisocial behaviour in 411 high risk boys, noted that "less than 5% of the families accounted for half of all the convictions of all family members" (ibid: 939). Delinquent boys were more likely to have convicted parents and siblings in comparison to non-delinquents. Farrington (1995) also noted that family criminality, in terms of convicted parents and siblings, was an independent predictor of both juvenile delinquency and persistence of offending in adult life, up to the age of 32.

These findings, according to Rutter *et al.* (1998), indicate that although modelling effects might be operating, it is also plausible to assume that part of the relationship

of persistent criminal behaviour in juveniles and young offenders is likely to be the result of genetic influences transmitted from parents to their siblings. Rutter *et al.* (1998) from a review of studies examining the effects of genetic influences on juvenile and adult delinquency concluded that "environmental factors are very important in relation to transient (but possibly severe and persistent for a while) antisocial behaviour that arises during the growing years, but play a much smaller role in relation to the persistence of such behaviour into adult life" (ibid: 131) suggesting that genetic effects in persistent offending are likely to operate in criminal behaviour that persists into adult life.

A similar conclusion was reached by Rutter *et al.* (1990) who reviewed a number of twin and adoptee studies examining the relation of genetic influences in adolescent and adult delinquency. Rutter *et al.* (1990) concluded that there is a significant genetic factor in adult delinquency, however, it appears to be greater for recidivist petty crime than for serious and violent offences. It has to be noted, however, that these results should be interpreted with some caution as both twin and adoptee studies are likely to underestimate the effects of parenting in the development of juvenile and adult delinquency as they are likely to sample a restricted range of family environments, as argued by Stoolmiller (1999). This lack of variability in family environments could prevent any associations of parenting and delinquency to be revealed.

Rutter *et al.* (1990), based on the evidence of twin and adoptee studies, concluded that any genetic influence on delinquency is evident mainly for criminal activities that persist into adult life and not for juvenile delinquency which usually does not persist into adult life, which means that for transient juvenile delinquency, environmental factors appear to be the main sources of influence.

CORRELATES OF RECIDIVISM IN JUVENILE AND YOUNG OFFENDERS

A number of studies had been conducted in an attempt to specify certain correlates of continuous re-offenders mainly due to the fact that a large percentage of criminal activity among young offenders is attributable to a small number of individuals who continue their crimes (Wolfgang *et al.*, 1987; Tarling, 1993).

Hanson *et al.* (1984), tried to investigate, among other things, the relationships of certain demographic, individual and family characteristics of 163 continuous juvenile males offenders, based on a retrospective analysis of the offenders' records and utilised an index of recidivism

derived from the total number of arrests of each adolescent divided by his age. They revealed that socialised-aggressive behavior was the most potent predictor of repeated and serious offences, a behaviour that means a strong and loyal commitment to a gang or a delinquent peer group, followed by the age of first arrest, low intellectual ability and family disorganisation.

Ganzer & Sarason (1973), compared one hundred males and one hundred females retained in young offenders institutions, from 11 to 18 years old, from which half in each sample were identified as recidivists based on offending for 20 months after release defined as "... the return to a juvenile institution as either a parole violator or a recommitment, Superior Court conviction with resulting probationary placement, or conviction and incarceration in an adult correctional institution" (p. 1). Consistent with the results of Hanson *et al.* (1984), age at first arrest was significantly related with recidivism for both males and females and from the diagnostic classifications only sociopathic personality discriminated between recidivists and non-recidivists males and females. Verbal intelligence did not differentiate between the two groups in both the male and female samples, which is inconsistent with the results of Hanson *et al.* (1984).

