YOUTH AND SERIOUS CRIME: DIRECTIONS FOR AUSTRALASIAN RESEARCHERS INTO THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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Introduction

Issues concerning youth and serious crime have been the focus of a great deal of research, debate and concern for police, politicians and the community. Official statistics both in Australia and in the US claim that crime rates for juveniles are increasing. Media reports abound on youth gangs, schoolyard violence, and the ever decreasing age of children accused of serious crimes. Recent hardline crime prevention initiatives have gained considerable attention worldwide. Zero-tolerance policing has been lauded for its success in significantly reducing crime rates in the United States, and its implementation is currently being considered by some jurisdictions in Australia.

While, the literature on youth and crime in general is abundant, studies focusing specifically on crimes of a more significant nature are more scarce, both in Australia and internationally. So what do we really know about youth and serious crime? How much of a problem is it in Australasia? Are serious crimes committed by youth increasing? What is being done to address the problem? How successful have these efforts been? These and other questions are considered here. Knowledge about this specific group of offenders has important implications for police, politicians, health and welfare agencies, and the community. Reviewing and expanding upon what we know about serious juvenile offenders are the necessary first steps towards crime prevention and reduction.

First, working definitions for 'youth' and 'serious' crime are provided. Next, three main sources of knowledge about serious juvenile offending, namely the media, official records and empirical research are discussed along with their limitations. This is followed by an overview of the current state of knowledge about the extent of serious offending, prediction of serious offending, and interventions for serious juvenile offenders, from both an international and an Australian perspective. It will become apparent that, while research into juvenile delinquency in general is abundant, much less is known about the more serious end of the youth crime continuum. Research of this nature is particularly lacking in Australasia. In the final section, an agenda for Australasian research is suggested.

Defining 'youth' and 'serious' crime

In most Australian States and Territories the minimum age of criminal responsibility is 10 years (Seymour, 1996). In Tasmania, children as young as 7 years may be prosecuted for a crime, while in the ACT the minimum age is 8 years. A person is considered an adult at 17 years in four jurisdictions (i.e., Queensland, NT, Tasmania and Victoria) and 18 years in four jurisdictions (i.e., ACT, NSW, SA and WA).

In New Zealand, a child under 12 years is not considered to be criminally liable for his or her actions. Between the ages of 12 and 13 years, the only crimes for which a child may be liable are murder or manslaughter. A child is considered to be a 'young person' between the ages of 14 and 17 years and can be charged with any offence (Children and Young Persons and Families Act, 1989). From the age of 17 years, a person is legally considered to be an adult in New Zealand.

On the basis of the position held in the majority of the jurisdictions, the present paper adopts a conservative working definition of a 'youth' as an individual between the age of 10 years up to 17 years of age.
The terms 'serious' and 'violent' crime tend to be used interchangeably in the literature (Omaji, 1997), yet definitions of serious and violent crimes vary greatly (Le Blanc, 1998). Violent crimes are typically considered to be serious, but not all serious crimes are violent in nature. A number of authors have classified serious crimes as non-violent or violent (Brown, 1996; Cookson, 1992; Le Blanc, 1998; Loeber, Farrington, & Waschbusch, 1998; Weatherburn & Lind, 1997). These classifications usually include the crimes listed in the following table.

Table 1: Serious crimes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violent crime</th>
<th>Non-violent crime</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homicide</td>
<td>Break and enter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>Theft of more than $100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>Fraud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manslaughter</td>
<td>Arson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggravated assault</td>
<td>Drug trafficking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnapping</td>
<td>Extortion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted murder/ conspire to murder</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual assault/ indecent assault</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wounding with intent to cause grievous</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bodily harm</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

This is by no means an exhaustive list of serious crime, however these examples are sufficient to highlight the nature of serious offences. Excluded from this description are vandalism, drunkenness, disorderly conduct, shoplifting and traffic violations.

In general terms, serious juvenile offenders refer to those youth who have committed one or more of the above serious offences.

