

Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Sampson, Robert J., and John H. Laub: Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control

Contributors: Gary Sweeten

Editors: Francis T. Cullen & Pamela Wilcox

Book Title: Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Chapter Title: "Sampson, Robert J., and John H. Laub: Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control"

Pub. Date: 2010

Access Date: September 16, 2014

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412959186

Online ISBN: 9781412959193

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n221>

Print pages: 806-813

©2010 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n221>

A debate over the significance of criminal careers dominated theoretical criminology, beginning in the mid-1980s. On one side, Alfred Blumstein et al. (1986, 1988a, 1988b) promoted a criminal career model to describe the volume of crime committed over an individual lifespan, including age of onset, frequency of offending, age of termination (desistance), and career length. The criminal careers paradigm suggested that each of these parameters warranted investigation and, possibly, distinct theoretical explanations. In opposition, Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi argued that these supposed distinct parameters were not necessary for understanding the causes of crime; stable individual differences in self-control accounted for crime committed over an individual criminal career. Furthermore, because of the stability of these differences, there was no need to measure criminal career lengths, or even to conduct longitudinal research. This debate fueled many theoretical and quantitative advances in criminology throughout the 1990s, and continues to impact research today.

In 1993, Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub joined the fray by introducing a compelling new age-graded theory of informal social control in their book *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points Through Life*. This theory has become the leading life-course theory of crime. The theory does not side with either Blumstein's criminal career model or Gottfredson and Hirschi's self-control theory; rather, it attempts to walk a middle ground, drawing useful elements from both perspectives. Sampson and Laub side with Blumstein in terms of embracing the value of longitudinal research and explanations of crime that takes into account not just the beginning of a criminal career but persistence and desistance as well. They reject the stable individual differences hypothesis of Gottfredson and Hirschi, claiming instead that individual propensity to offend may vary over the life course due to a number of factors, primarily informal social controls. Their recent theoretical reformulation, presented in *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives*, identifies a number of factors in addition to informal social control that explain crime across the life course, the most important of which are routine activities and human agency. According to the theory, social control, routine activities, and human agency, both directly and in interaction, affect trajectories of crime across the entire life course.

The Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency Study

Sampson and Laub's life-course theory is drawn from their analysis of a groundbreaking data set. The data for a multiple-wave prospective study of juvenile and adult criminal behavior were originally collected by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck and presented in their book *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency*. The research design involved a sample of 500 male delinquents ages 10 to 17 and 500 male nondelinquents ages 10 to 17 matched case-by-case on age, race/ethnicity, IQ, and low-income residence in Boston. The two groups grew up in similar high-risk environments of poverty and exposure to antisocial conduct. Because of this environmental similarity and the matching design, differences in offending between the two groups cannot be attributed to sex, age, ethnicity, IQ, or residence in slum areas.

The initial period of data collection lasted from 1940 to 1948. The average age in this first time period was 14. This sample of 1,000 boys was followed up twice—at age 25 and again at age 32. As a result, extensive data are available for nearly 90 percent of the original sample at all three age periods. The Gluecks collected a wide range of data for analysis relating to criminal career histories, criminal justice interventions, family life, school and employment history, and recreational activities for the subjects in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood.

Despite the richness of this study, the original case files were left nearly forgotten in the basement of the Harvard Law School Library until they were discovered by John Laub in 1987. Following the discovery of the original files for this study, Sampson and Laub spent 6 years (1987–1993) reconstructing, augmenting, and analyzing the full longitudinal data set. Sampson and Laub's analysis of this reconstructed data, presented in *Crime in the Making*, was driven by the challenge to develop and test a theoretical model that would account for crime and deviance in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Their age-graded theory integrates the life-course perspective with social control theory to meet this challenge.

[p. 807 ↓]

The Life-Course Perspective

The life-course perspective provides a broad framework for studying lives over time. Sociologists, criminologists, and psychologists all use life-course methods to help explain and predict major life changes and decisions. It has been applied to numerous domains of human behavior, including crime. According to Glen H. Elder, Jr., the life course is a pathway through an individual's life that follows a sequence of culturally defined, age-graded roles and social transitions. For example, entering the workforce is a culturally defined event that would be part of most people's pathways.

Elder maintains that two central concepts underlie the analysis of life-course dynamics: trajectories and transitions. *Trajectories* may be described as pathways or lines of development throughout life. These long-term patterns of behavior may include work life, marriage, parenthood, and criminal behavior. *Transitions*, on the other hand, are short-term events embedded in trajectories, which may include starting a new job, getting married, having a child, or being sentenced to prison. Because transitions and trajectories are so closely connected, transitional events may lead to *turning points*, or changes in an individual's life course. For example, getting married may have a great influence on one's life and behavior, from changing where a person lives or works to changing the number and type of friends with whom one associates. Turning points are closely linked to role transitions and are helpful in understanding change in human behavior over the life course. Turning points in adulthood modify life trajectories, creating life paths that cannot be predicted from childhood characteristics or events. Contrary to Gottfredson and Hirschi's position, life-course theory holds that people continue to be strongly influenced by society throughout adulthood.

Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control

Sampson and Laub developed a theory of age-graded informal social control in an attempt to explain childhood antisocial behavior, adolescent delinquency, and adult crime. The key component of this theory is that delinquency and crime have

an inverse relationship with an individual's bond to society. The theory is organized around three major themes. First, informal family and school social controls are the fundamental social structures that influence behavior and explain delinquency in childhood and adolescence. Second, antisocial behavior in childhood has a strong likelihood of continuing through adulthood across a variety of life domains. Finally, informal social control in adulthood explains changes in criminal behavior over the life span, independent of prior individual differences in criminal propensity.

Structure and Process in Adolescent Delinquency

Sampson and Laub believed that the separation of structural and process-oriented explanations for the onset of delinquency was a mistake. This theory joins structural and process variables, along with individual characteristics, into a single theoretical model. It explains onset with both structural factors, such as poverty or broken homes, and process variables, such as attachment to family and school. Structural context thus influences informal social controls, which in turn explain variations in delinquency.

In *Crime in the Making* Sampson and Laub point to three components of informal social control in the family context: consistent discipline, monitoring, and attachment to the family. To the extent that these three link the child to the family (and ultimately, to society), they inhibit delinquency. These three components of informal control can reduce delinquency through emotional bonds, or through direct control (monitoring and punishment). The school context is another important socializing institution in the prevention of delinquency. Attachment to school and school performance are inversely related to delinquency.

The age-graded theory of informal social control also suggests that social structural factors, such as family disruption, unemployment, residential mobility, and socioeconomic status, indirectly affect delinquency through social bonds. These factors are considered to be structural because they indicate a person's structural position in society. Sampson and Laub claim that previous research has failed to account for the influence of the social structural context on delinquency through family

life and social bonds. Some authors argue that socioeconomic disadvantage has potentially adverse effects on parents, such that parental [p. 808 ↓] difficulties are more likely to develop and good parenting is impeded. Similarly, factors related to socioeconomic disadvantage, such as poverty and household crowding, may disrupt bonds of attachment between the child and school and may lead to educational deficiencies. If true, one would expect poverty and disadvantage to have indirect effects on delinquency via the influence of parenting and education. Therefore, Sampson and Laub predict that family and social bonding will mediate the effects of structural background factors on delinquency.

Continuity between Adolescent Delinquency and Adult Offending

Sampson and Laub point to weak social bonds to explain continuity in antisocial behavior across adolescence and adulthood. That is, early antisocial behavior, such as delinquency, conduct disorder, and violent temper tantrums, predicts adult antisocial behavior, such as crime and substance abuse. In addition, adolescent antisocial behavior predicts weak adult social bonds. These weak bonds become evident in erratic labor force participation, low educational attainment, and poor quality of marital attachment. These outcomes occur independently of the sociological and psychological variables that are traditionally used to predict delinquency, such as social class background, ethnicity, and IQ.

Sampson and Laub emphasize a developmental model of cumulative continuity to explain the correlation between adolescent delinquency and adult crime. Their “cumulative disadvantage” concept, presented in 1997, suggests that delinquency continues into adulthood because of its negative consequences for future life chances. For example, arrest, official labeling, incarceration, and other negative life events associated with delinquency may lead to decreased opportunities, including school failure and unemployment. Delinquent activities are also likely to sever informal social bonds to school, friends, and family and to jeopardize the development of adult social bonds. In this way, childhood delinquency has an indirect effect on adult criminal

behavior through the weakening of social bonds. Thus, the theory proposes that crime, deviance, and informal social control are intimately linked over the full life course.

Changes in Offending Across the Life Course

Despite the considerable continuity between adolescent offending and adult crime, Sampson and Laub (1993) hold that salient life events and socialization experiences in adulthood can, to some extent, counteract the influence of early life experiences. They recognize that the concepts of continuity and change are not mutually exclusive, and their theory attempts to explain both. Using the imagery of the life-course perspective, they identify certain turning points in the life course, such as marriage, work, and the military, which can alter life trajectories. The social ties that are an inevitable component of most adult transitions (e.g., marital attachment, job stability) provide social capital and can change an individual's path from a delinquent trajectory to a nondelinquent one or vice versa. In other words, pathways to both crime and social conformity are modified by key institutions of social control in the transition to adulthood, regardless of past indicators of an individual's criminal propensity.

