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## Early intervention crucial to avoid a life of crime

Greater focus on support strategies, including improved literacy and numeracy, vocational training, living conditions and mentoring, is required to stop young people from falling into a life of crime, according to research on young people in custody and on those serving orders in on the community.

The findings are published in a new book by Professor Dianna Kenny from the University of Sydney and Paul Nelson.

"We found that more than 60% of those we surveyed while researching the book had parents or other relatives who had spent time in prison," Professor Kenny said.

"They also had lower education levels, and higher than average exposure to risky lifestyle behaviours, including drug and alcohol abuse and unprotected sex."

Titled *Young offenders on community orders: health, welfare and criminogenic needs*, the book will be launched tonight by Professor Chris Cunneen, the UNSW Global Chair in Criminology.

It details the family background, physical health and lifestyle, cognitive and educational difficulties, mental health, and alcohol, tobacco and drug use of 800 young offenders. Interestingly, despite their disadvantaged backgrounds and bleak prospects, more than half had a positive outlook on life.

Professor Kenny's research presents a challenge to policymakers to focus on support for families with a history of crime.

"If we can identify children at risk of offending before they appear in the criminal justice system, we may be able to improve their future prospects," she said. "Prevention and support, rather than punishment, may help our young people break the cycle of offending."

**Editor's note:** The research project is one of the most extensive ever conducted on young people serving community orders (court-directed supervision by the department, including good behaviour bonds, probation, community service or parole). The study was jointly funded by the Australian Research Council, the NSW Department of Juvenile Justice and Justice Health.

**About the authors:** Dianna Kenny is a professor of psychology at the University of Sydney. Paul Nelson is currently a PhD student with the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales.

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