



ALCOHOL'S LEGACY: HIGH CRIME RATE SEEN IN FAS/FAE

Doctors routinely warn pregnant women to stop drinking alcoholic beverages, but many women can't or won't. About 20% still expose their unborn babies to alcohol and, as a result, thousands of babies are born each year in the U.S. with either Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) or Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE).

Many children with FAS and the milder FAE exhibit inappropriate behaviors including impulsiveness, lack of consideration, cheating, and lying (See [Crime Times, Vol. 1, No. 1/2, Page 3](#)). But until recently, little was known about the effects of FAS and FAE on criminality and delinquency.

A new study by Ann Streissguth and colleagues, conducted for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, followed 415 individuals with FAS or FAE, and determined the number of subjects who experienced trouble with the law. The researchers found that 14% of subjects between the ages of 6 and 11, 61% of adolescents, and 58% of adults had run afoul of the law at least once. Overall, 60% of FAS/FAE subjects age 12 or over had been in trouble with the authorities, charged with a crime, or convicted of a crime.

"About one in three clients 12 years and older committed a first crime between 9 and 14 years of age," the researchers say. "Very few clients had their first trouble with the law after age 20." Shoplifting and theft were the crimes most frequently committed by individuals with FAS/FAE, and subjects with FAE were somewhat more likely than those with FAS to commit crimes- possibly because more severely affected individuals receive more care and supervision.

Streissguth et al. also report that about 50% of FAS/FAE subjects age 12 or over had exhibited inappropriate sexual behavior, with sexual misbehavior being most common among subjects who had themselves been abused. More than 60% of subjects age 12 or older had been suspended or expelled from school, or dropped out, and almost a third of subjects age 12 or older had abused drugs and/or alcohol (with female subjects as likely as males to abuse alcohol). Of the entire sample of 415 subjects, 94% exhibited mental health problems.

Streissguth et al. conclude that early diagnosis, early and intensive intervention, and stable and safe living environments are critical factors in reducing rates of criminal behavior, school failure, and other problems among individuals with FAS or FAE. The researchers also call for increased efforts to educate women about the dangers of drinking during pregnancy, saying that "the magnitude and costs of [life problems associated with FAS and FAE] are huge- when calculated against the estimated figure of 1 to 3 FAS [cases] per 1,000 births and several fold this figure for FAE."

"Understanding the occurrence of secondary disabilities in clients with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE)," Ann P. Streissguth, Helen M. Barr, Julia Kogan, and Fred L. Bookstein, report to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, August 1996. Address: Ann Streissguth, Fetal Alcohol and Drug Unit, University of Washington School of Medicine, 180 Nickerson, Suite 309, Seattle, WA 98109-9112.

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