Knight & West (1975), in a longitudinal survey of a representative sample of boys from a working-class neighborhood report on 81 boys -the most delinquent fifth of the sample defined as such both by official convictions and self-report measures of delinquency. Recidivism was assessed as the occurrence of any conviction or self reported delinquent act since the boys were 17 years old until they were interviewed by the age of 18-19. They report that prior convictions of the boys predicted re-offending and in an attempt to control possible confounding relationships between this variable and other predictors, they matched the groups on the number of prior convictions and resulted in 27 pairs. Recidivists attributed their offences to rational motives while non-recidivists to enjoyment, they had committed their offences alone, continued to be involved in the same peer group of their adolescence while non-recidivists said they had abandoned it. Significantly more continuing offenders had a family member with a criminal record and came from a deprived socio-economic background rather than temporary ones and all the above relationships remained significant after controlling for number of juvenile convictions. Another interesting finding reported by the authors is that although I.Q. scores and aggression proneness successfully discriminated between delinquents and non-delinquents in general, these two variables failed to discriminate between recidivists and non-recidivists.

Myner *et al.* (1998), examined offenders who reached age 18 and remained in juvenile jurisdiction until then and defined recidivism as the number of their convictions since they committed their first offence until they reached their 18th birthday. The sample was composed of 138 male juvenile delinquents and data collection relied on the offenders' probation report and mental health file. Two raters quantified the variables of interest from the information available in the case files of each participant. The results of this study has shown that the younger an adolescent engages in offending the more likely he is to continue offending and age at the first conviction was the most potent predictor of subsequent re-offending followed by alcohol abuse, status conviction, length of first incarceration, group home placement and birth order. In this study, socio-economic status was not related to recidivism. A variable that, in the general literature of delinquency and the most specific of recidivism, emerges as controversial. Not only because of its theoretical value of the general sociological perspective which regards socio-economic status as a key theoretical variable in the explanation and prediction of recidivism, but because it is inconsistently related with recidivism.

Niarchos & Routh (1992) in a study of 234 male juveniles, ranging in age between 8 and 18, with a mean age of 14.6, randomly selected from among those arrested and evaluated by the Juvenile Court Mental Health Clinic, attempted, in a longitudinal prospective study, to predict recidivism, defined as return to Juvenile Court within 1 year after the data collection, based on information about several legal, sociodemographic and psychological variables available from the juveniles' assessment reports of a child guidance facility. From a host of variables, recidivism rate could be predicted by the number of prior arrests, level of academic achievement and recommendation for placement in residential care by a psychologist. Number of prior arrests capturing most of the variance predicted. The amount of variance, however, that could be predicted by these three variables, was modest, as Niarchos & Routh (1992) noted and was about 25% of the total variation of recidivism, suggesting that several other factors, not measured in the study, could be operating, as well, in subsequent recidivism.

Niarchos & Routh (1992) also noted that, contrary to their expectations, age of onset of delinquent involvement, as measured by the age of the juveniles' first arrest, did not predict future recidivism, although the age of onset of criminal activity has been found a significant and potent predictor of persistent offending in adolescent and adulthood (Andrews & Bonta, 1984). They, however, noted that the design of the study might not have allowed

such a relationship to be revealed, as the time frame of recidivism was relatively short and recidivism was based on official information from the court records. According to Niarchos & Routh (1992), the combination of the short time frame, insufficient for many delinquent acts to be recorded and official records as the measurement of delinquency, which usually underestimate the frequency of criminal activity, might have restricted the range of involvement in offending, thus preventing a relationship between age of onset of delinquency and subsequent recidivism to be revealed.

Gendreau *et al.* (1996), conducted a meta-analysis of studies between 1970 and 1994 with the focus on adult offender recidivism. Their review concentrated on studies employing a longitudinal design with a follow-up period of at least 6 months, with adult samples (18 years or older) and recidivism was operationalised as “arrest, conviction, incarceration, parole violation, or a combination thereof” (p. 579). It has to be noticed, however, that only published studies were included in the meta-analysis, a fact that does not address the file drawer phenomenon, that is, the inclusion of unpublished studies that do not report significant results and may change the image created by published studies only. In sum, 131 studies were used in the meta-analysis generating 1,141 effect sizes with the criterion variable of recidivism. The authors categorised the variables employed in the study into 18 categories i.e.: risk scales, static predictors such as age, criminal history, history of antisocial behaviour, family criminality, family rearing practices, family structure, gender, intellectual functioning, race and socio-economic status and dynamic predictors such as antisocial personality, companions, criminogenic needs, interpersonal conflict, personal distress, social achievement and substance abuse. (p: 583).