Sources of knowledge of serious juvenile offenders: media, official statistics and empirical research

A great deal of knowledge of serious juvenile offending is obtained through the media, in spite of the widespread criticism concerning its accuracy in depicting the extent of juvenile involvement in serious crime (Loeber et al., 1998; Mukherjee, 1997; Omaji, 1997). In general, media reports create the impression that juvenile crime is increasing in magnitude and seriousness. These perceptions are promoted and reinforced through the use of terms such as 'crime waves' and 'crisis', which have served to heighten public fear and prompt calls for more severe approaches to curb juvenile offending (Hall, 1994; Omaji, 1997). As a consequence of media distortions, large sections of the public are misinformed or unaware of the extent and seriousness of juvenile crime.

Official statistics (e.g., arrest rates, crimes reported to police, crimes cleared) are generally considered to be more reliable indicators of juvenile crime than media reports, however these suffer from a number of limitations (Broadhurst & Ferrante, 1993; Dunford & Elliot, 1984; Loeber et al., 1998). For example not all crimes come to the attention of police and those that do may be influenced by any number of intervening legal, social and political variables that lead to the detection and classification of offenders. These include police bias (e.g., according to race, gender, age), increases/ decreases in police resources, the introduction of crime-prevention initiatives, and changes in police practices (Fergusson, Horwood, & Lysney, 1993; Hawkins, Laub, & Lauritsen, 1998; Meehan, 1993; Mukherjee, 1997).
Moreover, the existence of an arrest record or police crime report does not prove the guilt of the suspect. Indeed, it is generally acknowledged that official records underestimate the actual incidence of crime. This becomes particularly important when considering serious juvenile offending, which tends to have a much lower base rate than other forms of delinquency (Loeber et al., 1998). As a result there is currently no reliable data source available in Australia to measure the amount of juvenile crime (Mukherjee, 1997). Consequently, we are left to rely on official data with its inherent limitations, and thus caution must be exercised when interpreting data derived from official statistics.

The other available source of information about the nature and extent of juvenile crime is empirical research. Although studies frequently use official records as measures of offending, self-report measures are gaining more prominence in the literature. These indicators are being increasingly recognised as valid and reliable measures (Anthony, Vlahov, Celentano, Menon, Magolick, Cohn, Nelson, & Polk, 1991; Huizinga & Elliot, 1986; Inciardi & Pottieger, 1986), however they too are subject to certain biases. For example, self-report measures are prone to individual distortions including memory lapses, exaggeration and concealment. These can present problems if studies rely solely on self-report measures of offending.

In order to reduce the limitations and biases inherent in the use of official records and self-report measures, it has been suggested that a combination of both self-report and official records be used to more accurately determine the extent of juvenile crime (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997; Loeber et al., 1998). Furthermore, there has been a longstanding need for a reliable national data-base to inform on the extent and nature of juvenile crime (Owen & Carroll, 1997). A combination of the best available information is necessary in order to accurately gauge the extent and nature of serious juvenile offending and to subsequently develop policies and programs to deal with the problems of juvenile crime.

**Extent of serious juvenile offending**

A great deal of concern about crime and youth relates specifically to questions of prevalence and frequency of offending. The following overall trends have been identified in the literature, based on official statistics and/or empirical research, both in Australia and overseas.

1. Rates of serious offending vary considerably according to such factors as race / ethnicity, age, gender, subject (e.g., convicted offender, student, general population) and by offence type (Loeber et al., 1998; Pedersen & Wischtrum, 1995).
3. Juvenile offending is a relatively prevalent activity (Baker, 1998; Graham & Bowling, 1995) but most youth offend only once (Coumarelos, 1994; Loeber & Farrington, 1998a; Snyder, 1998).
4. Serious criminal offending is relatively infrequent among the general youth population (Fergusson, Lynskey, & Horwood, 1996; Graham & Bowling, 1995; Hartless et al., 1995; Morgan & Gardner, 1992; Pedersen & Wischtrum, 1995).
5. Most offending is of a relatively minor nature (e.g., shoplifting) and is frequently property related (Fergusson et al, 1996; Graham & Bowling, 1995; Hartless et al., 1995).
6. Serious offenders tend to commit less serious crimes at a high rate (Loeber & Farrington, 1998a; Snyder, 1998).

