

European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research

Vol. 5, no. 2, 1997

Crime Prevention by Early Intervention

Editorial

'Once a thief, always a thief' is common sense thinking. It refers to the difficulty to change bad manners or if not behaviour in general. The judicial interventions in general yield disappointing results. It does not surprise for that matter that over a long period people have sought methods to prevent the development of criminal careers. In recent years there seems to be a growing interest in early detection, prevention and intervention of anti-social or criminal behaviour. Several researchers claim considerable progress in the possibilities to do so. And in policy-making there is a growing tendency to invest on the base of risk-assessment instead of casework. (In the next issue there will be information on the expert group of the Council of Europe.)

In this issue one will find a fine selection of analyses, research findings and reflections on the topic of early intervention. The subject has some sensitive aspects in terms of ethics, political desirability and scientific reliability and validity. They were discussed on the conference Early detection, prevention and intervention, which was organized by the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of Justice, and was held from 18-20 June 1997. The key speeches of the conference were based on the articles that are published in this issue.

Marc Le Blanc gives an overview of the efforts that were made in designing and implementing screening strategies. In his opinion research findings suggest to develop a strategy with multiple gates, informants, variables, and methods. The tradition teaches us six lessons that can help in the development of a prediction instrument. The criterion should involve an adequate follow-up and use an optimal cut-off point. The predictors should rest on solid empirical evidences and display theoretical significance. The reliability of measures should be maximised. Additive methods for combining predictors are more efficient. Reporting the predictive accuracy is necessary. Finally, the screening device should be validated.

Screening involves ethical issues, but there are no adequate solutions in the realms of ethics or in the domain of statistics. Policy issues revolve around the costs and benefits of false positives and false negatives. An opinion about an optimal predictive accuracy is then a question of morality rather than a question of statistics. In sum, there is much technical work still to be done before screening instruments can be recommended, even if some strategies and instruments are promising.

In the second article Richard Tremblay and Wendy Craig give a review of thirteen prevention experiments targeting juvenile delinquency. The outcomes demonstrate that positive results are more likely when interventions are aimed at more than one risk factor, last for a relatively long period of time, and are implemented before adolescence. The majority of studies are small-scale confirmation or replication experiments. They need to be followed by large-scale field experiments that test the efficacy and cost of implementation in regular service systems.

In the Cambridge study in delinquent development, 411 London males have been followed up from age 8 to age 32 by interviews, and from age 8 to age 40 in criminal records. David Farrington investigates in the third article how far four measures at age 8-10 predicted convictions for violent and non-violent offences between ages 10 and 20 and self-reports of violent and non-violent offences between ages 15 and 18. It also reviews different methods of assessing predictive efficiency. It is concluded that, despite high false positive rates in some cases, offending can be predicted. The boys identified as high-risk at age 8-10 had a probability of offending that was three or four times as great as the remainder.

The juvenile justice system in the Netherlands offers the opportunity to identify juveniles with psychiatric disorders and to refer them to institutions for professional assistance. Proper multidisciplinary diagnostic assessment, however, is a prerequisite. Theo Doreleijers and Françoise Moser investigated the characteristics of a (small) subgroup of juvenile delinquents who were diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). These juveniles appeared to be younger, to have more police contacts and a longer history of problem behaviour than juvenile delinquents without ADHD. They also had presently more behavioural problems (at school, work and at home) and they had more DSM-III-R-diagnoses. This higher co-morbidity and the earlier onset of problem behaviour indicates a worse prognosis.

The history of crime prevention can - according to Catherine Rollet, be divided into three periods. The first period is characterized by a general attitude which comprised pushing aside, suppressing, and separating the deviant members of a family. This period was marked by segregation, whether it was of mad people, ill people, delinquents, or even schoolchildren. A number of establishments were built at the time to care for, or 'put away', these population groups. During the second period, the preferred way of preventing disorder and ensuring security was to monitor and keep an eye on a family where there was a risk of certain members turning bad. Such monitoring supposes that legislative provisions are in place and the co-operation of employees, civil servants, volunteers and philanthropists. Finally, during the third period, families become partners to the authorities, and it is with these families that initiatives and actions are envisaged with the aim of resolving, individually, the problems of their children and young people.

It is this cooperative family that seems to be central in the view of Josine Junger-Tas on prevention policy. In her opinion early intervention must be part of a broader prevention strategy which is directed on multi-problem neighbourhoods. She is especially inspired by the programme 'Communities that care', which among others was developed by David Hawkins - speaker on the conference, but unfortunately not an author in this issue. She pleads for an integrative policy in these neighbourhoods and more specific measures for families which are not-serious-enough for measures of child care but at risk in terms of developing criminal behaviour of the children.

On the cover of the last issue was - unfortunately - printed 1996 instead of 1997. You are recommended to change this by hand in order to prevent misunderstanding in references.