

SIBLING STUDY

Research Notes

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Young people



criminality:

the Sibling Study

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THE CAUSES OF CRIME

One of the central issues characterising criminology as a discipline is the search for the causes of crime.

In 1979, John Braithwaite (1979: 23) positioned this issue within a broader discussion of the relationship between social class and crime and asked:

Is the lower class more criminal than the rest of the population? Do people who live in lower class areas engage in more crime than people who live in middle class areas? These

questions have dominated modern criminology and have stimulated more empirical research than other criminological hypotheses.

When we extend these questions to more recent analyses of gender and ethnicity, it is salutary to realise just how limited our real advances in understanding the social bases of

INTRODUCTION

This paper is the first of a series of papers drawing upon the findings of the Sibling Study in order to explore adolescent criminality in Australia. The Sibling Study is an investigation, conducted over several years, of young people’s involvement in criminality and the criminal justice system. The study is based upon self-reported offending from three groups of young people – (1) a group selected from a representative spread of state schools in the general Brisbane area, (2) a group of known offenders, and (3) a group characterised by backgrounds of chronic disadvantage (i.e. ‘vulnerable’). The social and conceptual context of the study is outlined in this introductory paper, together with the methodological framework of the study and some preliminary findings.

The primary aim of this paper is to provide an introduction to the Sibling Study research project. This project is the largest research exercise of its type ever undertaken in Australia, and, indeed, there are only a handful of equivalent studies internationally. The Sibling Study is managed by a consortium of researchers from the University of Queensland, Griffith University, Bond University and the Criminal Justice Commission. In addition, the project has been supported and funded by the Criminology Research Council and the Queensland departments of Justice, Corrective Services and Families.¹

criminality have actually been. In particular, our understanding of the bases of criminality in adolescence remains underdeveloped and marked by persistent contradictions.

¹ Funding was provided by the Australian Research Council within the terms of the then Collaborative Research Grants Scheme. The CJC was the industry partner for the project and matched the ARC’s funding support. Further financial support was later provided by the Criminology Research Council.

Nevertheless, a considerable body of researchers are now very productively targeting 'multiple risk and protective factors at multiple levels (the individual, the family, the immediate social group, and the larger community)' (National Crime Prevention 1999: 100).

As individual causal factors are increasingly identified, patterns of causation are ever more clearly revealed, thereby allowing the development of strategies aimed at promoting 'community safety, pro-social behaviour and healthy development as well as prevent drug misuse and crime' (Farrington 1996:4).

In terms of research squarely directed at these very practical goals, there have been various useful, large-scale, longitudinal self-report studies that have both explanatory and preventative objectives. For example there is the Youth in Transition project, which focuses on strain (Agnew 1989), self-esteem (Rosenberg et al. 1989) and morality (Matseuda 1989).

In addition, the National Youth Survey has examined, among other things, drug use (Elliott et al. 1985), social control (Agnew 1991) and delinquent attitudes (Reed and Rose 1991), while the Concordia High Risk

The Sibling Study looks at such factors as social class, family and personal attitudes to find out what causes some young people to be propelled into criminal behaviour.



Project is investigating psycho-social risk factors (Serbin et al. 1991).

