
Abstract

This research examines the prevalence, correlates and nature of police contacts of Finnish adolescents in the age group 15–16. Police contacts included various control interventions by the police such as commands to leave an area, searching bags and pockets, and being taken to a police station or to a police vehicle. Of all respondents (N=5,826), 39 per cent had experienced at least one such police intervention during lifetime. Last year prevalence of being targeted for police control was 30 per cent. Corresponding figures for being apprehended by the police (e.g. being taken to police station or to vehicle) were 13 per cent (lifetime) and 8 per cent (last year), respectively. In a multivariate analysis, the most robust correlate of police control was the versatility of the youth’s criminal behaviour. Apart from criminality, male sex, urban residence, living with a single male parent, low academic achievement and low educational aspirations increased the likelihood of police contact, net of criminal versatility. The over-controlling of males was partially but not fully explained by the fact that boys were often apprehended in traffic related situations (when they were driving mopeds).

The study is based on self-reports by adolescents. The legality, or ethical grounds, of control interventions by the police cannot therefore be assessed. On a more general level, the results are discussed from the point of view of criminological labelling theory. It seems that police control towards juveniles is largely explainable and triggered by “legal” causes such as crime and public drunkenness. Yet it cannot be excluded that some social biases still exist in control targeting.