

THE EDINBURGH STUDY OF YOUTH TRANSITIONS AND CRIME: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS ON CRUELTY TOWARDS ANIMALS

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Background

The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime is a prospective, longitudinal study of offending and anti-social behaviour among young people. It takes place in the City of Edinburgh and involves a 'cohort' of about 4300 young people who started secondary school in the autumn term of 1998. Mainstream, independent and special schools all take part.

The main aim of the study is to further our understanding of criminal offending in young people and find out why some young people become deeply involved in crime as they get older while most do not. The Edinburgh Study is different to many other studies of this kind because we are just as interested in those who have not been involved in offending as we are in those who have. Thus, the study involves a whole year group of young people rather than a pre-selected sample.

Data are collected from a variety of sources. The main source of data is a self-completion questionnaire administered to all 4300 young people on an annual basis. We also collect information from school records, children's hearing records and social work records to help us understand why some people might offend more than others. Teachers and parents have also been involved in providing valuable information for the study, and a trawl of police records is planned for 2002.

Research findings on animal cruelty

During the second sweep of the survey, while the cohort were aged approximately 13 years, questions were included in the self-completion questionnaire on cruelty towards animals at the request of the SSPCA. The cohort were asked 'during the last year, did you hurt or injure any animals or birds on purpose?'. For those who answered 'yes' to this question, a series of follow-up questions were asked to determine how many times they had done this; whether they had got into trouble for doing it from an adult or the police; whether an animal or bird was involved and, if an animal, what type; whether a pet or wild animal/bird was involved; and how many friends had they been with at the time.

The time period was determined by the rest of the questions included in the questionnaire (all of which covered the last year period covering September 1998 to August 1999).

Cruelty to animals was one of the least frequently reported types of delinquency among the cohort of young people. A total of 5.8% (n=249) young people stated that they had hurt or injured an animal or bird on purpose during the previous year. Compared with other types of violent offending, this is far fewer than the 46.1% who had been involved in a fight and 11.8% who said they had carried a knife or other weapon with them for protection or in case it was needed in a fight. The only types of

delinquency which were less frequently reported than animal cruelty were riding in a stolen car or on a stolen motorbike (4.5%), breaking into houses or other buildings (2.9%), stealing something from someone with violence (1.6%) and breaking into cars to steal things (1.9%). These findings suggest that animal cruelty is perceived by young people as one of the more serious types of offence.

Animal cruelty was significantly more common amongst boys than girls ($p < 0.001$). Almost one in ten (9.0%; $n=195$) boys at age 13 stated that they had hurt an animal or bird on purpose during the last year compared with only 2.6% ($n=54$) of girls. Nevertheless, amongst those who had been cruel to an animal or bird, there was no statistically significant difference between boys and girls in terms of the number of times they had done this. A third had done so only once (34.6%), however, two thirds said they had done this on two or more occasions during the last year. In fact, 45.5% of young people said they had done this between two and five times, while around one in five (19.9%) said they had done it on six or more occasions.

Despite this high incidence rate, the vast majority (92.0%) said they had not got into trouble from either an adult or the police for doing this. Of the remainder, 5.6% said they had got into trouble from an adult, while only 2.4% (or six individuals) had got into trouble from the police. Again, there were no significant gender differences in terms of the proportion who got into trouble. There was also no significant relationship between the number of times an individual had committed an act of animal cruelty and whether they had been caught by an adult or the police.

Many acts of delinquency by young people are carried out by groups of individuals – often to show off in front of comrades - rather than by lone actors. Acts of cruelty towards birds or animals also fit this pattern. Half (50.2%) of all young people who had done this reported being with up to three friends on the most recent occasion, while a further 16.9% were in larger groups of four or more friends. Worryingly, however, a third (32.9%) of young people said they were alone when they hurt an animal or bird on the last occasion. Although the difference between boys and girls in this respect was not statistically significant, a higher proportion of girls (46.8%) reported animal cruelty as a lone activity than boys (29.5%).

Four out of five (82.1%) respondents stated that they had hurt or injured a wild animal on the most recent occasion, although 11.5% said they had hurt someone else's pet and 6.4% had hurt their own pet. There was almost an equal split in the proportion of young people who had injured animals (51.7%) and birds (48.3%). Looking in more detail at the types of animals involved, the most commonly targeted were rabbits (14.9%), various other wild animals (10.7%) and cats (10.3%), while only 4.1% had hurt or injured a dog. Interestingly, girls were significantly ($p < 0.01$) more likely to have hurt their pet (15.2%) or someone else's pet (17.4%) than boys (4.2% and 10.1%, respectively).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who committed acts of animal cruelty on their own were more likely to target pets than those who had acted with others. In fact 31.1% of those who acted alone on the most recent occasion hurt either their own or someone else's pet, compared with only 14% of those acting with one other and 10.5% acting with 2 or 3 others (none of those acting in larger groups targeted pets). Again, the

gender difference is significant ($p < 0.01$) with 55.0% of girls acting alone targeting a pet, compared with only 22.2% of boys.

As has already been stated, the prevalence of animal cruelty among the cohort suggests that it is at the more serious end of offending. This also became apparent when looking at the broader range of delinquent behaviour reported by these respondents. Those who had been cruel to animals were significantly more likely ($p < 0.001$) to have offended in at least one other way than those who had not been cruel to animals (96.4% compared with 71.8%, respectively).

More worryingly, however, it is obvious that cruelty towards animals is part of a wider culture of violence. Those who had been cruel to animals or birds were significantly more likely ($p < 0.001$) to have carried a weapon (46.2%), to have been involved in fighting (77.4%) and to have bullied others (92.4%) during the last year than those who had not been cruel to animals (13.8%, 44.0% and 72.2% respectively). These findings were true for both boys and girls.

Conclusion

Cruelty towards animals and birds is a relatively uncommon form of delinquency among young people aged 13 and it falls at the most serious end of offending in prevalence terms. However, two thirds of those involved in it were repeat offenders and the vast majority had gone unsanctioned for their actions. Thus, this is very much a hidden crime which is rarely detected by adults and, therefore, many young people appear to think it is acceptable to hurt or injure animals again and again.

As with most types of serious offending, boys are significantly more likely to be involved than girls. However, our findings show some interesting gender differences in terms of the nature of this type of offending. Girls were more likely to offend alone and more commonly targeted pets, whereas boys were generally more likely to offend in groups and to focus their attention on wild animals or birds. This suggests that while more serious offending amongst boys is characterised by 'acting out' and showing off to their peer group, such offending amongst girls is far more secretive and personally directed. While further investigation requires to be done, it may be that animal cruelty is linked to other types of introspective psycho-social disorders amongst girls such as self-harm and eating disorders.

It is clear that both boys and girls who are violent towards animals or birds also tend to be more predisposed to other types of violence or violent intent. This suggests that general education approaches aimed at reducing violence and conflict amongst young people aged around 13 might also have the effect of preventing cruelty towards animals. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen how this will change as the cohort gets older and as other aspects of their behaviour change.

Further information

For more information on this or any other aspect of the Edinburgh Study, contact Susan McVie, Senior Research Fellow on 0131 650 9166 or see our website at: www.law.ed.ac.uk/cls/esytc.