

Crime and the Life Course

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Abstract

The introduction of the life-course perspective to criminology brought about a conceptual realignment of the field. After recounting this history, we describe emerging research in criminology, point to some nagging unanswered questions, and suggest some new avenues for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Social scientists as early as Quetelet noticed something remarkable about criminal behavior: it is highly age-dependent. Age-specific rates of offending in the general population peak in middle to late adolescence for most offenses, and drop sharply and permanently thereafter. Drug offenses are one of the few exceptions to this rule, reaching a peak at later—but still young—ages. The law-like relation between age and criminal conduct would eventually come to occupy the interest of many eminent criminologists, including the Gluecks, Sutherland, Hirschi and Gottfredson, Blumstein, Wolfgang, Farrington, Moffitt, and Sampson and Laub.

In the 1980s, the connection between age and crime became a—perhaps *the*—dominant issue in the field of criminology. This intense interest was prompted in large part by a 1983 article by Hirschi and Gottfredson in the *American Journal of Sociology*. There the authors made several bold (some might say extravagant) claims, including the assertion that the age distribution of crime is invariant across cultures, over time, and among demographic groups, and that it cannot be explained by any variables known to criminology. Some of these claims remain controversial even today, but Hirschi and Gottfredson succeeded in advancing the issue of age and crime to the forefront of attention in criminology.

Seven years later, Gottfredson and Hirschi published *A General Theory of Crime*, in which they asserted that criminal behavior is the result of low self-control, a trait, they argued, that arises early in life and remains stable over the life course. Under this theory, the propensity to engage in crime

is unaffected by events that occur in life (e.g., marriage, military service, and college attendance), and the observed age distribution of crime merely reflects the distribution of criminal *opportunities* over the life course, not criminality itself.

Despite misgivings about longitudinal data, Hirschi and Gottfredson helped launch the paradigm shift that was the life-course perspective. Responding to their theory, Sampson and Laub published *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points in Life* in 1993. In direct contrast to Gottfredson and Hirschi, Sampson and Laub presented and tested an “age-graded theory of informal social control,” according to which changing ties to conventional institutions (e.g., marriage, full-time employment, the military) over the life course explain movement in and out of crime. They later revised the theory to include changing peer relations as well as a greater role for human agency and other elements, but they held fast to their position that current life circumstances rather than early-life events or traits explain criminal behavior. Numerous other investigations have buttressed this view. For example, Warr demonstrated that marriage is usually followed by a sharp decline in time spent with peers, and that this decline explains much of the marriage effect on desistance, that is, the discontinuation of crime. He also presented evidence that changing peer relations in adolescence and young adulthood can account for the age distribution of crime itself. To date, evidence from empirical studies using data on unemployment, childbearing, and other life-course events has generally favored Sampson and Laub’s perspective over Gottfredson and Hirschi’s.

Although Gottfredson and Hirschi’s claims about the stability of self-control and criminality over the life course have generated little empirical support, their argument about self-control itself has fared much better. Numerous studies have documented a substantial inverse correlation between self-control and criminal conduct, and some criminologists, like Frank Cullen, place it among the strongest correlates of criminality. Moreover, there is mounting evidence that criminal peers mediate much or all of the effect of self-control on criminal behavior. Low-control youth, it seems, often fall in with peers who lead them to the wrong side of the law.

Sampson and Laub’s work is often credited with introducing the life-course paradigm to criminology, that is, a shift in focus away from interindividual differences in criminality to changes in criminality *within* individual biographies as persons and cohorts progress from childhood through adolescence, adulthood, and old age. However, in addition to Hirschi and Gottfredson’s work, there were other precursors and contributors to this intellectual movement that deserve credit. These include the “criminal careers” perspective developed by Alfred Blumstein and his students, the success of Glenn Elder’s life-course paradigm within sociology (which Sampson and Laub give due

credit), the growing influence of developmental psychology within criminology from scholars like Terrence Thornberry, and advances in longitudinal statistical models for life-course data from scholars like Daniel Nagin. Psychiatry also took part in the revolution. Terrie Moffitt famously claimed that hidden within the great number of ordinary “adolescence-limited” offenders was a smaller group of “life-course persistent” offenders who suffered from neurological deficits and other disorders. Her argument has stimulated much research, but the existence of true life-course-persistent offenders remains a matter of controversy.