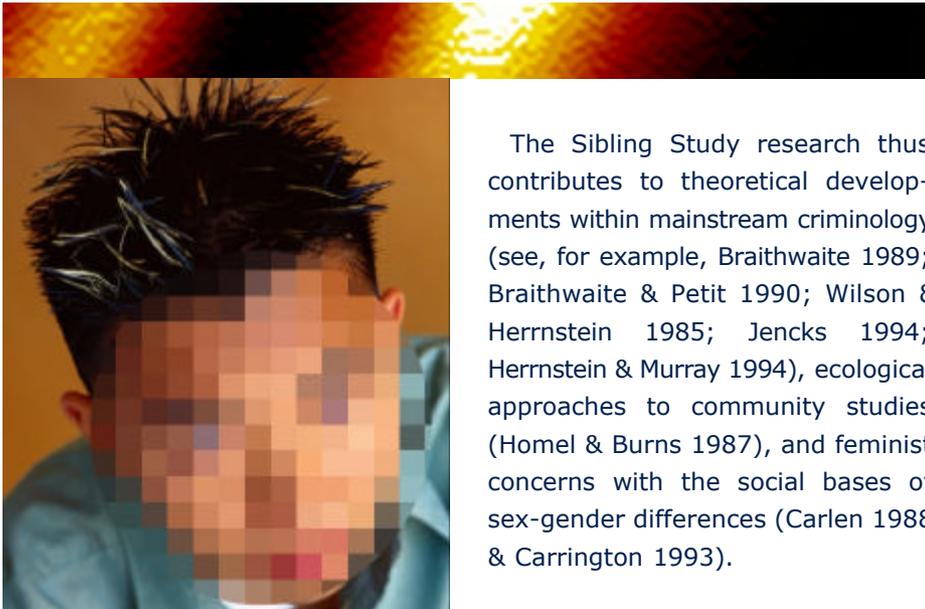
Also noteworthy are the Bloomington Study (Bates et al. 1991) and the Dunedin Multi-Disciplinary Project (Moffitt 1990), which focus upon behavioural problems, and the Mater Study of Pregnancy and its (very much later) Outcomes (Najman et al. 1997), which examines 'social health' and its development.

Collectively, these studies provide a means of identifying a wide range of causative or risk factors that may propel young people into criminal behaviour or careers.

The Sibling Study research program constitutes a valuable contribution to these general endeavours because of the extent to which it incorporates factors at the macro level such as social class, factors at the meso level such as family and peers, and factors at the micro level such as individual attitudes and beliefs.

THE DETERMINANTS OF DELINQUENT BEHAVIOUR IN ADOLESCENCE: THE SIBLING STUDY

Because a great deal of criminal behaviour has its origins in adolescence and earlier, this period of the life cycle is a particularly strategic one for study in theoretical



and practical terms. While adult criminality typically follows from delinquent behaviour in adolescence, the risk factors associated with juvenile delinquency are not well understood.

Because delinquent criminal behaviour constitutes a particular response of some individuals to their environment, we need to improve our understanding of the nature and extent to which young people are embedded in different networks of social relationships and how these group memberships increase (or decrease) the likelihood of particular individuals becoming involved in delinquent or criminal behaviour.

The Sibling Study research thus contributes to theoretical developments within mainstream criminology (see, for example, Braithwaite 1989; Braithwaite & Petit 1990; Wilson & Herrnstein 1985; Jencks 1994; Herrnstein & Murray 1994), ecological approaches to community studies (Homel & Burns 1987), and feminist concerns with the social bases of sex-gender differences (Carlen 1988 & Carrington 1993).

In less theoretical and more policy-oriented terms, the aim of the Sibling Study research is the generation of detailed information that can be readily used as a basis for initiatives to be implemented at the community level.

For example, the research findings offer direction for police networking programs and community policing initiatives such as those presently being trialled in different States. The study also seeks to make available information that can readily feed in to broader initiatives such as the national crime prevention strategies being developed by the Commonwealth Government.

It is very practical concerns of this sort that are central to the Sibling Study research program. The research is thus explicitly oriented towards enhancing our capacity to manage factors that elevate juvenile delinquency and criminality rates and facilitate the exercise of factors that reduce rates of juvenile delinquency or criminality.

METHODOLOGY

The Sibling Study research design was formulated so as to permit a detailed quantitative comparison of the life course of serious offenders with the life courses of non-offenders. Three key features distinguish the Sibling Study research design. Firstly, the design is quasi-experimental incorporating three quite discrete cohorts or groups.

These three groups are a school-based group comprising 677 respondents, an offender-based group comprising 226 respondents and a chronically marginalised/disadvantaged (vulnerable) group comprising 160 young people.² Secondly, wherever possible, the sample draws upon mixed-sex sibling pairs aged between 12 and

2 There is also a small cohort of 62 urban Indigenous young people. However, the data obtained from this group are not being made publicly available at this time (see the more detailed overview of the Sibling Study research design by clicking here).

18 years and not separated in age by more than three years.

Thirdly, the study is semi-longitudinal. Respondents were first interviewed in 1995. In 1998–99, they were re-interviewed, and, subject to funding, a third wave of interviews will be conducted around 2002 or 2003.