Contrary to the emphasis of many life-course researchers, Sampson and Laub argue that the mere occurrence of an event (e.g., getting married or getting a job) or the timing of that event are not the determining factors in their effects on life-course trajectories. Rather, the changes in social bonds and social capital that occur in conjunction with a transition may divert life trajectories. Similarly, the mere presence of a relationship between adults is not sufficient to produce social capital. Instead, adult social ties are important insofar as they create interdependent systems of obligation and restraint that impose significant costs for translating criminal propensities into action. For example, being married will not increase social control if the relationship is not strong. However, close emotional ties and mutual investment between spouses increase the social bond between individuals and, all else being equal, should lead to a reduction in criminal behavior. Sampson and Laub hold that adults, regardless of delinquent background, are inhibited from committing crime in proportion to the amount of social capital invested in work and family relationships. On the other hand, those subject to weak informal social

control as adults—that is, those without strong family obligations or steady work—are freer to engage in deviant behavior, even if they were nondelinquent in adolescence.

[p. 809 ↓]

While this focus on change may appear inconsistent with the earlier discussion of the stability of antisocial behavior over time, evidence suggests that continuity is far from perfect. In fact, most antisocial adolescents do not become antisocial adults (Robins, 1978). Additionally, lives are often unpredictable, and change is ever present. Sampson and Laub propose a dynamic theory of social capital and informal social control that incorporates explanations of stability and change in criminal behavior. Adult social ties can modify childhood trajectories of crime despite general stability. Specifically, they suggest that adult social bonds have a direct negative effect on adult criminal behavior, controlling for childhood delinquency. A person whose youthful life course seems to predict a criminal adulthood may, in fact, experience a well-defined turning point that leads to social stability and engagement instead.

Age-graded theory brings together the concepts of continuity and change. This theoretical framework proposes a dynamic process whereby transitions within trajectories generate turning points in the life course. Sampson and Laub identify three kinds of positive turning points for adult offending trajectories: a cohesive marriage, meaningful work, and serving in the military. They also identify prolonged incarceration and subsequent job instability during the transition to young adulthood as a negative turning point that prevents the formation of social capital and conformity.

Revised Theory

While Sampson and Laub made considerable headway in explaining criminal behavior across the life course with their theory, lingering questions remained, so they followed up on the Glueck men one more time, searching out records and interviewing subjects who were then about age 70. In particular, Sampson and Laub wished to further explore the relationship between age and crime, especially in later years, and to better integrate qualitative and quantitative data. They presented their findings in their 2003 book *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives*. Their study involved three sources of new data

collection: criminal record checks, death record checks, and personal interviews with a sample of 52 of the original Glueck men, stratified to ensure variability in patterns of persistence and desistance in crime. These combined data represent a roughly 50-year window on “criminal careers,” allowing them to update the Glueck men's lives at the close of the 20th century and connect them to life experiences as far back as early childhood.

Analysis of these quantitative and qualitative data led Laub and Sampson to significantly modify their age-graded theory of informal social control. While they maintain that social bonds help to explain persistence and desistance throughout the life course independent of pre-existing factors, they invoke a number of other causal factors as well. They suggest that criminal behavior, or lack thereof, is a result of individual actions (choice) in conjunction with social situations and influences linked to key institutions. More plainly, they identify social controls, structured routine activities, and purposeful human agency as causal elements in explaining crime throughout the life course. The lack of these factors helps explain late onset of criminal behavior, or persistence in criminal behavior. The presence of all three of these factors helps explain desistance in adulthood independent of a history of antisocial behavior.

The core proposition of Laub and Sampson's theory remains intact in its newest version: levels of offending are reciprocally related to social bonds throughout the life course. In the revised theory, they seek to expand the understanding of informal social control across the entire life course by highlighting how social bonds interact with individual choice and situational context. They note that social bonds may interact with age and life experiences. That is, the inhibiting effect of the increased costs of offending due to potential loss of social capital may increase with age (Shover, 1996).

Structured routine activities, such as going to work every day, tend to limit the variety of situations an individual finds himself or herself in, thus reducing the array of behavioral choices available (Birkbeck & LaFree, 1993). Laub and Sampson (2003) contend that structured routine activities enhance the effect of social controls on offending. Persistent offenders are notable in their lack of structured routine activities across the life course. On the other hand, increased routine activities facilitate desistance from crime regardless of prior offending trajectories.

The third factor proposed to shape offending trajectories across the life course is human agency, [p. 810 ↓] a core principle of the life-course perspective. At first glance, the concept of human agency might seem inconsistent with the social control perspective, since a key distinction of control theories is their assumption of universal motivation to offend. Laub and Sampson offer a less stringent version of control theory, assuming that human nature, and thus the motivation to offend, is changeable. In addition, their concept of human agency cannot be understood simply as a proxy for motivation. Rather, their concept of agency has the element of projective, or transformative action within structural constraints. Laub and Sampson refer to agentic moves within structural context as “situated choice.”