THEORIES OF DESISTANCE

Sampson and Laub’s life-course theory drew heavily from Travis Hirschi’s classic control theory of delinquency, according to which ties to conventional persons and institutions create stakes in conformity that discourage crime and delinquency. In response, some other prominent theoretical traditions in criminology have sought to incorporate the life-course approach. These include Aker’s social learning theory, which focuses on social sources of reinforcement, and Agnew’s revised strain theory, which concentrates on stressors or strains that may increase the likelihood of crime. In addition, a good deal of theoretical work in the past decade has focused attention on one issue in life-course criminology, desistance from crime. Many criminologists regard desistance as the most policy-relevant issue in life-course criminology because of its implications for crime control and corrections, especially in light of widespread concerns about prison overcrowding and mass incarceration. Researchers have set forth a variety of new theoretical accounts of desistance, some more empirically grounded than others.

Paternoster and Bushway (2009) focused on identity, arguing that offenders develop “working selves” as criminal offenders. This day-to-day working self contrasts with possible imagined future selves, both positive and negative. The latter they refer to as the *feared self*. In their words (2009, p. 1103), “Persons are committed to their working self until they determine that the cost of this commitment is greater than the benefits. A perception that one may in fact turn out to become the feared self, a perception assisted by the linking of life failures, or what has been called the ‘crystallization of discontent,’ provides the initial motivation to change the self.”

Giordano, Schroeder, and Cernkovich (2007) concentrated on emotional and cognitive transformations that may be precursors to desistance and that may or may not be tied to life-course transitions such as marriage, college entry, or employment. Noting, for example, the “thrills and excitement” that delinquency offers youth, they observed that “as youths move into the adult period, these positive emotional connections to crime and associated views

of the self are less likely to receive social backing of any kind” and “may be replaced in adulthood with feelings of regret, sadness, and depression” (2007, pp. 1610, 1612).

In *Confessions of a Dying Thief: Understanding Criminal Careers and Illegal Enterprise* (2005), Steffensmeier and Ulmer documented the criminal career of “Sam Goodman,” a burglar, fence, and illicit businessman whose criminal career spanned half a century and ended with his death from cancer. Looking back on his extraordinary career, what did Sam conclude? “If I had to live my life over, I would not change it. Except get into the fencing sooner. And not get caught [referring to a prison stint]” (2005, p. 373). Sam admits pulling “some rank shit,” but insists that it was balanced by the good things he had done—helping destitute individuals and families, giving to charities, treating people fairly, and taking care of neighborhood kids. Far from promoting desistance, his prison time only led to a more cautious and careful approach to his work. By his own admission, Sam never lost the “larceny” in his heart.

Among the earliest social scientists to investigate desistance, Shover (1996) credits conventional social bonds (e.g., romantic partners), legitimate experiences (e.g., employment), and family ties as catalysts to desistance, but in what seems to foreshadow Giordano, Schroeder, and Cernkovich’s “cognitive/emotional transformations” and Paternoster and Bushway’s “crystallization of discontent,” Shover points to “a new perspective on the self” (along with a growing awareness of time and changing aspirations) that comes with age as a critical precursor to desistance. “As they get older, persistent thieves and hustlers develop and employ a critical, detached perspective toward their earlier years, their youthful behavior, and the personal identity they believe it exemplifies. They gain a vantage point from which they can view and critique their youthful behavior and self. What they experience is nothing less than development of a separate, evaluative, judgmental perspective” (1996, p. 130). Shover quotes one offender, who stated (1996, p. 131) that “I saw myself for what I really was. I saw what I was. I saw it. With my own eyes I saw myself. I could see it as plain as I’m looking at you now. And I know that what I looked at was a sorry picture of a human being. . . . I was a self-made bastard, really.” In taking stock of their lives, Shover adds, many older offenders “confront the realization that crime has been an unproductive enterprise and that this situation is unlikely to change” (1996, p. 141). These men recognized that the direction they had chosen in life was a serious mistake, a recognition nurtured by age.

