

Kids from juvenile justice system 7 times more likely to commit criminal acts

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A new study shows that juvenile delinquents sentenced to either a juvenile retreat, probation or unsupervised community service were seven times more likely to commit criminal acts as adults than youngsters from the control group who managed to avoid the juvenile justice system.

The findings come from Frank Vitaro, a psycho-education professor at the Université de Montréal and researcher at the Research Unit on Children's Psycho-Social Maladjustment, who collaborated with UdeM colleague Richard Tremblay as well as Uberto Gatti of the Université de Gènes. They compared kids who went through the juvenile justice system with a control group that had similar behavioural and socioeconomic conditions.

They analyzed the cases of 779 francophone, underprivileged Quebecers between kindergarten and age 25. They found 113 youngsters out of the 779 were subjected to judicial intervention between the ages of 12 and 17. To evaluate this impact on their behaviour into adulthood several factors were measured and controlled: verbal ability, impulsiveness and hyperactivity, premature delinquency, family structure, family revenue, parental supervision and the delinquency level of their peers.

The study showed that kids who went through the system were seven times more likely to commit criminal acts as adults that correlated with the severity of their sentence. For instance, for the least severe sentence (community service) the risk of relapse is 2.3 percent. However, for the

most severe sentence (juvenile retreat) the risk of relapse is 38 percent.

The best way to intervene, according to Vitaro, "is to establish prevention practices using early screening methods." Several factors can help identify children at risk: young parents, anti-sociability of parents, lack of support, aggressiveness of the child and family setting.

Screening programs must be consistent and permanent support should be provided to select youngsters. "Studies show that prevention programs can help reduce criminality by as much as 50 percent," says Vitaro.

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Source: University of Montreal

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