The results from that analysis revealed that each predictor was a significant one of recidivism with risk scales being the most potent ones (.30) followed by delinquent companions (.21), antisocial personality (.18), criminogenic needs (.18) and adult criminal history (.17). Overall, comparing static with dynamic factors, a categorisation employed mainly by Andrews and Bonta (1984), in the prediction of recidivism they concluded that dynamic factors were better predictors of recidivism 54% of the time. A not very impressive finding yet statistically significant and one recognising the usefulness of employing the measurement of dynamic aspects of the individual offender in predicting his/her subsequent re-offending. An aspect mainly neglected in the recidivism literature (Andrews & Bonta, 1984). Apart from the potential aforementioned usefulness of employing

dynamic factors in the prediction of recidivism, the identification of certain correlates or predictors of continuing criminal offending, can possibly inform professionals working in penal settings. Especially those responsible for the rehabilitation of the offender, as these aspects of the inmate are potentially amenable to intervention programmes which concentrate on the individual and try to provide him with means of better adjustment after release (Andrews *et al.*, 1990). Socio-economic class, a controversial variable of delinquency in general, emerged as a predictor, yet only as a weak one, and the same outcome was obtained for intelligence and personal distress. The authors conclude that the results of the meta-analyses provide additional support for theories of differential association and social learning theories, which deal with criminogenic needs, and delinquent associates as key variables while theories of strain, anomie and subcultural ones received weaker support. The limited support obtained for social class as a predictor of delinquency leads the authors to estimate that social class theories will need to consider inclusion of variables related to the individual. This is an estimation in the same line of arguing of Binder (1988) who supports that the dominance of sociology on the explanation of juvenile delinquency witnessed in the 20th century, mainly due to the reluctance of the American cultural elite intellectuals to tolerate the notion of the individual responsibility for offending, especially for young offenders, while blaming society as a whole for the phenomenon appeared more appealing, has started to be considerably challenged. However, this conclusion could be premature since socio-economic status is a variable that is rather skewed in prison populations, and it is possible to assume that socio-economic status can lose its predictive power in terms of predicting recidivism if it represents a constant variable. Howell (1992) argued that for relationships between variables to be revealed and for prediction to be achieved, there has to be a degree of variability in the variables of interest.

With regard to the recidivism of criminal and violent offending among mentally disordered offenders Bonta *et al.* (1998) conducted a meta-analysis in order to investigate whether the predictors of recidivism for offenders with mental disorder differ from those predictors examined for non-disordered offenders. They included both published and unpublished manuscripts, from 1959 to 1995, in their study and only those that employed a longitudinal prospective design. Fifty-eight studies were included in the meta-analysis dealing with 74 predictor variables having been grouped by the authors in four main categories, i.e.: “personal demographics, criminal history, deviant lifestyle-history and clinical” (ibid: 125)

and providing 548 correlations with the criterion variables. They assessed general recidivism as “any evidence of a new criminal offence (arrests, convictions), including a recommitment to a psychiatric hospital because of law-breaking behaviour” (ibid: 125-126) and violent recidivism as “criminal re-offending of a violent nature” (ibid: 126). General recidivism was predicted by age, gender and single marital status, as well as criminal history variables. Moderate, yet significant, results are reported based on poor living conditions, family dysfunction and drug abuse. Within the domain of clinical variables, only antisocial personality and recurrent psychiatric admissions were predictive of recidivism, a finding in line with that reported by Gendreau *et al.* (1996). Socio-economic status, race, seriousness of the offence, education and employment problems failed to predict recidivism. This study showed that predictors of recidivism for non-disordered offenders are the same for offenders with mental health problems and that applied for general as well as violent recidivism. Socio-economic status did not predict recidivism and they argue that the results of the meta-analysis support a social psychological perspective of criminal activity based on the key notions “an established history of benefiting from criminal activity, a social environment that encourages and tolerates crime and criminals, personal attitudes and values supporting criminal behaviour and a personality style that finds high-risk behaviour rewarding” (p. 138). Yet, they acknowledged the need for further work in examining the interrelationships and the degree of overlap between variables as well as the identification of possible main latent constructs connecting these elements together.

