



PRI “Investing in Youth” Thematic Paper Series

Discussion Paper: Boys Biopsychosocial Difficulties During The Teenage Years: Canadian State of Affairs For The 21st Century

by Eric Lacourse and Paul L. Gendreau, University of Montréal

“Boys do not seem to be doing as well as girls these days.” Is this really the case? Statistics show that boys are more likely than girls to exhibit anti-social behaviours which increase their risk in participating in delinquent or offending activities. The risks are often associated with school disengagement and have important consequences for these youths and their communities.

- What is the state of affairs regarding risky behaviours among boys?
- Are new generations of adolescent males doing worse than previous ones?
- Are there emerging trends/concerns requiring further attention?

This brief presents highlights from a PRI-commissioned paper that examines four developmental outcomes of concern in male adolescents: delinquency, dropping-out of high school, drug use/abuse and, depression/suicide. These have been referred to as the “4D’s” of male adolescence biopsychosocial difficulties.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **In general, differences among young people from different socio-economic status, as well as intragender variations, are far more pronounced than differences between boys and girls.** Ineffective and inconsistent parenting, lack of warmth, social isolation, dysfunctional parental monitoring, abuse and neglect and poor attachment have been associated with all 4 D’s of adolescent difficulties. **Most risk factors cluster in poor families that live in socially disorganized neighborhoods.**
- There are obvious neurobiological differences between males and females with boys being at higher risk of presenting developmental and learning disorders, which are indirectly related to the 4Ds. **It is not clear, however, whether these risks are more prevalent today than they were fifty years ago, as most learning disorders were not known or investigated until more recently.**
- **In Canada, delinquency has generally declined since the 1990s, but certain deviant behaviours, such as bullying, are now being observed at a much earlier age.** Delinquent

trajectories among youth and young males in particular, are also more diverse than previously observed.

- It is well established that young males more frequently display physical aggression and commit more crimes than females. **However, trends and patterns in female delinquency are changing.** While the rate of violent crime among young males has been declining, there has been a slight increase among girls.
- Drug use has increased significantly over the same period. **Although prevalence in drug use is generally higher for young men, trends appear to be similar for both genders.** Peer affiliation is likely to play a greater role in the earlier stages of experimentation, while individual and family effects may play a greater role in the process of abuse and addiction.
- **While girls are more likely to experience depression than boys, the number of male suicides has increased dramatically in recent years.** Suicide is the second leading cause of death in youth in Canada, and depression is one of the leading causes of youth suicide, along with drug abuse. **There has been little theoretical or empirical work on youth suicide in Canada.**
- Drop-out rates are declining in Canada, although less rapidly for young men than women. **School drop-out must be viewed in conjunction with other behavioural and psychosocial difficulties in order to be fully understood.** It is a dynamic process that cannot be explained solely by academic performance.
- **Multi-component prevention programs that target home, school and community environments are most effective in altering the trajectory of at risk individuals.** Intervening on a single or few risk or protective factors is generally ineffective and insufficient.
- **Medicalization of learning disorders is on the rise and may present insidious drawbacks to preventive interventions.** There has been a sharp increase in the medical treatment of children's disruptive behaviours in the last 25 years (e.g., 111% increase in Ritalin use primarily for boys from 1994 to 1999). But, long-term effects have yet to be assessed. Rather than looking only at biological dysfunctions, it is equally important to look at contextual factors that can instigate individual problems.
- **Except for mental health problems, there has not been a significant change or deterioration in behavioural outcomes among male adolescents over time.** However, in addition to youth suicide, prevalence of delinquency and drug use remain high and should be of concern to health professionals and policy makers. All "4D's" of male and female adolescent biopsychosocial difficulties should continue to be closely monitored in the future. **The key will be to invest in health and well-being via the family and community networks.**