The quasi-experimental design was used in order to economically acquire sub-samples of particular interest. In particular, the dependant variable, criminal adolescents, was deliberately over-sampled. The aim of this over-sampling was to reduce the standard error associated with multivariate analyses of the determinants of juvenile criminality.

For the same reason, young people deemed to be 'vulnerable' because of chronic marginalisation/disadvantage were over-sampled. The final group of young people drawn from a range of south-east Queensland high schools serves as a 'control' group because they most closely approximate the general population of adolescents in Australia.

The use of mixed-sex sibling pairs was perhaps the most innovative feature of the Sibling Study research design. This strategy was adopted in order to exploit the well-established finding about juvenile criminality that males typically offend at around five times the rate of females (Ogilvie, Lynch & Bell 2000).

The notion guiding the initial project development was that the identification of those aspects of socialisation closely associated with the *gendering* of young people was simultaneously also likely to identify the factors associated with the sex-effects so consistently observed in studies of youth crime. By using mixed-sex sibling pairs, there was obviously also some degree of control being exercised over the potentially confounding effects of background or home environment.

In both waves of interviews conducted so far, the survey instrument was constructed in terms of a number of discrete modules: Neighbourhood, Family, Social Networks, School, Personality Structure, Delinquent/Criminal Behaviour.

SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Social class

When examining social class, it is important to keep in mind that the only information available about parental occupation is that provided by the adolescent respondents. Many young people did not have a particularly clear sense of their parents' work.

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Table 1: Cohort by class (row percentage)

Cohort	White-Collar	Blue-Collar	No employed parent	N
School	67.4	23.0	9.5	678
Vulnerable	25.7	61.0	13.2	159
Offender	30.5	48.6	20.8	226

Prob = 0.001 [Back to text](#)

For this reason, the very simple dichotomy, white-collar/blue-collar, has been used. The occupational data on which the distinction is based were coded to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ASCO) categories.

The admittedly crude white-collar/blue-collar distinction represents our best attempt at developing a satisfactorily robust measure that categorizes parents' occupation, given the often sketchy nature of the data upon which the measure is based.

Notwithstanding the cautionary notes as to the data quality, on the basis of the information contained in tables 1 and 2, it is possible to create a 'household class' measure in order to obtain a more complete sense of the family background of the respondents.

This household class variable designates a household as white-collar if either or both parents are in white-collar occupations.

Table 2: Would you like to move from your area? (row percentage)

Cohort	White-Collar	Blue-Collar	No employed parent	N
School	21.4	54.8	23.7	658
Vulnerable	29.9	43.3	26.7	157
Offender	33.0	47.2	19.7	218

Prob = 0.002 [Back to text](#)

A household can thus only be designated as blue-collar if both parents are in blue-collar occupations or one parent is blue-collar and the other is not working. A household is not assigned a class category at all if no parent is recorded as employed.

As can be seen in **table 1** there are very clear (and statistically significant) household class differences across the three cohorts. The majority of the school cohort has white-collar status (67 per cent), followed by 23 per cent who are blue-collar and 10 per cent with no employed parent and, therefore, no class designation.

In comparison, the majority of the 'vulnerable' cohort are assigned blue-collar status (61 per cent) with

26 per cent being white-collar and 13 per cent having no employed parent. Within the offender cohort just under 50 per cent are assigned blue-collar status, 30.5 per cent are white-collar, and 21 per cent cannot be assigned a class position.

Community ecology

While social class is an important factor in obtaining an understanding of the situation of the adolescents within each of the three cohorts, this factor does not provide a very complete picture of the environmental context. **Table 2** takes up the issue of neighbourhood context in terms of whether or not the respondents wish to move from the area in which they live.

If we turn to **table 2**, we see some interesting patterns. Nearly 55 per cent of the school cohort would rather stay in their area, with 24 per cent not being sure and 21 per cent preferring to move. For the vulnerable cohort, 43 per cent would like to stay, while nearly 30 per cent would rather move, and 27 per cent were 'unsure'.

Within the offender cohort, just over 47 per cent were happy where they were, but 33 per cent would prefer to move and 20 per cent were not sure. There are then systematic, although not tremendously large differences, in the environmental context experienced by the three cohorts.