In his widely read book “Making Good” (2000), Maruna argued that the Liverpoolian desisters he studied succeeded in leaving crime behind through the use of “redemption scripts,” self-narratives that connected “negative past experiences to the present in such a way that the present

good seems an almost inevitable outcome: 'Because of all I have been through, I am now this new way'" (2000, p. 87). The redemption script emphasizes the inherent goodness of the actor all along and attributes criminality to external forces—poverty, oppression, drugs, abuse—that must be overcome. "Yet, with the help of some outside force, someone who 'believed in' the ex-offender, the narrator is able to accomplish what he or she was 'always meant to do.' Newly empowered, he or she now also seeks to 'give something back' to society as a display of gratitude" (2000, p. 87). Maruna describes this process as "self-reconstruction" and acknowledges that these self-narratives are frequently "out of step with reality" (2000, p. 9). But he insists that these are the narratives that actually work.

What seems to unite these recent theories of desistance is their emphasis on identify, the self, and what is essentially a psychological or social-psychological explanation of crime. This places them in sharp contrast with Sampson and Laub, who took a much more structural approach to crime that emphasizes the conventional roles that bind individuals to society and conventional behavior. There may be room, perhaps, to integrate these theories to some degree, but they approach the explanation of crime and the life course from very different angles.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Compared to some areas of research within criminology, the life-course perspective is relatively young. Consequently, there remain a number of important unanswered questions confronting the field, as well as a variety of new research directions that have yet to be explored or are only beginning to draw attention. Here we detail some of these questions and issues, including conceptual, substantive, and methodological matters.

First, what exactly is desistance from crime? If an offender ceases offending for a full 5 years, but then resumes, is that desistance? Or do we need an additional concept, say, cessation, to designate permanent desistance? If we insist on true cessation to define desistance, then we significantly complicate all empirical tests of desistance theories, because we must await the death of each and every subject to insure genuine cessation. What about an individual who transitions from a very high rate of offending to a very low rate? Although not exactly cessation, this circumstance certainly resembles such a transformation, and the magnitude of change could even exceed that of a true desister. And what about the intermittent "zig-zag" offenders identified by Laub and Sampson (offenders who stop and restart), or offenders whose "career" consists of a single horrific act (e.g., shooting into a crowded movie theater, derailing a train)? One might also wish to differentiate involuntary desistance (as a result, e.g., of incarceration) from voluntary desistance, as

well as recognize that offenders may desist from one *form* of crime while persisting in or even initiating another. The larger point is that scholars may need to consider more carefully the meaning of concepts such as desistance or persistence in examining criminal careers.

When it comes to crime, life-course researchers have investigated a number of life-course transitions, including marriage, full-time employment, entry into the military, and higher education. Yet there are other important transitions that remain largely or wholly unexamined. These include the death of a spouse (perhaps the most traumatic of all human experiences, according to psychologists) along with the death of one's parents, children, or close friends. Other events, such as debilitating illness, the sudden inheritance or loss of wealth, religious conversion, catastrophic accidents, criminal victimization, disfigurement, undiscovered talents, or the acquisition or loss of relatives through marriage and divorce, seem potentially pertinent to criminal careers as well.

Criminal careers do not take place in a social vacuum. Because much criminal behavior is group behavior, and because peer offending is one of the strongest predictors of criminal behavior, researchers need to examine how the life-course trajectories of offenders *intersect* and *interact* with one another. For example, does the desistance of one offender influence others? If so, who? Younger co-offenders? "Followers" versus "instigators?" How does the availability of one or more co-offenders (e.g., their work/school/girlfriend schedules) regulate the opportunities for crime of a criminal group/gang? Can they only "work" at nighttime or on afternoons or Saturdays? Then, too, criminologists often allude to the group process of replacement—criminal groups can replace members who leave without dissolving the group itself. But replacement may not always be a straightforward matter. How, for example, does one replace members who possess highly specialized skills, valuable experience, or desirable qualities such as reliability or loyalty or strength?

