

## Youth crime and justice: Key messages from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime

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Using data from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime, this paper argues that a key challenge for UK policy-makers and practitioners is to develop youth justice policy which is holistic and promotes diversion from criminal justice intervention.

The Scottish model of youth justice – the Children’s Hearings System – is held up as a model of good practice due to its underlying principles of decriminalisation and minimal intervention. Despite its structural and cultural diversity from the system in England & Wales, however, the last decade has seen a gradual convergence in practice based on an increasingly managerialist approach and an elision between social exclusion, crime prevention and youth justice policy frameworks. This has led to a degree of tension within Scottish youth justice policy, as children in need of care are increasingly viewed as offenders in need of punishment.

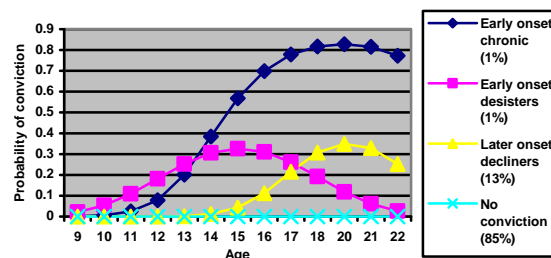
The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime is a longitudinal programme of research on pathways into and out of offending for a cohort of around 4,300 young people which started in 1998. Information has been collected from multiple sources, including self-completion questionnaires and official records from schools, police, social work, children’s hearings and Criminal Records. The analysis presented in this paper is based on four ‘facts’ about youth crime, summarised below.

*Fact 1: Persistent serious offending is associated with victimization and social adversity.* At age 15, 23% of respondents were involved in violent offending. Compared to other young people, violent youths were more likely to have experienced a range of problematic experiences and adversities including self-harm, drug and alcohol use, early sexual intercourse, depression and victimisation. Binary logistic regression revealed that aspects of vulnerability remained as strong risk factors for violence, even when other characteristics and behaviours were controlled for. In addition, early violence was predictive of later engagement in self-harming behaviour. These findings demonstrate that violence is symptomatic of a broader spectrum of vulnerability amongst young people.

*Fact 2: Early identification of at-risk children is not a water-tight process and may be iatrogenic.* Only 32% of persistent serious offenders and 24% of violent offenders at age 17 were previously known to the social work or children’s hearing authorities. This contrasts with 63% of those who were convicted by age 17 being known to these agencies.

This is indicative of a labelling process which can have detrimental effects in the longer term.

*Fact 3: Critical moments in the early teenage years are key to pathways out of offending.* Trajectory modelling revealed four distinct groups of young people in terms of their conviction patterns. A large group had no convictions. Of the remainder, most were ‘later onset decliners’ who started being convicted at age 16 and peaked around age 20. A small proportion had much earlier convictions, some of whom desisted at an early age and some of whom had ‘chronic’ conviction histories (see below). Early onset convictions occurred against a backdrop of social adversity, behavioural problems, turbulent family lives, and early system contact. However, critical moments around age 13-15, particularly involving school truancy and exclusion, determined who took the more chronic conviction pathway.



*Fact 4: Diversionary strategies facilitate the desistance process.* Selection effects were found to be operating which resulted in certain young people – the usual suspects – being propelled into a repeat cycle of referral into the children’s hearing system. Using propensity score matching, a form of quasi-experimental analysis, the study showed that desistance from offending was inhibited amongst those who were caught up in this cycle and received youth justice intervention.

The paper concludes that justice for communities and victims cannot be delivered unless the broader needs of young people are addressed. The challenge facing policy-makers and practitioners is to tackle these needs in ways which are not stigmatizing and criminalizing and which maximise diversion wherever possible.

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Original article published in *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 170-209 (2010)