CROSS-SECTIONAL COMMUNITY STUDIES OF FREQUENT JUVENILE RE-OFFENDERS

A different approach to the study of frequent juvenile offenders was followed by Hagell & Newburn (1996). They chose to study those young re-offenders who, in a year, have been arrested three or more times, aged between 10 and 16 years old. The selection of the base sample or of the population of interest was based on official records, specifically, police arrest records of two different geographical areas in England. The study was designed to explore certain issues regarding the social background and perceptions of a group of young re-offenders, and was different from previous studies on chronic and/or persistent young re-offenders as it did not rely solely on incarcerated populations. At the same time, it allowed for a significant number of potential interviewees to be included, in contrast with general population studies which generally rely on cohort or high risk populations, studies that generally identify a small number of persistent offenders, unless a very large number of youngsters is studied. However, while approximately 531 young people were identified as re-offenders and an attempt was made to interview almost half of them, due to difficulties of obtaining co-operation, either from the families of the children or the children themselves only 74, that is 29% of the target sample was interviewed, and while this was the best outcome that could have been achieved by the researchers, the results could not be readily generalised to the whole population of young re-offenders originally defined. According to the authors, it was those children who could not be traced that led the most chaotic and disturbed lives and possibly experiencing more, and to a greater degree, adversities, thus it is possible to assume that the results overall might underestimate the presence of risk factors in the population of young re-offenders as a whole.

Hagell & Newburn (1996) further argued that although the base sample consisted of youngsters arrested three or more times in a year and covered a wide range of geographical locations, the reliance of the selection of the sample on official records does not permit any generalisations to youngsters who were offending yet, were not caught by the police. The base sample may represent those youngsters who are processed by the police, although not only because of their frequent offending but also because they were better known to the police and subjected to increased surveillance.

Hagell & Newburn (1996) compared the final interviewed sample (N=74) with the base sample (N=531) and the sample selected for interviews (N=251). They noted that the interviewed sample did not differ from the base sample in terms of sex ratios, age, and number of known and alleged offences, however, “comparisons of the interviewees with those selected for interview suggested that those successfully seen were from the less frequent end of the continuum” (ibid: 9).

The young re-offenders of the study reported quite satisfactory relationships with both their mothers and fathers, while the extent to which these accounts were affected by presentation bias from the subjects is not known. Hagell & Newburn (1996) noted “they might be due, in part, to an understandable level of insecurity about “betraying” mothers to strangers” (p.11). In general, 7% had been in foster care, 36% in children’s home, 49% admitted having run away from home at least for a night, and often for longer. In terms of their peer groups, 49% of the young re-offenders in the study said that their

peer group was larger in number than most of the people, 49% that it was the same age group as themselves while 45% that their peer group was generally older than themselves, they had frequent contact with them, 72% said that they saw them more often than six times per week, 63% said that their friends did not disapprove of them, 82% admitted that they were getting into trouble with police with their friends while 40% said that their parents disapproved of their friends.

In terms of their daily activities almost two thirds had left school, with 76% reporting having been temporarily excluded from school and 51% permanently excluded. From those who had left school about a third were unemployed while 16% did not do anything. In addition half of the girls in the study were either parents or were currently pregnant, while three boys were either parents or their partners were expecting a baby. In terms of rates of conception in girls the results, although clearly indicative, tend to underrepresent the rates as only information for babies was sought and not number of pregnancies.

Although experimentation with alcohol was no higher than in schoolchildren populations, the subjects reported heavier use, and similar results were obtained for drug abuse which was heavier and with more variety in comparison to the general population of similar age. In general more than half of the subjects have been referred for counseling and/or psychological help at some point in their lives.