7. A small proportion of youth are responsible for a disproportionate number of crimes (Bilchik, 1998; Coumarelos, 1995; Graham & Bowling, 1995; Hartless et al., 1995; Morgan & Gardner, 1992; Mukherjee, 1997; Wolfgang, Thornberry, & Figlio, 1987).

These findings help to dispel some widely held myths reinforced by media sensationalism, including the perception that youth serious crime is a widespread problem and that, once on the path to crime, juveniles continue to offend.

Official records are clearly the most frequently relied upon source of information on the amount of serious juvenile crime in Australasia. Overall, official statistics point to an increasing trend in serious youth crime over the last 20 years, particularly among females, the highest increases being for serious assault (Mukherjee, 1997). Despite these worrying trends, the overwhelming majority of arrests for serious assaults involve adults.

Few empirical studies have been conducted in Australasia that provide some indication of the extent of youth involvement in serious crime. Most of these have been one-off studies conducted at a local (e.g., State) level, mainly in New South Wales (e.g., Baker, 1998; Coumarelos, 1994; Salmelainen, 1995; Trimboli & Bonney, 1994; Weatherburn & Lind, 1997). Only one recent study was located that used a sample of respondents from across Australia (Sarantakos, 1997). While each had a particular focus on issues of youth and crime, none of these studies was specifically designed to determine the extent of involvement of youth in serious crime.

In short, while there is considerable potential for research to be used to validate official records of serious juvenile offending and widen our understanding of the extent and nature of the problem, this avenue has not been exploited by police agencies and researchers. Currently, there is a disturbing lack of valid and reliable information available about the extent of juvenile involvement in serious (and other forms) of crime in Australasia. This leaves police agencies uninformed about the extent and nature of the problem and undirected in their efforts to address the problem. Furthermore, the absence of accurate information may allow the media to distort the problem thereby unleashing a backlash of public and political scrutiny of the police response.

**Prediction of serious juvenile offending**

A large number of studies, particularly from the US, have investigated the relationship between juvenile offending and various other factors (e.g., strain, parenting, video violence, maltreatment). As a result, a number of factors have been identified as predictors or risk factors of offending. It should be noted that few of these studies focused specifically on serious crimes, as opposed to more general delinquency. However, a comprehensive review of predictors of serious crime (youth violence) was carried out by researchers in the US (Hawkins, Herrenkohl, Farrington, Brewer, Catalano, & Harachi, 1998). These authors assessed the results of a number of longitudinal studies in order to identify those predictors that are amenable to modification, to guide prevention and intervention efforts. The factors that emerged from this analysis fall into one of the following five categories:
1. Individual factors including:
   • medical or physical conditions (e.g., pre-natal, post-natal complications)
   • psychological characteristics (e.g., aggressiveness, anti-social behaviour)

2. Family factors including:
   • parent criminality
   • child maltreatment
   • family or marital conflict

3. School factors including:
   • academic failure
   • truancy and dropping out of school

4. Peer related factors including:
   • delinquent siblings
   • delinquent peers
   • gang membership

5. Community and neighbourhood factors including:
   • poverty
   • community disorganisation
   • availability of drugs

The identification of individual predictor variables is helpful in that it shows the range of factors that contribute to serious juvenile offending, but it does not indicate the way in which specific factors combine to predict offending behaviour. However, the prediction of juvenile offending has been attempted to varying degrees. Some researchers have maintained a fairly limited focus, such as merely examining the effects of one variable (e.g., preference for heavy metal music) on the frequency and type of offending, while controlling for the effects of other variables (e.g., parental and school-related factors; Singer, Levine, & Jou, 1993). Others have shown how a particular factor (e.g., social sanctions) relates to juvenile offending through the mediating effects of another variable (e.g., internalised norms; Foglia, 1997).

