

New 'magnifying glass' helps spot delinquency risks

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WSU's Brittany Cooper.

Drug abuse, acts of rampage – what's really the matter with kids today? While there are many places to lay blame – family, attitude, peers, school, community – a new study shows that those risks vary in intensity from kid to kid and can be identified.

Scientists at Washington State University and Pennsylvania State

University have found a way to spot the adolescents most susceptible to specific risk factors for delinquency. Breaking down a survey of over 30,000 teens, researchers were able to pinpoint five subgroups and the risks for delinquency that were most relevant for each.

The findings were recently published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*; the study was funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

The paper was a collaboration between Stephanie Lanza, scientific director, and Bethany Bray, research associate, in the Pennsylvania State University Methodology Center and Brittany Cooper, assistant professor, in the Washington State University department of human development.

Cooper is also a faculty member in WSU's new program in prevention science. The Ph.D. program is one of the first in the nation focused on developing strategies for drug and alcohol prevention, youth development, obesity prevention and early child care and learning programs.

Individual analysis a new approach

In the current study, Lanza, Cooper and Bray used an innovative type of statistical analysis to uncover hidden delinquency risk subgroups.

Their analysis focused on the individuals instead of the broad-brush technique normally applied to a general population. Both methods evaluate how factors like family, peers, school or community relate to delinquency.

But the broad-brush analysis, said Cooper, "assumes all adolescents are the same. We don't believe this is the case and felt that the results would vary for different adolescents. We wanted to fine-tune the approach."

After analyzing a national sample of more than 30,000 typical 10th-grade boys and girls, Cooper said their intuition paid off when the technique acted as a magnifying glass to zoom in on previously undetected risk subgroups.

Persistent problems

Of the five subgroups identified, the smallest—1 percent of the teens—would have been completely overlooked by the broad-brush technique yet accounts for the vast majority of delinquent acts, she said.

"On average, these kids each committed 44 acts of delinquency over the past year," she said. "This is an extremely high-risk group of kids and the only group where individual antisocial attitudes did not predict delinquency. This was surprising as it usually shows up as a very strong predictive factor."

"For most kids, there is a normal spike in delinquency during adolescence, but it's not too serious and they usually grow out of it. For other kids, delinquency seems to take a persistent course ... violent behaviors and difficult temperaments show up very early in life and never resolve," she said. "We're wondering if the 1 percent might be part of this group."

Though none of the usual delinquency risk factors stood out for that group, they did clearly define the other subgroups.

Peer, family, community cohesion

The largest—60 percent—could be called the "peer pressure" group. These children were most influenced by peer and individual factors such as antisocial attitudes or socializing with delinquent friends.

Cooper said this confirms past studies and that, for most kids, life-skills training and other school-based programs can be effective in helping them resist peer pressure.

A smaller group—29 percent—including teens who showed widespread risk at the individual, peer, family and school levels.

"This was the only group where family cohesion was an important predictor of delinquency," Cooper said. "Even if youth in this group are acting out negatively, it's more about the family system. For these children, we might target strategies toward resolving family conflict issues—such as family-based therapy."

For 8 percent of the teens, community cohesion factors, such as living in a highly chaotic neighborhood, played the biggest role in [delinquency](#).

"These kids need to feel more connected to the community," she said. "They need more access to things like basketball tournaments or a safe place to hang out with their friends."

Better matching services to kids

She said her team's ultimate goal is to use the study's nuanced findings to more closely match preventive services, programs and children.

"We have evidence that prevention can have some really impressive long-term benefits," she said. "Our study takes another step forward by giving hints at what type of intervention might help which type of youth most."

"By targeting resources more efficiently, we can save taxpayer money and hopefully help prevent kids from going down an unhealthy path," she said.

Provided by Washington State University

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