

## Studying Very Young Offenders



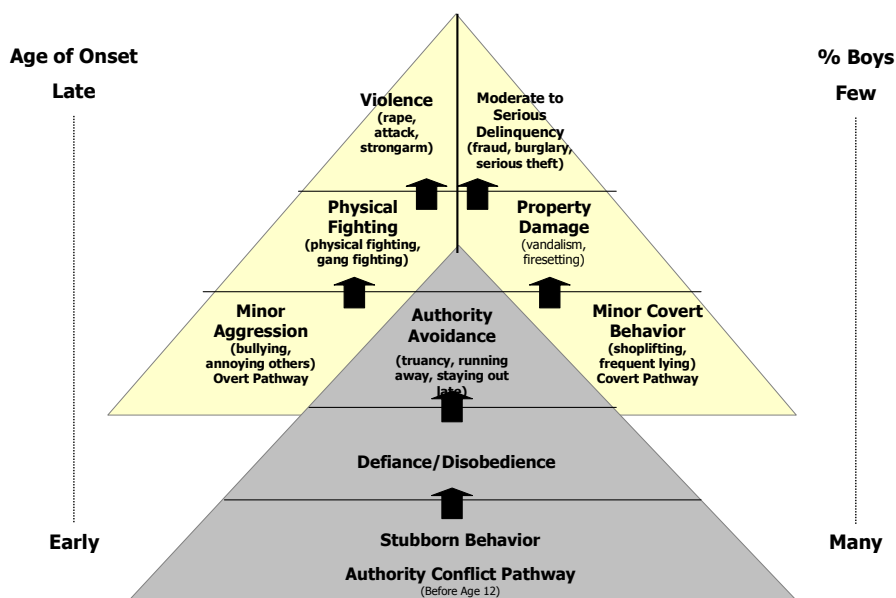
There has been a growing emphasis on the early characteristics of delinquency development, largely because of the work of two researchers, Dr. Rolf Loeber and Dr. David P. Farrington and their associates, all of whom have studied serious and violent juvenile offenders extensively. In 1995, The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) sponsored a Study Group on Serious and Violent Offenders that culminated with a report by Dr. Loeber and Dr. Farrington. The report concluded that there was very little known about child delinquency or the early onset of behaviors associated with serious and violent offending. Thus, another study group was initiated to focus on very young offenders and the causal influences on the development of their criminality. The Study Group on Very Young Offenders, consisting of 16 scholars and

23 coauthors, worked for 2 years on preparing a report which includes a state of the art review of the developmental background of child delinquents as well as risk and protective factors in the individual, family, peer group, school and neighborhood which affect that development.

## Study Group Conclusions

One of the major conclusions from the Study Group on Very Young Offenders was that serious and violent offending evolves from a "broad pattern of deviant development that starts with disruptive, non-delinquent behavior." Although this type of behavior involves numerous status and similar offenses, truancy and school related problems are primary examples of the types of disruptive behaviors that are stepping-stones to more serious offending. According to Dr. James C. Howell, "The early behavior patterns, studied by Dr. Loeber and Dr. Farrington as part of the Study Group, as well as other colleagues, identify three distinct pathways among males: the overt pathway, the covert pathway, and the authority conflict pathway." Dr. Howell identifies the authority conflict pathway as the earliest type of behavior that is quite evident in many young children when they reach school age. He shares that boys on the authority pathway are children under the age of 12. He adds that problem behavior typically begins in the authority conflict pathway with stubborn behavior, followed by defiance/disobedience, then truancy, running away and staying out late. Dr. Howell also states that persistent offenders then typically move into either the overt pathway or the covert pathway. He specifies that the first stage of the covert pathway is minor covert behavior; this is followed by property damage and then moderately serious and serious delinquency. He also points out that the first stage of the overt pathway is minor aggression; this is followed by physical fighting and then more serious violence.


### Pathways to Boys' Disruptive Behavior and Delinquency



Source: Preventing and Reducing Juvenile Delinquency by James C. Howell, 2003.


## Prevention/Intervention

The OJJDP Study Group on Very Young Offenders focused on identifying whether young offending predicts future delinquent or criminal careers, how juveniles are handled by various systems, and the best methods to preventing very young offending and persistence of offending.

 The Study Group found that action can be taken to prevent child delinquency and its escalation to chronic criminal behavior. They cite that the best way to prevent any type of delinquency (including child delinquency) is to focus on risk and protective factors. Child delinquency risk factors, like risk factors applicable to older juvenile offenders, exist in the individual child, the family, the peer group, the school, and the neighborhood in which the child lives. For very young offenders, the most important risk factors are likely to be individual (e.g., birth complications, hyperactivity, impulsivity) and family (e.g., parental substance abuse, poor child rearing practices). Protective factors



that can buffer or off-set the impact of risk factors might include prosocial behavior during the pre-school years and good cognitive performance. Ultimately, those children with many risk factors and few protective factors are at highest risk of becoming serious, violent, and chronic offenders.

 The Study Group also found that primary prevention and early intervention efforts should be emphasized. There are several well-evaluated primary prevention programs geared toward conflict resolution and violence prevention that focus on enhancing children's problem-solving and interaction skills. Programs that seek to educate children about the causes and destructive consequences of violence have been shown to significantly reduce aggressive behavior. Several effective programs also exist that focus on reducing early persistent disruptive behavior among children. Some are known to reduce the risk of later, more serious, offending. You can find additional information on these programs at [www.ncjrs.org](http://www.ncjrs.org).

### Material for this newsletter was derived from the following sources:

Howell, J. (2003). *Preventing and Reducing Juvenile Delinquency*. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA.

Loeber, R., & Farrington, D.P. (2000). Young children who commit crime: Epidemiology, developmental origins, risk factors, early interventions, and policy implications. *Development and Psychology*, 12, 737-762.

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Child Delinquency Bulletin. (2003). Child delinquency: Early intervention and prevention. Retrieved September 15, 2004, from <http://www.ncjrs.org.html>

160-05-0210

Louisiana State University  
School of Social Work  
Office of Social Service Research and Development  
311 Huey P. Long Field House  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803