Some researchers have analysed how particular factors inter-relate. The more frequently investigated factors include maltreatment (Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Zingraff, Leiter, Myers, & Johnsen, 1993), religiosity (Benda, 1995; 1997; Cochran, Wood, & Arnekleiv, 1994), the influence of peers (Battin, Hill, Abbott, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1998; Matsueda & Anderson, 1998; Warr, 1993), gang membership (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Battin et al., 1998; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993), and alcohol use (Cookson, 1992; Fergusson et al., 1996).

A few studies have used structural equation models or have applied mathematical models to explain or predict offending behaviour. Each of these studies has specific aims (e.g., comparing different theories of offending behaviour; Matsueda & Anderson, 1998) and has used specific subject groups (e.g., chronic vs less active offenders; Nagin & Land, 1993), making it difficult to generalise results. The results do however shed light on pathways to delinquency and clarify how particular factors combine to predict offending behaviour.
A number of recent Australasian studies have explored the association between various factors and juvenile offending. However, as found with the international research, few of these studies focussed on the more serious end of the crime continuum. Although they contribute to and validate the wealth of knowledge on the predictors of juvenile offending, most of these studies are limited in that they do not inform on developmental pathways and causal links between correlates and offending behaviour. Only one study attempted to incorporate predictors into a model of juvenile offending (Weatherburn & Lind, 1997), however, this was limited to only four factors (single-parent family, crowded dwelling, abuse, and neglect).

Overall, the results of these Australasian and international studies show that it is inappropriate to study offending behaviour in terms of individual correlates in isolation. It is widely acknowledged that violent behaviour is a product of interactions between individual, contextual, situational and neighbourhood factors (Hawkins, Herrenkohl et al., 1998; Loeber & Farrington, 1998b). It is clear that a number of factors contribute significantly, but may have a differential impact on offending behaviour over the course of time and according to offender characteristics or offence classifications. Multivariate models that include the most significant predictors in theoretically linked causal sequences are presently lacking in studies of serious juvenile offending, and this is particularly the case in Australasia.

**Interventions for serious juvenile offending**

A major theme in research on juvenile offending concerns intervention and attempts to measure their effectiveness. Interventions may seek to prevent offending among juveniles identified as being at risk of offending, or aim to reduce offending behaviour among known offenders. Interventions may involve a focus on the family (e.g., family therapy), child (e.g., social competence training), peers (e.g., peer mediation, conflict resolution), or they may be directed at the school (e.g., classroom management). Furthermore, there is a range of community interventions which may involve different segments of the community (e.g., citizens, schools, police, volunteers). Some of the strategies used include neighbourhood watch, citizen patrol, situational prevention, mentoring, police patrol, and community policing (Catalano, Arthur, Hawkins, Berglund, & Olsen, 1998; Wasserman & Miller, 1998).

A number of recent studies of intervention approaches conducted internationally were identified in the literature. It is interesting to note that, compared to the amount of research on the extent of offending and prediction of offending, intervention studies were few. Most were concerned with rehabilitative programs (Brownlee, 1995; Deschenes & Greenwood, 1998; Gottfredson & Barton, 1993; Greenwood & Turner, 1993; Sealock, Gottfredson, & Gallaher, 1997), while considerably fewer examined prevention programs targeting pre-school children (e.g., Pagani, Tremblay, Vitaro, & Parent, 1998; Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993).

A comprehensive review of interventions for serious juvenile offenders was conducted by US researchers through a meta-analysis of 200 studies (Lipsey & Wilson, 1998). The range and diversity of studies, the differences among juvenile samples, differences in research methods applied, and the assortment of procedures used in these studies mean that there were few studies of any one type of intervention. As a consequence, the results should be regarded as tentative. Overall, the results show that the average intervention effect was positive for these studies. However, there was a wide variation in the degree of effectiveness. For example, some interventions were able to reduce recidivism by up to 40%, while the effects of others were negligible. In general, the most effective programs for non-institutionalised offenders
involved interpersonal skills training, behavioural contracting, or individual counselling, while for institutionalised offenders, interpersonal skills training, cognitive behavioural treatment or family homes programs were most effective.

