

Executive summary

This is the third and final report from the collaborative partnership between the Australian Institute of Family Studies and Crime Prevention Victoria. It further explores issues concerning adolescent antisocial behaviour and outcomes arising from it. The research draws upon data collected as part of a unique Australian study – the Australian Temperament Project.

The Australian Temperament Project (ATP) is a large, longitudinal study which has followed the development and adjustment of a community sample of children from infancy to early adulthood. The study began in 1983 with the recruitment of a representative sample of 2443 infants and their families living in urban and rural areas of Victoria. Approximately 65 per cent of the sample was still participating in the project in 2004. Thirteen waves of data have been collected over the first 20 years of the children's lives, using mail surveys. Parent, teachers and the children have reported on the child's temperament style, behavioural and emotional adjustment, social skills, health, academic progress, relationships with parents and peers, and the family's structure and demographic profile.

The Third Report focuses on six distinct issues: (1) the transition to early adulthood, and the continuation, cessation and commencement of antisocial behaviour; (2) connections between antisocial behaviour and victimisation; (3) the role of substance use in the development of adolescent antisocial behaviour; (4) why do some low risk children become antisocial adolescents; (5) motivations to comply with the law, attitudes, and antisocial behaviour; and (6) concordance between official records and self-reports of offending and victimisation.

Many of the findings report the progress of the three groups identified in the First Report from this collaborative project, who displayed differing patterns of antisocial behaviour across adolescence. These were:

- a *low/non antisocial* group, N=844, 41 per cent male (these adolescents consistently exhibited no, or low levels of antisocial behaviour at 13-14, 15-16 and 17-18 years);
- an *experimental antisocial* group, N=88, 43 per cent male (these adolescents exhibited high levels of antisocial behaviour at only one time point during early-to-mid adolescence and then desisted); and
- a *persistently antisocial* group, N=131, 65 per cent male (these adolescents reported high levels of antisocial behaviour at two or more time points, including the latest time point of 17-18 years).

The findings concerning victimisation and motivations to comply with the law compare two additional groups who displayed differing patterns of antisocial behaviour at 19-20 years of age: a *highly antisocial* group (N=177) who had engaged in three or more different types of antisocial acts in the past 12 months, and a *low/non antisocial* group (N=963) who had engaged in fewer than three different types of antisocial acts in the past 12 months.

Transitions to early adulthood: stability and change in antisocial behaviour

While rates of most types of antisocial behaviour are known to decrease from adolescence to early adulthood, less is known about individual trends. To what extent do young people who consistently engage in antisocial behaviour during adolescence continue their involvement in antisocial behaviour in adulthood? Do individuals who display particular types of adolescent antisocial behaviour differ in their later opportunities, experiences and wellbeing? Is there a late onset pathway to antisocial behaviour that begins in early adulthood?

Findings on these issues revealed that, first, the majority of individuals who had engaged in *persistent antisocial* behaviour at multiple time points during adolescence continued to display antisocial behaviour at 19-20 years (55 per cent). The considerable minority who did not maintain high levels of such behaviour (45 per cent) often reported some continuing lower frequency involvement. It did not seem that this decreasing involvement in antisocial behaviour was associated with any particular life experiences or circumstances, individual characteristics or interpersonal relationships.

Second, a small *late onset antisocial* group was found (N=68). This group had not engaged in high levels of antisocial behaviour during early or mid adolescence, but began to display this type of behaviour for the

first time during late adolescence or early adulthood. The *late onset* group was compared to three groups: (a) the *low/non antisocial* group who never displayed high levels of adolescent antisocial behaviour; (b) the *persistent antisocial* group; and (c) the *experimental antisocial* group who engaged in antisocial behaviour in early adolescence and then desisted.

Comparisons of the progress of these four groups revealed that the *experimental* group closely resembled the *low/non* group at 19-20 years, and both groups appeared to be faring well. The *late onset* group did not appear to experience a more difficult transition in terms of their participation in work and study, but more frequently experienced interpersonal and adjustment difficulties. The *persistent* group was less likely to have completed secondary schooling and to be undertaking further study by comparison with the other three groups. This group also more frequently displayed long-standing adjustment and interpersonal relationship difficulties, highlighting the long-term impact of persistent adolescent antisocial behaviour and the desirability of prevention and early intervention efforts to avert its development.

Connections between antisocial behaviour and victimisation

As well as being responsible for more offences than older individuals, young people experience the highest rates of victimisation, and there may be links between engagement in antisocial behaviour and the experience of victimisation. Factors implicated in the occurrence of victimisation are thought to include lifestyle characteristics and activities, and interpersonal characteristics.

When these issues were investigated it was found that approximately one-third of the 19-20 year olds had experienced victimisation during the previous 12 months. The most frequent types of incidents reported were threats of violence, followed by theft from a motor vehicle, and other theft. The relationship between victimisation and antisocial behaviour was complex. On one hand, two-thirds of those who engaged in high levels of antisocial behaviour at 19-20 years had experienced victimisation. Furthermore, those who engaged in violent antisocial behaviour were also very likely to experience violent victimisation. On the other hand, looking at the group of young people who experienced victimisation, it was found that the majority had not engaged in high levels of antisocial behaviour at 19-20 years.

