



DR. DON WEATHERBURN  
DIRECTOR

In reply please quote:

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## MEDIA RELEASE

### Juveniles in crime - Part 1: Participation rates and risk factors

Nearly 50 per cent of secondary school students have participated in some form of crime during the past 12 months, according to the first-ever representative sample survey of self-reported offending among Australian secondary school students.

The pioneering survey of more than 5,000 New South Wales secondary school students was conducted on behalf of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research and the Crime Prevention Division of the NSW Attorney General's Department.

The survey asked secondary school students whether they had participated *either inside or outside school*, in a variety of offences ranging in seriousness from property damage (such as graffiti) through to serious offences such as break and enter or motor vehicle theft.

In the previous 12 months the percentage involvement in each of the offences examined by the Bureau was assault: 29 per cent, property damage: 27 per cent, receiving or selling stolen goods: 15 per cent, shoplifting: nine per cent, break and enter: five per cent and motor vehicle theft: five per cent.

Although a clear majority of the students surveyed had committed at least one of these offences at some stage in their life, most had only ever offended a few times and many had only ever offended once or twice.

The likelihood of participation in crime tended to peak in year 10 but was higher in each year for male students than for female students.

Aboriginal students had higher rates of self-reported involvement in assault and property crime than non-Aboriginal students. Contrary to popular opinion, however, students from non-English speaking backgrounds were, if anything, less likely to become involved in crime than students from English-speaking backgrounds.

The Bureau found a number of other factors which increased the likelihood of juvenile participation in crime.

Students who truanted often, drank alcohol frequently or frequently consumed cannabis were significantly more likely to have been involved in property crime, assault and malicious damage to property.

Lax parental supervision was also found to increase the risk of involvement in property crime and malicious damage to property but did not increase the risk of involvement in assault.

Although past research has shown strong links between poor school performance and juvenile involvement in crime the Bureau found that the effects of poor school performance on juvenile participation disappeared when factors such as drug use were taken into account.

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Commenting on the report the Director of the Bureau Dr Don Weatherburn said that the estimates of participation in crime may seem high but they are broadly comparable to similar estimates of juvenile participation in crime obtained by researchers in the United States and Britain.

“The stand-out exception is assault. Our estimate is significantly higher than comparable estimates obtained in the United States and Britain. However there are good reasons for this.”

“Overseas surveys often only count assault cases where someone was injured or a weapon was used. Our survey may have included many cases where no-one was injured and no weapon was used.”

According to Dr Weatherburn the prevalent but transient nature of much juvenile offending has important implications for crime prevention.

“The criminal justice system may be of some help in dealing with repeat juvenile offending but most juvenile offenders only commit a few offences and are extremely unlikely to be caught. It’s simply impractical to seek to prevent crime among those who are not likely to get caught by relying on police and penalties alone.”

“Transient juvenile offending is far better dealt with through strategies which reduce the motives, incentives and opportunities for offending.”

“Such strategies include parent training programs, measures designed to prevent substance abuse among juveniles and anti-truancy programs.”

“Although the effects of poor school performance on crime disappeared in our study when factors such as drug use were taken into account, programs designed to enhance school performance in the earliest years of school should not be ignored.”

“The effects of poor school performance on crime are probably indirect. In our study poor school performance increased the risk of drug use. This, in turn, would have increased the risk of involvement in crime.”

According to Dr Weatherburn, the higher rate of self-reported offending amongst Aboriginal students is understandable given the level of economic and social disadvantage within many Aboriginal communities.

“Economic and social stress often leads directly to substance abuse, disrupted parenting and poor school performance. These, in turn, can lead directly to crime.”

**Further enquiries:**

Dr Don Weatherburn: 02 9231 9190 (wk), 0419 494 408 (mob)