

Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties: Antisocial and Delinquent Behaviour

Excerpts from the Report on the Schools Survey Submitted to Justice Canada

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THE SCHOOLS SURVEY

Background

Educators today work with an increasingly diverse student population, comprising youngsters with troubled backgrounds and emotional and behavioural difficulties. These difficulties result in learning problems, social ineptness and aggression in classrooms, playgrounds, and surrounding neighbourhoods. For years, child care advocates have cited the relationship between children's early learning opportunities and experiences and their life success. Anecdotal and observational data have been supported by longitudinal studies and extended by recent findings in neuroscience (Wolfe & Brandt, 1998). Although consensus exists that early intervention for disadvantaged children yields long-term positive outcomes, there is no agreement as to exactly what processes mediate the benefits, nor is there widespread systematic application of research findings.

Learning Disabilities and Behavioural Disorders

Children with learning disabilities and behavioural disorders are 1) more likely to come into contact with the juvenile justice system and 2) more likely to be incarcerated (Leone, Rutherford, & Nelson, 1991). A recent U.S. study (McGarvey & Waite, 2000) demonstrated the high incidence (more than 40%) of special education needs among incarcerated juveniles. A substantial literature validates a relationship between ADHD and increased risk for subsequent involvement in antisocial behaviour (Biederman et al., 1996; Hechtman, 1996; MacDonald & Achenbach, 1996; Shamsie et al., 1999; Taylor et al., 1996). Aggressive behaviour measured from ages 6 to 13 consistently predicts later violence among males. Many researchers have noted the continuity in antisocial behavior from early aggression to violent crime (Loeber, 1990, 1996; Loeber & Hay, 1996, Olweus, 1979). A longitudinal Swedish study found that two-thirds of boys with high teacher-rated aggression scores at ages 10 and 13 had criminal records for violent offenses by age 26. They were over six times more likely than boys who were not rated aggressive to be violent offenders (Stattin & Magnusson, 1989). Thus, although serious delinquency often reaches its apex during adolescence, the onset of delinquent and antisocial behavior occurs much earlier for most offenders (Thornberry, 1998).

Prevention experiments with children have confirmed the hypothesis that early childhood factors are important predictors of delinquent behavior and that a cumulative effect model best fits the data. Findings support the idea that prevention programs should begin at an early age and should be comprehensive. Studies of childhood interventions with socially disruptive behavior, cognitive deficits, or parenting as an outcome generally have positive effects (Tremblay et al, 1996, Wasserman, et al., 2000). It has been recommended that these studies (often small-scale confirmation or replication experiments) be supplemented by large-scale field experiments to test the efficacy and cost of developmental crime prevention in regular service systems (Tonry & Farrington, 1995).

Schools offer a practical avenue for standardized and systematized prevention activity via public health programming models. Because of their education and professional training, teachers have skill levels to help identify children with difficulties. The profession is governed by regulatory bodies and the educational system is publicly funded. It was with this background in mind, and the possibility of yielding helpful data that the schools survey was initiated.

The Schools Survey

The Schools Survey was an initiative to offer teachers and schools an opportunity to report anonymously and confidentially on student behaviour and student difficulties. Roughly one of every ten schools in the country was selected by a third party (i.e., a mailing house) to receive the Schools Survey questionnaire. Information on student difficulties was gathered in an effort to help reduce violence in schools and society and to substantiate the need for additional resources and supports where indicated. It was felt that if schools were serving large numbers of students with emotional and behavioural difficulties, then findings might contribute to helpful ways of dealing with these increased challenges.

Definition of Terms

Those involved in assessing inappropriate behavioural development such as mental health practitioners, juvenile justice practitioners, and educators use such terms as antisocial behaviour, disruptive behaviour, delinquent behaviour and inappropriate behaviour. Considerable overlap exists in these categories across disciplines.

☐ ***Mental health practitioners*** consider a range of diagnostic labels for *disruptive behaviours*, including 1) ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) or hyperactivity, inattention and impulsivity; 2) ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder) or negativistic, oppositional, and noncompliant behaviour; and 3) CD (conduct disorder) which can involve aggression to people and animals, destruction of property, deceitfulness or theft, and serious violation of rules, such as those regarding curfews and school attendance (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

☞ Among ***juvenile justice practitioners***, these disruptive--or *delinquent behaviours*--are legally defined as: delinquent acts involving the destruction or stealing of property, commission of violent crimes against persons, possession or sale of alcohol or drugs, illegal possession of weapons, truancy, running away, and curfew violations. Children and youth are considered beyond the control of their parents or guardians when their behaviour is inadequately monitored or regulated and requires the intervention of the family court to establish adequate supervision.

☞ ***Educators*** may refer to *unacceptable behaviour* when it interrupts or disturbs classroom

learning, violates the code of conduct in school, threatens the safety of staff or other students, and involves vandalism or theft. Students displaying such behaviours may be expelled, suspended, or placed in special, remedial, or alternative education programs. Many of these youth are described as emotionally disturbed, behaviourally disordered, learning disabled, challenged, exceptional, or truant (Kelley et al., 1997).

Profile of the Sample

The vast majority of respondents identified themselves as regular classroom teachers--females predominating-- and over half had more than ten years in the profession. Fifty-four percent were elementary teachers; 21% were middle/junior high teachers and 25% were high school teachers. The vast majority worked in the public school system; only 8% worked in a private school and 1% was employed in an alternativeschool. Most of the respondents worked in a small school with a student population of 1-500 students and 20% noted that their school ranged in size from 501 to 1000 students. Only 5% taught special education classes, and all grades from kindergarten to grade twelve were represented in this survey. There is an almost equal distribution between rural (38%) and urban (35%) schools. Seventy-one percent of the teachers rated their school resources as either excellent or good. Two-thirds of the respondents reported that their students' fall in the middle class category. Only 5% indicated that their students were in the upper class category and 28% classified their students as lower class. Most of the respondents taught in towns/cities of less than 50,000 people. Finally all provinces and territories were represented in this survey with the highest response rate from Manitoba.