The results of the study were suggestive of the extent and the nature of social disorganisation that young re-offenders had been experiencing in their lives. From comparisons with data of the general population of similar age, it appeared that both the number and the degree of the adversities experienced by the young re-offenders were considerable. In addition, it was noted an absence of behavioural norms anticipated by the sample according to their age, especially in terms of daily activities. The results although of an exploratory nature, are unique in terms of the population that they could be applied to and are raising important issues that should be further examined, if more light is to be shed on young adolescent re-offenders.

PROSPECTIVE LONGITUDINAL STUDIES OF HIGH RISK SAMPLES PREDICTING CHRONIC JUVENILE AND ADULT OFFENDING

Farrington & West (1993) further attempted to examine the predictive role of certain variables measured when the sample was between the age of 8 to 10, with the aim

to predict chronic versus non-chronic offenders, offenders versus non-offenders and chronic offenders versus the rest of the sample, with the status of offenders or chronic offenders according to recorded offences. They reported that chronic offenders compared to the rest of the sample could have been predicted by earlier application of measurements of troublesomeness, having a delinquent sibling, daring and having a convicted parent. Chronic offenders compared to offenders could have been predicted by earlier measurements of troublesomeness, having a delinquent sibling, daring, low social class and coming from a Roman Catholic family. In general convicted offenders in comparison to non-offenders could have been predicted by early measurements of having a convicted parent, low junior school attainment, poor housing, separation from a parent, high dishonesty and coming from a Roman Catholic family, while social isolation in terms of having no or few friends and having a well-educated father, could be regarded as protective factors as they were inversely related to becoming a convicted offender.

Farrington & West (1993), however, noted that the construction of a prediction measure for chronic offenders based on these factors found uniquely related to chronic offending, would not be suggested. Such a measure would capitalise on chance in predicting chronic offenders and would attenuate the degree of predictive efficiency. As a more realistic alternative, they proposed a combination of five basic characteristics measured at age 8 to 10 reflecting certain deprivation features such as "low family income, large family size, a convicted parent, low non-verbal IQ, and poor child-rearing behaviour" (ibid: 512) which are less likely to overestimate predictive efficiency. Sixty three participants in the sample could be identified as "vulnerable", that is having three or more of these characteristics, and from these 63 "vulnerable" participants 14 became chronic offenders, (having been convicted 9 or more times according to official records), 32 became non-chronic offenders and 17 were never convicted. From the 154 males without any of these adverse features at age 8 to 10 only 3 became chronic offenders, 34 were at some point convicted and the majority of 117 were never convicted.

Farrington & West (1993) thus argued that most of the chronic offenders, by the age of 32 in the Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development, could have been predicted on the basis of the knowledge of existence of these five simple predictor variables at the age of 8 to 10. They further attempted to investigate any factors with protective effects, that is, any factors in the background of the vulnerable boys who were not convicted in comparison to

those boys that have been convicted. They identified social isolation, having few or no friends and being shy or withdrawn at age 8 to be acting as a protective factor against conviction to those boys with general vulnerable backgrounds. They proposed that, as juvenile delinquency is often committed within a group context, boys without a delinquent peer group were less likely to have many opportunities or peer pressure to engage in delinquent acts. In general however, by the age of 32, those males from vulnerable backgrounds yet socially isolated who have not been convicted were not leading successful lives, suggesting that social isolation might have been a protective factor in terms of delinquency in these males yet it was still related to general social dysfunction in adult life. Those males were likely to be living in dirty home conditions, not having a family of their own, having never been married, were not home owners, lived alone, were in conflict with their parents, had large debts and had low status and low paid jobs.

FACTORS DIFFERENTIALLY ASSOCIATED WITH INITIATION, ESCALATION, PERSISTENCE AND DESISTANCE IN JUVENILE OFFENDING

Loeber *et al.* (1991) argued that, in contrast to views arguing that there is nothing of significance in the concepts of age of onset and age of desistance, and that there is no reason to assume that the causes of criminal activity are different at different ages and developmental periods, the above assumptions do not account for the fact that most of the juveniles initiate delinquent acts when they are aged around 10 to 11, continue their criminal activities which peak overall at 17 years of age and then the majority stop their delinquent careers while a percentage shows a persistence of criminal activity that continues even around their early thirties (Rutter *et al.*, 1998; Farrington & West, 1993; Tarling, 1993; Henry *et al.*, 1993; Farrington, 1995). Loeber *et al.* (1991) further attempted to examine longitudinally the different correlates of initiation, escalation and desistance of three samples of boys at grades one, four and seven, each sample at each grade consisting of the top 30% (N=250) of the most antisocial boys and an equal number of the remainder of the sample randomly selected.

