

Adult crime linked to childhood anxiety

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Being nervous, socially isolated, anxious or neurotic during childhood protects young men from becoming criminal offenders until they enter adulthood, but the protective effect seems to wear off after the age of 21. These are the findings of Dr. Georgia Zara, from the University of Turin in Italy, and Dr. David Farrington, from the University of Cambridge in the UK, who explored whether or not certain childhood factors delay the onset of criminal behavior until adulthood. Their research has just been published online in Springer's *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

Zara and Farrington followed a total of 400 males in London, who took part in The Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, between the ages of 8 to 10 and 48 to 50. Participants were split into three groups: 35 late onset criminals first convicted at 21 years old or older with no overt signs of delinquency at ages 10 to 14 and 15 to 18; 129 early offenders first convicted between the ages of 10 and 20 years old; and 236 law-abiding men.

The authors found that being nervous and withdrawn shielded boys against committing criminal acts during adolescence, but, after the age of 21, it no longer held them back. Compared with early onset offenders, late onset criminals were more nervous, had fewer friends from ages 8 to 10, and were less likely to have had sexual intercourse by the age of 18. Compared with nonoffenders, those who turned to crime later in life were more anxious at school from ages 12 to 14 and very neurotic by age 16.

The results of this study show that adult offending can be predicted from childhood and may shed light on early psychological and temperamental traits likely to play a role in delaying criminal behavior until adulthood. The findings provide insight into how children with these characteristics may find themselves in high-risk situations later in their lives, being unprepared to cope with the pressures and difficulties of adult life.

The authors suggest that tackling the issues involved in delayed criminal behavior early is key: "Given that diverse strongest predictors of adult criminality in this study can be addressed (e.g., nervousness), kept under control (e.g., anxiety), or modified (e.g., not having had sexual intercourse), they imply possible targets for successful intervention. Hence, there is enormous scope for significant cost savings, both economically and in the quality of life, from early intervention policies."

Citation: Zara G & Farrington DP (2008). Childhood and adolescent predictors of late onset criminal careers. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*; DOI 10.1007/s10964-008-9350-3

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