**Violence 'is natural' in teenage boys**

[Gaby Hinsliff](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/gabyhinsliff), chief political correspondent

Teenage boys have a natural tendency towards violent and aggressive behaviour which may be part of being male, according to a major new study of youth offending published today.

Its findings will reopen the fierce debate over nature and nurture, as well as raising questions about the effectiveness of crackdowns on juvenile offenders.

The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime tracked more than 4,300 children starting secondary school in 1998 to monitor how many would fall foul of the law during their teens.

It found that, while girls who committed violent offences were highly distinct from other girls - more likely to use drugs, truant and come from poorer backgrounds - violent male offenders are very much like other boys, only more so.

'More serious offending in boys is relatively common,' said David Smith, Professor of Criminology at Edinburgh University and joint author with Dr Lesley McAra of the study.

That did not mean it was inevitable that teenage boys would be aggressive, he said. But it was possible that violent behaviour in girls more often had deep-rooted pathological causes and was therefore likely to be sustained into adulthood, while in boys it might simply be a more common but passing phase.

'It's possible more of them would do it, but they are restrained by the fact that they have relationships with people who don't want them to do it,' said Smith. 'The stronger these relationships are, the more effective these constraints are.'

Studies have repeatedly shown that boys are far more likely to offend than girls, but more likely to grow out of criminal behaviour on reaching adulthood.

Such theories are controversial among feminist academics, who argue that it reflects beliefs that girls are 'born' gentle rather than conditioned to be so, and that any aggression must therefore be unnatural.

The study suggests, however, that many preconceptions around youth offending may be wrong. It found that while good parenting - based on taking a close supervisory interest in children, but showing trust in them - appeared protective against getting into trouble, living in a deprived neighbourhood could undermine the protective effect.

'If there is a policy implication from this, it is that social context is part of what makes it difficult to be a good parent,' said Smith. 'It's much harder if you are living in cramped accommodation, in a deprived neighbourhood with few play facilities, tired all the time and working long hours.'

Boys were only slightly more likely than girls to offend at the ages of 13 to 15 once all offences were considered - girls were more likely to smoke and drink underage, but serious offending was far higher in boys.

For the broadest range of offences - 18 crimes from the petty, such as graffiti and shoplifting, to robbery and housebreaking - the stron-gest predictor of offending at 15 was having been a victim of crime aged 12.

Smith said that similar characteristics, such as risk-taking and impulsive behaviour, could lead children both to put themselves into dangerous situations and to transgress the law.

'If a child of 14 is out very late at night - in an amusement arcade, say - they are not only likely to get up to no good, but they also may be attacked themselves or vulnerable to attack,' she added.

The juvenile justice system must adjust to take into account the fact that many children are a complex mix of being simultaneously victims and victimisers, he said. Smith hopes to track the children in the study through to the age of 30.