Loeber *et al.* (1991) noted that many correlates of initiation were the same with those of escalation and desistance and although one could argue that differentiations between the three processes should not be further examined, the authors nevertheless went on to closely examine

the issue which was explored in three ways. The identification of variables related to one process but not the others, the examination of the strength of the association of the variables with all the three processes and examination of the way correlates of one process were related to correlates of the other processes.

Initiation of offending was related and predicted by physical aggression, oppositional behaviour, attention deficit/hyperactivity and other covert disruptive behaviours such as manipulation, family variables of coercive interactions between parents and their children and inadequate supervision, as well as internalising behaviours such as shyness and depression, across the three samples. All of them factors that have been found related and predictive of juvenile delinquency, yet, in this study their role in initiating offending behaviour by children and adolescents was highlighted. The results, according to Loeber *et al.* (1991), are of particular importance both for preventive interventions of juvenile delinquency and, especially, for early onset delinquency which has been found related to chronic and serious offending later in life.

Escalation was found to be related with poor school functioning, physical aggression, covert disruption, favorable attitudes towards deviance and family functioning. It has to be noted that most of these variables were overlapping with the variables found associated with initiation and escalation and that the positive associations were most prominent for the middle sample and secondly to the oldest. Yet, they were not replicated for the younger sample, suggesting a lack of knowledge of the factors associated with escalation of offending in younger children.

Desistance from offending was related to low shyness, low disruptive behaviour, favorable attitudes to school and non-offending and strict discipline for more than one of the samples. In addition, it was observed that several variables were associated with desistance in the different samples, with school adjustment and scholastic performance being related to the younger boys, and family environment and association with non-delinquent peers for the aged ten and older boys. Overall the results suggested, both a shift of the factors associated with desistance from offending in different age groups, as well as, the presence of the same factors related with desistance across different ages.

Further analysis by Loeber *et al.* (1991) examining whether initiation, escalation and desistance from offending represent different processes, revealed that most of the correlates of initiation were not associated with escalation and some of the correlates of escalation did not apply to initiation while the strength of the correlations

were stronger for initiation than escalation of juvenile offending. The results were interpreted as suggesting different and distinct variables responsible for initiation of offending in comparison to escalation of offending, with the implication that if prevention of juvenile offending is of interest rather different ways should be employed for addressing initial involvement in delinquency and further preventing escalation of juvenile offending. A rather different picture emerged for the correlates of initiation and desistance with a considerable overlap of the variables associated with both processes, thus suggesting that initiation and desistance from juvenile offending "appear to reflect positive and negative aspects of a similar process" (Loeber *et al.*, 1991, p. 81).

CONCLUSION

While some adolescents engage in minor and not serious delinquent acts, there is a proportion of youngsters who seem to persist in their offending behaviour. As a result, a number of studies have been conducted in an attempt to specify certain correlates of continuous re-offenders mainly due to the fact that a large percentage of criminal activity among young offenders is attributable to a small number of individuals who continue their crimes (Wolfgang *et al.* 1987; Tarling, 1993).

Certain studies have been conducted to identify possible correlates of persistent offenders that are not dissimilar from the main correlates of delinquency. Dysfunctional family characteristics (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber; 1998; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Loeber & Dishion, 1983; Ganzer & Saranson, 1973), social instability (McLoyd, 1998), poor educational and employment attainment (Farrington & West, 1993; Myner *et al.*, 1998), substance abuse (Myner *et al.*, 1998) are among the most important.