The school cohort does seem to find their local area more accommodating than either of the other two cohorts. Even though these between-group differences are rather modest, they are nevertheless statistically significant ($P = 0.002$).

Family and peer relations

While the preceding tables examining class and neighbourhood provide some useful indicators of background characteristics of the families with whom adolescents live, they do not provide direct information about the impact of

these characteristics of social inequality upon the adolescents participating in the study.

A number of questions examining different aspects of family impact were included in the questionnaire. For the purposes of this paper, we will briefly examine the level of emotional support respondents report having received in their childhood.

Statistically significant differences between the cohorts are apparent (see **table 3**). As can be seen, while 30.5 per cent of the school cohort report high emotional support, only 14 per cent of the vulnerable sample and 10 per cent of the offender cohort report similar levels.

At the opposite extreme we see that the offender and the vulnerable cohorts are relatively similar with 34 per cent and 33 per cent respectively reporting low levels of emotional support, in marked contrast to the school cohort where only 12 per cent report a similar low

level of emotional support while growing up.

The Sibling Study instrument also contains a series of questions designed to tap the importance that adolescents placed upon peer networks.

Table 4 reports the distributions over the peer alignment measure. This measure was designed to determine whether, in a situation offering the opportunity to engage in criminal acts with friends, wider social norms would be favoured over personal friendships, or whether friends would be favoured at the expense of more general normative values.

Again we discover statistically significant differences between the cohorts. **Table 4** reports the likelihood of respondents joining in criminal activities if their friends were engaging in them. We find the, by now, predictable pattern of between-cohort effects with only 7.5 per cent of the school cohort

Table 3: Emotional support received from parents (Row percentage)

Cohort	Low	Moderate	High	Total N
School	11.6	57.8	30.5	678
Vulnerable	33.3	52.8	13.8	159
Offender	33.6	56.6	9.7	226

Prob = 0.001 [Back to text](#)

favouring friends over norms compared with 33 per cent of the vulnerable cohort and 38 per cent of the offender cohort, although, in saying this, it is also worth noting that in all three groups the respondents were still more likely to favour norms. Over 50 per cent of both the vulnerable and offender cohort chose this option.

Self-reported delinquency

The extent and nature of delinquent behaviour was determined by responses to several general questions and some specific items from the Mak (1993) scale.



Table 4: Peer alignment (row percentage)

Cohort	Norms		Friends	
	prioritised	Undecided	prioritised	N
School	86.4	6.0	7.5	678
Vulnerable	59.7	7.5	32.7	159
Offender	50.8	11.5	37.6	226

Prob = 0.001 [Back to text](#)

Table 5 contains 37 items that have been adapted from Mak's Self Report Delinquency Scale for Australian adolescents.

Thirty-three of the items describe either deviant or criminal activities. The items range in seriousness from playing pranks on someone on the telephone to break and enter and other acts of personal violence, property crime and drug and alcohol use.



The original wording of items was modified to simplify the language, and an item on cheating on games machines was omitted as it was seen to duplicate the item dealing with stealing from dispensing machines.

Two of the items originally asked respondents if they had used LSD and if they had abused barbiturates. Ecstasy and Speed were added to the 'used LSD' item, and the 'abused barbiturates' item was modified into a question that specified pills, puffers or medicine for fun when they (the respondents) were not sick. Presented with the list of activities, respondents were asked to indicate which they had carried out in the last 12 months.

Preliminary analysis reveals that less than half the sample (46 per cent) stated that they had never done anything that they thought was against the law while 67 per cent asserted that they had never had any formal contact with the criminal justice system.

Focusing on the total sample, it can be seen that the activities fall into three major groups: those reported by less than 20 per cent of the sample; those reported by between 20 per cent and 25 per cent; and those reported by over 25 per cent. The most common activities related to telephone pranks, buying and drinking alcohol in a public place, using cannabis, getting into a group fight and shoplifting.

The least common offences concerned forced sex, drink-driving, racing with other cars, joy riding in a stolen car and stealing car or bicycle parts. The great majority of the remainder of the offences were between these extremes. Not surprisingly, participation in delinquent acts is least likely in the school cohort and most likely in the offender cohort. Also as we would expect, the 'vulnerable' cohort falls between these two groups.