Lifestyle factors and specific social contexts appeared to increase the risk of victimisation. About half the victimisation incidents had been reported to police. The main reasons for not reporting such incidents were their perceived lack of importance, negative attitudes towards the police, or a belief that the incident was a private matter. The implications for crime prevention were highlighted and it was suggested that a clearer focus on victimisation could have dual benefits in reducing both antisocial behaviour and victimisation.

Substance use and antisocial behaviour

Adolescent substance use is associated with a wide range of difficulties in personal and social functioning, such as decreased educational attainment and mental health problems. It is also strongly associated with engagement in antisocial behaviour in both adolescence and later in adulthood. The overlap between antisocial behaviour and substance use was investigated, as were the role of substance use in the development of antisocial behaviour, and the influence of substance using and/or antisocial peers.

Strong links between adolescent substance use and antisocial behaviour were revealed. There was a considerable overlap between the occurrence of antisocial behaviour and substance use at the same point in time. In addition, individuals who engaged in *persistent antisocial* behaviour from early to late adolescence had the highest rates of all types of substance use, followed by those who engaged in *experimental antisocial* behaviour, while adolescents who did not engage in antisocial behaviour had the lowest rates of substance use. Investigation of across-time pathways between substance use and antisocial behaviour revealed strong bi-directional pathways between the two types of behaviours. Peers' levels of involvement in antisocial behaviour and/or substance use were closely linked to adolescents' own engagement in such behaviours.

The powerful association between antisocial behaviour and substance use found serves as a reminder that antisocial adolescents frequently experience a wide range of difficulties, underlining the need for broad-based intervention programs that assist these young people in a number of areas of their lives.

Why do some low risk children become antisocial adolescents?

The Second Report showed that while most *persistently antisocial* adolescents had a history of childhood problematic behaviour, a small sub-group (N=42) had relatively problem-free childhoods and first began

to display difficulties during early adolescence. Their progression to *persistent adolescent antisocial* behaviour was unexpected, and could not have been predicted from their earlier development. Their across-time pathways, and the factors which may have contributed to a change in pathways, were investigated. As well, these individuals were followed forwards into early adulthood to investigate whether antisocial behaviour persisted or ceased, as well as their adjustment and wellbeing.

The first differences between the *low risk persistently antisocial* sub-group and the *low/non antisocial* group emerged during early adolescence, at 12-13 years (Year 7 for the great majority). Differences became more widespread during adolescence and peaked at 15-16 years of age, although numerous differences were still evident at 19-20 years. During the early secondary school years, the *low risk antisocial* sub-group was notably more involved with antisocial peers and less attached to school than the *low/non antisocial* group. They also began to display more difficult traits and behaviour as well as lower social skills. By mid adolescence there were more extensive differences between these two groups. As the *low risk antisocial* sub-group became more differentiated from the *low/non antisocial* group, it became increasingly similar to the *high risk persistently antisocial* group (N=89). However, generally the *high risk antisocial* sub-group displayed more severe and diverse difficulties than the *low risk antisocial* sub-group, and thus appeared to be faring worse at this age.

The majority of individuals from both antisocial sub-groups (*low risk* and *high risk*) continued to engage in high levels of antisocial behaviour in early adulthood (19-20 years). The differences between the *low risk antisocial* and *low/non antisocial* groups found in adolescence were again evident in early adulthood. Thus, the *low risk antisocial* sub-group more frequently engaged in problematic and risk-taking behaviours such as substance use, risky driving and speeding. Fewer had completed secondary school or undertaken further education. They were more often involved in antisocial peer friendships. The *low risk antisocial* sub-group continued to be very similar to the *high risk antisocial* group on these characteristics, but otherwise displayed a more limited, and generally less severe range of difficulties in early adulthood. Thus, there appeared to be few differences in the early adulthood outcomes of individuals traversing these differing pathways to *persistent adolescent antisocial* behaviour, regardless of the age of onset.

Motivations to comply with the law, attitudes, and antisocial behaviour

Connections between motivations to comply with the law, attitudes toward police and courts, and engagement in antisocial behaviour were explored. Two types of motivations were investigated: the perceived risk of apprehension if an offence is committed, and a sense of community attachment or civic mindedness. The attitudes towards police and courts of those who did, or did not, engage in antisocial behaviour were also examined.

Perceptions of the risk of apprehension were found to be inversely related to involvement in antisocial behaviour at 19-20 years of age. Only one of the three aspects of civic mindedness, trust in organisations, differentiated between *highly antisocial* and *low/non antisocial* young adults. Overall, perceptions of the risk of apprehension appeared to be a more important influence on engagement in antisocial behaviour than civic mindedness.