The main feature of the literature about recidivism is that the theoretical framework mainly employed is that of social criminology. The main correlates searched and actually identified are mainly social factors (Binder, 1988) which are regarded as criminogenic and reflect the trend for issues of delinquency being examined through the sociological perspective and with the subsequent suggestion that, unless crucial changes are put forward by society for a change in societal structures, the problem of delinquency will always be there as a side effect of modern, institutionalised, political-economic societal functions.

Similar statements, whether subject to debate or not, may be useful to governments and policy makers who are responsible for finding ways and initiating policies for

reduction, prevention and rehabilitation of social instability which appears to be criminogenic. They are of limited help to those institutions and the staff employed there, such as prison services, who have to deal with the individual offender and his rehabilitation. In addition, little research has examined these issues in young offenders' correctional institutions despite the fact that their population, at any given point in time, is highly likely to recidivate (Rutter *et al.*, 1997) and they represent a high risk population that significantly contributes to the level and the extent of overall criminal activity upon release from the correctional settings. Similarly, Rutter *et al.* (1998) argued that targeting high risks groups, highly likely to commit delinquent acts, with the aim of preventing further criminal involvement has been proposed as a cost effective approach.

The individual is target of challenge by the prison's staff, and how and what he perceives, interprets, thinks, feels, expects and plans. Knowing what and how a juvenile offender thinks will enable the parties involved in his rehabilitation to have a better idea of his cognitive representations of his own offending and deal with that appropriately (Dodge, 1993).

Focusing solely on social factors that facilitate offending, to the exclusion of individual characteristics, provides only a partial view of the puzzle of offending. Short & Meier (1981) argued that delinquency in general can be conceptualised and examined at different levels of explanation. They identify the individual level, where the focus is on the individual characteristics, the macrosociological level, focusing on the role of social systems and cultural variation in explaining delinquency and the microsociological level, which focuses on situational determinants of delinquency in terms of role and reference groups and the processes of ongoing interaction. Short & Meier (1981) argued that further understanding of delinquency should consider interdisciplinary research at every level of analysis with the aim to "recognise different levels of explanation and to seek conceptual bridges between them" (*ibid.*: 468). Possible interactions of the individual's way of thinking and the social environment he belongs to, may be fruitfully identified and the picture become more complete, thereby providing a clearer idea of the possible causes of offending.

Consistent with the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) that problematic behaviour of children and adolescents could not be examined outside the contexts they live in, several researchers (Farmer & Farmer, 2001; Barrera *et al.*, 2002; Conger *et al.*, 2002; Wadsworth & Compass, 2002), considered child-rearing practices as mediators of the relationship between social

disadvantage and family structural variables, on the one hand, and juvenile delinquency, on the other, in line with Rutter (2005) that adverse environmental experiences are a critical factor of psychosocial poor adjustment.

On the other hand, regarding adolescent delinquency, it has been proposed (Rutter, 1994; Rutter *et al.*, 1997; 1998) that the causes of antisocial and offending behaviour are not easily captured under one causal factor – rather, many factors are operating in adolescents' and young adults' offending behaviour, consistent with the principle of equifinality (Thornberry *et al.*, 2001). A combination of various risk factors with either additive or/ and interactional effects has been proposed (Farrington, 1995).

However, as the experience of adverse family environment does not lead everyone to the experience of poor psychosocial functioning, a within-person approach has been followed for the identification of pathways or mediational mechanisms that translate experience of family functioning into developmental problems in adolescence (Cicchetti & Rogosh, 1996; Bolger & Patterson, 2001; Kiriakidis, 2006). The mediational role of family functioning is more evident in the relation between social disadvantage and delinquency.

Rutter (2005) argued that the development of poor psychosocial functioning, including antisocial and delinquent behaviour, is actually mediated through several mediational processes. He argued that adverse experience has a long term effect on psychosocial functioning through either/ or cognitive/ affectional working models, representation of the self, interpersonal interaction and several environmental and social experiences and interactions. It seems that the search for several risk factors responsible for persistent offending has come to its limits. A within-person approach searching for mediational mechanisms seems quite promising for the elimination of the processes responsible for persistent offending.

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