In terms of individual types of illegal behaviours, the data present some perhaps surprising findings. Both the offender and vulnerable groups had used cannabis at more than three times the level reported by the school group (65 per cent, 60 per cent, and 18 per cent respectively).

Table 5: Percentage of self-reported delinquent involvement by cohort

ASRDS item	PARTICIPATION RATE (%)			
	School (n=548)	Offenders (n=196)	Vulnerable (n=141)	Total (n=885)
Forced sex	2.0	4.1	4.3	2.8
Used ecstasy/acid/speed	2.2	37.2	35.5	15.3
Joy-riding in stolen car	2.7	38.3	19.9	13.3
Break and enter	2.9	51.0	27.7	17.5
Starting a fire	3.6	14.8	17.0	8.2
Driven after drinking	3.8	26.5	21.3	11.6
Stolen parts from car	4.0	30.1	22.7	12.8
Stolen a bicycle or parts	4.0	27.6	17.7	11.4
Driven unregistered car	4.9	33.7	19.9	13.7
Damage public property	5.1	31.6	29.1	14.8
Used weapon in fight	5.1	37.2	19.9	14.6
Raced with other cars	6.0	32.1	17.0	13.6
Used medicines for fun	6.4	27.6	29.1	14.7
Stolen \$10 or less	7.3	53.1	41.8	22.9
Run away from home	7.8	38.4	30.5	18.2
Used force to get things	8.4	36.2	29.4	17.9
Stolen from dispenser	9.3	29.1	28.4	16.7
Damage private property	10.8	39.8	36.2	21.2
Damage school property	11.7	34.2	36.9	20.7
Nasty phone calls	12.4	26.0	26.2	17.6
Drinking in public place	13.9	59.2	50.4	29.7
Beaten someone up	14.1	52.6	35.5	26.0
Graffiti on public places	14.2	39.8	37.6	23.6
Shoplifted	15.9	54.6	47.6	29.5
Not paid entrance fee	17.0	47.4	31.9	26.1
Seen an R-rated film	17.9	43.4	29.1	25.3
Used marijuana/hash	18.4	65.3	60.3	35.5
Driven without licence	18.8	61.2	29.1	29.8
Stolen \$10 or more	19.9	31.1	38.3	25.3
Group fight	20.3	58.2	36.9	31.3
Skipped class/school	22.4	57.7	45.4	33.9
Bought alcohol	23.4	66.8	52.8	37.6
Telephone tricks	35.2	42.9	44.7	38.4

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Programs and policies aimed at interrupting the progression from trivial acts of delinquency to more serious criminality need to be developed to respond to the needs of marginalised youth.

Only 2 per cent of the school group had used ecstasy, acid or speed in the previous 12 months compared with 37 per cent of the offender group and 36 per cent of the vulnerable group.

This closeness of the percentages reported by the offender and vulnerable groups versus the very much lower figures reported for the school group is the single most distinguishing feature of the data presented in **table 5**. If we turn to more serious drug use we see an even more stark illustration of this phenomenon.

This general pattern holds across almost half the items with only the

'break and enter' item signalling an unambiguous difference between the offender and vulnerable groups.

This aspect of the data raises important questions about relative frequency of offending, relative visibility of offending, and relative access to 'diversionary' strategies.

CONCLUSION

The data reported in this paper constitute a broad introduction to the Sibling Study. They provide a unique opportunity to advance both our theoretical and practical understanding of the factors implicated in delinquency.

While it is not surprising to discover that young people in the offender cohort are characterised by having no employed parent, wanting to move from their area if they could, receiving low emotional support and favouring their peers over norm-abiding behaviours, the more general message contained in this data is one that needs to be recognised by all agencies working with young offenders.

Programs and policies aimed at interrupting the progression from relatively trivial acts of delinquency to more serious criminality need to be developed to respond to the needs of marginalised (and so 'vulnerable') youth. In saying this, however, we need to recognise that 'marginalisation' or 'vulnerability' is a broad concept that encompasses low levels of emotional support in childhood as much as it does levels of access to public amenities.

Precisely because it can encompass this breadth of issues, the Sibling Study is important. The research findings to date are consistent with both the 'mainstream' criminology of the last forty to fifty years, and the newer 'multiple risks/pathways' approaches that have forcefully emerged in the last four to five years.

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