Overall, research conducted internationally shows that serious juvenile offending can be reduced through intervention. It appears that multiple component programs (i.e., that aim to reduce risk factors in multiple domains) coupled with after-care programs are the most successful for both prevention and intervention (Catalano et al., 1998; Wasserman & Miller, 1998). This is consistent with the widespread acknowledgment that serious offending is multiply determined (Lipsey & Derzon, 1998; Loeber & Farrington, 1998b). Research also indicates that early intervention is critical to prevention (Farrington, 1994) and the provision of after-care programs is essential to reduce the likelihood of re-offending (Loeber & Farrington, 1998a).

Very little information exists on intervention approaches for serious juvenile offenders in Australasia and those programs that have been trialed, do not appear to have been systematically evaluated. For example, diversionary practices such as community aid panels and family group conferences, while attracting lively discussion and debate (Alder & Wundersitz, 1994; Blagg, 1997; Braithwaite, 1997; Cuneen & White, 1995; Wundersitz, 1997), have not been subject to evaluation regarding their impact on serious juvenile crime (Coumarelos, 1994; Wundersitz, 1997).

Mugford and Nelson (1996) summarise a number of violence prevention projects that have been applied in various jurisdictions across Australia, only some of which are directed to youth populations. Crime prevention is frequently one of several aims of these programs, however none appear to specifically target serious offending behaviour. A number of indicators have been used to assess the degree of success of projects (e.g., crime and reduction, development of new interests and activities, increase in self-esteem). However, details concerning the effectiveness of the programs are sketchy and appear to be based on rather superficial and subjective appraisals, rather than a formal evaluation.

Recently, a review of existing social and health oriented intervention programs for juveniles was conducted in Australia (National Crime Prevention, 1999). Crime prevention is frequently not explicitly stated as an objective of these programs, however they are considered to be crime prevention initiatives to the extent that they target factors associated with juvenile offending (e.g., parenting practices, school achievement, self-esteem). It is unclear as to how suitable any of these programs may be for targeting serious juvenile offenders. A major finding was that many of the existing programs are not adequately evaluated and the report specifically recommends that evaluation become a priority. Despite this, the review revealed a number of well-planned and well-executed programs that target a range of factors related to offending behaviour. However, some key risk factors of offending were notably absent from the selection of programs reviewed. These include certain peri-natal risk factors (e.g., prenatal brain damage, low birth weight), parental risk factors (e.g., substance abuse, psychiatric disorders), and problems associated with the transition from primary to secondary school. Consequently, it was recommended that services be extended to accommodate these factors.

In short, there appears to be little information available on prevention and intervention programs for serious juvenile offenders operating across Australasia. While many programs are available from various health, social and welfare agencies, most do not directly target
juvenile offending, let alone focus on serious offending. The failure to evaluate programs is a significant problem, as is the lack of coordination between agencies variously associated with juveniles and their families (e.g., health, justice, social and welfare organisations).

**Australasian agenda for research on serious crime**

Few empirical studies have been conducted in Australasia on youth and crime, and consistent with international trends, even fewer have focussed exclusively on serious crime. Many of the shortcomings of the exclusive reliance on official data sources can be overcome through well-designed experimental studies. However, this most fruitful avenue of knowledge about the topical issue of youth and serious crime has not been exploited by the relevant stakeholders in Australasia.

Broadly, there are three main areas in which there a need for Australasian data. These are knowledge about:

1. the extent of serious offending (e.g., frequency/ prevalence, types of offences),
2. serious offenders (e.g., characteristics, family factors, why they offend), and
3. intervention and prevention of serious offending.

A number of studies could stem from these three broad areas. The following suggestions should be used as a guide toward developing more detailed projects to expand on and enhance research into youth and serious crime in Australasia.

1. **Determination of the size of the youth and serious crime problem in Australasia**

   **AIM:** To identify how much of the total crime problem is accounted for by juvenile offenders committing serious offences compared to other juvenile offenders and/ or adult offenders.

   A one-off "snap-shot" study of representative samples of youth and adult offenders would provide baseline data to establish an accurate picture of youth offending. However, ideally, data would be collected on a regular basis to monitor for changes in patterns of offending. Both self-reports and official records should be used as data sources for offending behaviour. This study would yield critical and fundamental information on the size and nature of serious crime among juveniles according to basic demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, culture/ethnicity). This information would form a much needed sound basis for studies across time (i.e., highlighting trends in serious crime) and for studies designed to illuminate causes of the problem (e.g., developmental pathways).