Next, how does criminal behavior at one point in the life course affect the chances of criminal behavior at other points in the life course? For example, most youthful offenders learn quickly from experience or from their peers that the legal costs of crime are usually minimal, and such knowledge surely invites future criminal conduct. If the offenders are eventually convicted of a crime, however, that conviction (particularly if it is a felony conviction) can permanently and severely limit their opportunities for acquiring a legitimate job or reputation in the future. Criminal behavior, in other words, can be a self-reinforcing system, even when the initial conditions of crime have dissipated, or because those initial conditions are renewed or reinforced through crime itself. Joining a gang or other peer group, for example, can both lead to

crime, and, by making it difficult or impossible to leave, “lock” an individual into a deviant lifestyle/career.

Now consider another issue. How truly stable are purportedly stable personal traits that (allegedly) affect criminality? For example, is low self-control as invariant throughout life as Gottfredson and Hirschi maintain? Many criminological theories have been put forth over the years that tie adult criminality to events or conditions in early life (e.g., strain theory, social learning theory, labeling theory). However, the longer the time elapsed between an effect and its putative cause, the larger the number of new and intervening causal variables that are potentially relevant, and therefore the lower the certainty one can have about any alleged causal connections. Uncle Ralph’s slurred speech, in other words, may be a delayed reaction to that fist fight he had 15 years ago, or to a newfound fondness for whiskey. The empirical difficulty in sorting through such causal problems does not diminish their importance. In fact, perhaps the greatest value of the life-course perspective lies in its steadfast determination to answer this question: just how much does behavior at any one point in life depend on current circumstances versus “baggage” from the past?

Along those lines, Raudenbush has offered a trenchant critique of popular group-based trajectory models in current life-course criminology (i.e., from Nagin and others). Such models, he correctly notes, are based on individual records of behavior from which a limited number of trajectory groups are inferred and used to retrospectively classify subjects. The problem occurs, according to Raudenbush, when analysts speak as though these group memberships *foretell the future*, that is, they index some process that is immanent in early life and fully realized only later. On the contrary, Raudenbush argues, the observed criminal history of an individual is a summary of a complex interaction of propensity, opportunity, and environment in which the future is always exceedingly uncertain at the time (Will a co-offender die? Will a prosecutor drop the charges? Will a police officer make an arrest?), even if the past appears to be otherwise. In philosophical terms, group-based criminologists are closer to Nietzsche or Schopenhauer—life is the working of the will in the world—or perhaps Kierkegaard (life is only comprehensible backwards), whereas Raudenbush is something of an existentialist—life is an (intelligent) leaf in the wind. Or, perhaps, as the idiot-savant Forrest Gump speculated, “It’s both.”

Most applications of the life-course perspective in criminology pertain to offending, but criminologists are beginning to apply it to other facets of crime as well. A prime example is criminal victimization. Investigators have undertaken research on life-course trajectories of victimization, on childhood exposure to violence and adult mental health, on how intimate partner violence in early relationships colors new relationships, on early-life

bullying victimization and subsequent mental health problems, and on child abuse and adult excessive drinking. Research is also under way on exposure to violence during adolescence and eventual negative events such as suicide attempts, running away from home, and dropping out of high school. Others are examining childhood sexual abuse and later sexual revictimization among women, childhood maltreatment and delinquency, and the victimization that sometimes occurs when members attempt to leave their gang.

There is also ample room for new research on the life-course dynamics of *indirect* victimization, such as fear of crime. Research on fear of crime in the United States has concentrated on personal fear (fear for oneself) while largely overlooking the fear that people have for *others* in their lives—children, spouses, friends—whose safety they value. Warr and Ellison examined such *altruistic fear* (fear for others) in family households and found that it is more common and often more intense than personal fear, and that it has a distinctive structure in family households. For example, while women are more likely than men to exhibit personal fear, men are more likely to fear for their spouse than vice versa, and men are likely to worry more about others in their household than they are to worry about themselves. Many of the everyday precautions practiced by Americans and conventionally assumed to be *self*-protective appear to be a consequence of altruistic fear, not personal fear.

One of the interesting findings from Warr and Ellison's study pertains to differences in the fear that parents feel for their sons and daughters. While fear for sons declines sharply after about age 15, fear for daughters persists unabated into adulthood, a fact that Warr and Ellison believe may stem from females' risk of sexual assault. Similarly, men's fear for their spouse is greatest at younger ages (perhaps for the same reason) and generally declines throughout life, whereas women's fear for their husband actually increases from about age 30 to 60. These and other findings were uncovered by Warr and Ellison using cross-sectional data, but they deserve corroboration using true longitudinal designs—life-course data.