In general, most young adults held positive attitudes toward the police and courts. Across a range of aspects, an average 63 per cent of young people indicated that they had some or a great deal of confidence in the effectiveness of these agencies. Most *low/non antisocial* young people who had reported a victimisation incident to police expressed positive attitudes toward police and the courts, perhaps reflecting satisfaction with the way these agencies had attended to their needs. However those who were *highly antisocial* and/or had contact with police and courts for offending, were less positive in their attitudes towards the police and courts. A number of reasons for the lower confidence of these individuals were proposed, as were approaches for inhibiting the development of such attitudes.

Official records and self-reports of offending and victimisation

The similarities and differences between self reports and the official records maintained by police were investigated. Official records and self reports were compared on criminal acts, contact with police and courts for offending, and contact with police regarding victimisation. The similarities and differences in the profiles of individuals identified by official records and self reports were also explored.

The analyses were restricted to the individuals who gave permission for access to official records (74 per cent). While there were no differences between those who consented and those who did not on

family socio-economic background and community/local area characteristics, those who consented had less often engaged in antisocial behaviour and were less often males. However, a considerable number who did consent had engaged in antisocial behaviour and/ or self-reported contact with police or courts for offending.

The great majority of individuals who had an official record for offending also self reported engaging in the behaviour in question. Additionally, official records concerning victimisation incidents were matched quite closely by self reports, with almost four-fifths of individuals with a record for such an incident self reporting that they had contacted police regarding the incident. These findings suggest that self reports tend to be relatively accurate and reliable. However, when self reports were compared to official records, only a minority of those who self reported offending were found to have an official record. Among the reasons why self reported offending may not have been recorded are: the offence may not have taken place, the offence may not have been detected; there may have been insufficient evidence for further action, or the offence may have been dealt with unofficially. These findings are consistent with other research into this issue, and several explanations for the findings were offered. Agreement between self reports and official records was also relatively low for victimisation incidents.

The socio-demographic profiles of the group of offenders identified by official records was compared to the profile of the group of *persistently antisocial* adolescents identified by self reports and found to be similar. There were no significant differences on any aspect, including gender ratio, family socio-economic background; residence in a metropolitan, regional or rural location; and characteristics of the local area in which these young people lived (for example, unemployment rates, economic resources, crime rates). Thus, there was no evidence that the profile of offenders identified by official records was unrepresentative or atypical.

Implications

Reflecting on the findings from all three reports from this collaborative project, several important implications were highlighted. It is important to note that while occasional, limited engagement in antisocial behaviour was found to be relatively common, only a minority of young people (never more than 20 per cent) were involved in high levels, or persistent, antisocial behaviour at the separate time points. Nevertheless, the actual and psychological costs of antisocial behaviour to the individual, his/her family, community and society can be extensive.

The diversity of pathways to antisocial behaviour

A number of distinct pathways to antisocial behaviour commencing in early childhood, early adolescence and early adulthood were revealed. There appeared to be few differences in the later outcomes of individuals traversing these separate pathways, regardless of the age of onset. However, somewhat differing clusters of risk factors were identified for the differing pathways. The pathway commencing in early childhood was the most common. Fewer individuals followed the pathways that began in early adolescence and early adulthood. Considerable capacity for a change in pathways both in both childhood and adolescence was demonstrated. Several important transition points were identified that coincided with periods when major life changes were occurring. Key transition points at the entry to primary and secondary schooling may provide particularly promising opportunities for interventions, when children are especially amenable to change.

The co-occurrence of problem behaviours

Antisocial behaviour frequently co-occurred with other types of problem behaviours, such as substance use. One likely consequence of the overlap in problem behaviours is that strategies aimed at preventing the development of one type of problem behaviour may have a wide impact, preventing or ameliorating the development of other problem behaviours. However, there was considerable variability among young people who engaged in antisocial behaviour and not all highly antisocial young people displayed multiple problem behaviours. Differing intervention strategies may be needed to cater for multi-problem, and single-problem, youth.

Intervention implications

The findings are a reminder that to be “high risk” merely increases the likelihood but not the inevitability of a problematic outcome. Similarly, to be “low risk” decreases the likelihood of an adverse outcome, but is not a guarantee of a positive one. The environmental contexts in which children’s development takes place, especially the family, peer and school contexts, were found to be powerful influences on the development of antisocial behaviour. For some children, these environments appeared to provide a buffering or protective

influence which assisted them to move onto more positive developmental pathways. For others, less optimal environmental influences may have been instrumental in diverting them from a positive pathway. Overall, a mix of community- and school-based initiatives, together with more individualised approaches, may provide the most effective means of preventing or reducing the development of antisocial behaviour.

Summary

This Third Report marks the culmination of the very productive collaboration between the Australian Institute of Family Studies and Crime Prevention Victoria. It is hoped that the findings contained in these three reports, which offer data from a unique study of Victorian children and families, will contribute to the evidence base to guide policy making and practical interventions aimed at preventing the development of antisocial behaviour in young Australians.