2. **Determination of the nature of the youth and serious crime problem in Australasia**

   **AIM:** To assess the extent to which different factors cause youth to become involved in serious criminal offending.

   Recent advances in the knowledge of serious offending indicate that the precursors of crime occur very early in life and are complex in their arrangement (Farrington, 1994; Wilson, 1998). There is considerable scope for a number of both quantitative and qualitative studies to explore the relative contribution of various predictors of serious offending. Particular groups (e.g., gang members, other co-offending groups, different cultural/ethnic groups) could be targeted and specific comparisons could be made (e.g., serious offenders vs less serious
delinquents and non-offenders) to elucidate the way in which various factors combine to produce serious juvenile offending. Key individual difference variables to examine include age, gender, culture/ethnicity, prior offending behaviour, peer associations, family background, prior victimisation, other problem behaviours (e.g., mental health problems, school problems), and substance use (frequency and type). Qualitative measures could be employed to assess motivations, attitudes, social and cultural beliefs and other influences (e.g., peers, availability of firearms, television violence, attitude to victim). Identifying the factors that are most likely to result in serious criminal offending will enable relevant agencies to develop preventative programs or other interventions to target, where appropriate, 'at risk' youth.

3. Prevention and intervention programs

AIM: To develop and evaluate the effectiveness of programs designed to influence the rate of serious offending by youth.

The information derived from studies in the above two areas above could be used to guide the development of prevention and intervention programs for juvenile offenders likely to commit serious crime. Currently there is a lack of a holistic view regarding serious juvenile crime that takes account of the interaction between individual, social, situational and contextual factors over time (Hawkins et al., 1998; Loeber & Farrington, 1998b). However it is widely acknowledged that juvenile offending is multiply determined, and thus intervention and prevention efforts must correspondingly target multiple systems. It is clear that a coordinated effort between key organisations including police, schools, health and social welfare agencies, will be critical in order to comprehensively address problems of serious juvenile crime.

Multi-component interventions that target a range of the most significant individual, familial, social, educational and contextual factors that predict serious juvenile offending need to be developed. Separate programs should be designed for prevention (e.g., preventing 'at risk' youth from entering the criminal justice system) and intervention (e.g., reducing the potential for re-offending or escalation of offending among convicted juveniles). The programs should include a strong evaluation component that relies on a range of sources (e.g., self-report and official records) to measure effectiveness in terms of crime reduction and other factors associated with serious offending (e.g., anti-social behaviour, substance use).

Program outcomes should be monitored over time to determine whether positive changes are maintained. Interventions that fail to produce desired results should be re-assessed and re-designed in order to maximise their effectiveness. An ongoing review of the literature and developments achieved both nationally and internationally will facilitate this process.
Conclusion

The dearth of research on youth and serious crime in Australasia is surprising given the increasing number of media reports of juvenile involvement in serious and violent crimes. Official statistics show that serious crime has increased in recent years in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997). This also appears to be the case in the United States, particularly in relation to certain violent offences (Snyder, 1998; Snyder & Sickmund, 1995; Wilson & Howell, 1993). Farrington (1996) draws a similar conclusion in relation to juvenile offending in England and Wales. The situation is particularly more disturbing given that official records tend to under-estimate offence rates (e.g., Dunford & Elliot, 1984; Farrington, 1996), as not all crime comes to the attention of police.

Currently, there are many gaps in the knowledge of serious juvenile crime in Australasia. The necessary first step is to develop an accurate and reliable picture of the frequency and nature of serious juvenile offending. This will form the basis for the development of effective programs to prevent juveniles from entering the criminal justice system and to reduce the effects of serious crime among previously incarcerated youth. The research suggested would provide valuable data presently lacking in Australasia; data that could be used to reveal the real size and nature of the problem, and to direct relevant agencies towards developing appropriate and effective prevention and intervention initiatives.
References