No area of criminology presents more methodological difficulties for investigators than the life-course paradigm. Even elementary questions usually require longitudinal data, which are notoriously difficult to gather and interpret. Moreover, recreating criminal careers *retrospectively* forces investigators to confront numerous possible forms of measurement error, including, for example, the fallibility of human memory, faulty official data, and errors in the timing of events. Laub and Sampson (2003, p. 276) are correct in insisting that "retrospective data tend to confuse cause and effect for both laypersons and scholars alike. Although maddeningly difficult to carry out, only

prospective longitudinal data—studying lives going forward—can sort out casual ordering and shed light on how complex processes emerge over time.”

A perpetual problem facing life-course researchers remains selection bias. For example, does marriage promote desistance from crime, or are desisters simply more attractive candidates for marriage than active criminals? As with most social scientists, life-course investigators have to live with the fact that the causal variables they study (such as marriage) are not subject to experimental random assignment. Statistical techniques to isolate and control for selection continue to develop, but there is no way to surpass true experimental manipulation when it comes to attaining causal certainty.

True long-term prospective studies require extraordinary commitments from investigators and funders alike. It may be glib, but it is nonetheless true to say that life-course research requires life-long researchers, as well as systems for the intergenerational transmission of research goals and methods. Scientists of any ilk can readily appreciate how difficult such requirements are to fulfill.

CONCLUSION

The life-course perspective opened a new window to criminal behavior, a window that is likely to reveal more and more as time passes. As tests and applications of the paradigm have multiplied in recent years, research in the area has become increasingly technical and inferential, employing techniques such as propensity-score matching, latent-class modeling, and the like. This is natural and largely beneficial, but it carries with it a risk that investigators will lose sight of the essential value of the life-course perspective.

Consider the case of John “Jackie” Elliott, a young man whose criminal trial I (the senior author) attended in 1986. Elliott was charged and convicted of a monstrous crime, that is, instigating the gang rape of a young woman, Joyce Munguia, 19 years of age, under a railroad overpass one day in east Austin, Texas. After the rape was completed, Elliott used a length of motorcycle chain to strike Munguia’s face more than 20 times, tearing her face away and necessitating a closed-casket funeral.

During the course of the trial, I watched Elliott’s face closely for signs of regret, empathy, or any other emotion, but he maintained an utterly impassive facial expression throughout the trial, save for a few tears when his mother testified about him. Here, I thought, was a human being incapable of introspection or change.

Over the next 7 years, before his eventual execution, Elliott’s case became something of a *cause celebre* because, as a British citizen, his execution was opposed by many in the British government. In fact, more than 100 members of Parliament signed a petition requesting clemency in his case, which was

denied. Eventually his lawyer's appeals were exhausted and Elliott was scheduled for execution by lethal injection. Shortly before his execution, Elliott was interviewed by a journalist from the *Austin American Statesman* (February 4, 2003), who wrote of him: "Now he has gray hair, reads the Bible every day, and has a different outlook, he said." Elliott declared that "I'm very sorry about this. Anger is a big part of the thing that got me in prison." At another point, he stated that "I've stopped blaming other people and started forgiving myself." He added that "I believe there's an afterlife . . . I just don't know whether I qualify for it or not."

The man I thought incapable of regret or empathy seems to have arrived at just that. Judging from his words, Elliott had come to appreciate the gravity of his offense, accept personal responsibility for it, wish it were otherwise, and own the pain and other consequences of his actions. What is more, he appears to have reached some understanding of the reasons for his own behavior and undertaken to forgive himself.

This is a long journey, indeed, from monster to man. The life-course perspective urges us to not only compare Elliott's biography with that of other offenders, but to compare Elliott the young man with Elliott the older man, facing death, with the aim of understanding how human beings become (or do not become) new. Social scientists are not the first to take on such questions (literary examples abound), but the life-course perspective brings a set of scientific analytical tools that hold great promise for unlocking the mysteries of the human heart.

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