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Children of criminals to be 'targeted' and 'tracked'

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Children of criminals to be 'targeted' and 'tracked'

Hazel Blears: Shedding new light on the old cops-and-robbers story

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Children of criminals are to be "targeted" and "tracked" from an early age by the Government to prevent them following their parents into a life of crime, as part of a campaign to tackle the next generation of offenders.

In an offensive on youth crime, a programme to prevent 125,000 children whose fathers are in prison from joining them in jail, is being planned by the Home Office.

In an interview with *The Independent*, Hazel Blears, the Policing minister, says she is optimistic that "tracking" and "targeting" can help prevent children becoming criminals like their parents.

Studies showed that children with criminal fathers and "under-achievers" who grow up in local authority care have a significant chance of turning to crime themselves.

"About 125,000 kids have got a dad in prison. That's a huge risk factor. Something like 65 per cent of those kids will end up in prison themselves," she said. "We need to track the children who are most at risk. We can predict the risk factors that will lead a child into offending behaviour." However, she is aware the plan, based on research showing children of criminals are far more likely to end up in jail than their peers, may lead to accusations they are being unfairly singled out.

"I don't think it is stigmatising those children by targeting them," she said. "You can intervene at an early age and say 'your life can be different and we will help you and your parents make your life different.' Let's put the support in as early as we can."

The Policing minister has been in talks with Margaret Hodge, the minister for Children, about an early intervention scheme to prevent children of burglars, muggers, and gangsters from breaking the law.

She wants to use methods used in Labour's Sure Start programme for under-fives in deprived areas to give extra support to children from criminal backgrounds.

Children would be tracked by the authorities from the time they are in nappies to their teenage years with extra support and help to nip disruptive behaviour in the bud.

One study showed that the most violent offenders began to display bad behaviour as young as six. Another study which tracked children into adult life found "under-controlled" children who exhibited disruptive behaviour at the age of three were four times more likely to be convicted of violent offences.

"If you can tackle the 125,000 kids with dads in jail by providing extra support and help there's a chance," Ms Blears said. Teenagers with criminal fathers would be monitored and offered extra support at school and by social services as well as being introduced to sport, drama and other after-school activities.

"You can get the parents into parenting classes. We can get some of the older kids involved in arts, sports drama. Give them something to succeed at. If you go to school every day and everybody tells you you are rubbish you are never going to succeed," she said.

Ms Blears also wants to see a crackdown on violence and bullying in schools. Studies show classroom bullies are more likely to be involved in muggings, car theft and attacks outside school. "I don't think you can afford to let it go. It's a bit like zero tolerance," she said.

The judicial system should help offenders, including drug addicts who rob to fuel their habit, to change their ways. But if they

refuse to change, the police should provide a "hostile environment" for them.

"We will help you change your life but if you want to go back to robbing we will be on your doorstep," she said.

Meanwhile, children up to the age of five are to be kept in prison with their mothers at Cornton Vale, near Stirling, it emerged yesterday.

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