Beyond these three causal factors, Laub and Sampson's expanded theory of age-graded informal social control gives theoretical expression to “random developmental noise.” They conceive of development as the constant interaction between individuals and their environment, coupled with the factor of chance (Lewontin, 2000). This implies that there will always be considerable heterogeneity in criminal offending no matter how many factors are taken into account. In addition, prospective identification of meaningful long-term patterns of offending is not possible. That is, while distinct trajectories of criminal offending may be evident in post-hoc analyses, these trajectories cannot be reliably predicted prospectively (Eggleston et al., 2004. Laub & Sampson, 2003).

In addition to identifying three core causal factors which explain crime throughout the life course, Laub and Sampson draw heavily from their life-history interviews to describe in detail the mechanisms of desistance. The major self-described turning points that they found important in the process of desistance from crime include marriage, the military, reform school, work, and neighborhood change. They maintain that there are multiple pathways to desistance, not limited to these particular institutions. Rather, they identify general mechanisms whereby these institutions facilitate desistance. These institutional or structural turning points all involve, to varying degrees, new situations that (1) knife off the past from the present, (2) provide both supervision and new opportunities for social support and growth, (3) change and structure routine activities, and/or (4) provide the opportunity for identity transformation. While cognitive transformation is implicated in some desisting offenders, Sampson and Laub believe that most offenders choose to desist in response to structurally induced turning points that serve as a catalyst for long-term behavioral change. In the short term, these

institutions interrupt and replace previous social and situational motivations to commit crime, while in the long term they enhance commitments to conformity.

Conclusion

Raymond Paternoster and his colleagues (1997) suggested that Sampson and Laub's theory of informal social control could be classified as a general theory of crime, because age-graded social control explains both continuity and change in offending throughout the life course. Although one may be skeptical of this classification due to fundamental disagreements with the other prominent general theories, particularly Gottfredson and Hirschi's, Laub and Sampson (2003) agreed that theirs is a general theory. While they sharply disagree with Gottfredson and Hirschi over the static versus dynamic nature of crime-producing processes across the life course, Laub and Sampson's theoretical statements signal allegiance with Gottfredson and Hirschi on a number of other contemporary debates in criminology. They agree, for example, that the search for separate explanations for the processes of onset, persistence, frequency of offending, career length and desistance, promoted by the criminal careers perspective, is unnecessary. Likewise, they agree that typological theories of crime, which promote distinct etiologies of crime for different groups, are also mistaken. Their agreement on these matters simply stems from their adherence to a general theory of crime, albeit very different general theories. The revised version of age-graded theory more clearly specifies Laub and Sampson's position relative to both sides of the criminal careers debate of the late 1980s.

In summary, Laub and Sampson's revised age-graded theory of informal social control was developed in response to questions arising from new data on the Glueck men that their original theory had difficulty answering. Their original theory, which was developed in an attempt to explain crime and deviance in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, was not fully able to account for [p. 811 ↓] offending patterns across the entire life course. Laub and Sampson identify three causal factors that affect offending patterns for all people both directly and in interaction: social controls, routine activities, and human agency. They suggest that development is best conceived of as the constant interaction between individuals, their environment, social interactions, and random processes. Together, these factors result in considerable heterogeneity in trajectories

of offending, and make it difficult to predict adult offending trajectories based on youth or adolescent risk factors. This unpredictability drives Laub and Sampson's interest in adult-onset offending, desistance, and "zigzag criminal careers." Age-graded theory, although a general theory of crime, like Gottfredson and Hirschi's, embraces the notion of change. It is at root a hopeful theory that describes the ways in which supposed career criminals, life-course-persistent offenders, or those with low self-control may exit a life of crime.

GarySweeten

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n221>

See also

- [Criminal Career Paradigm](#)
- [Glueck, Sheldon, and Eleanor Glueck: The Origins of Crime](#)
- [Gottfredson, Michael R., and Travis Hirschi: Self-Control Theory](#)
- [Hirschi, Travis: Social Control Theory](#)
- [Moffitt, Terrie E.: A Developmental Model of Life-Course-Persistent Offending](#)

References and Further Readings

Birbeck, C., and LaFree, G. The situational analysis of crime and deviance . *Annual Review of Sociology* 19 113–137. (1993). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.19.080193.000553>

Blumstein, A., Cohen, J., and Farrington, D. P. Criminal career research: Its value for criminology . *Criminology* 26 1–35. (1988a). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1988.tb00829.x>

Blumstein, A., Cohen, J., and Farrington, D. P. Longitudinal and criminal career research: Further clarifications . *Criminology* 26 57–74. (1988b). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1988.tb00831.x>

Blumstein, A., ed. , Cohen, J., ed. , Roth, J., ed. , & Visher, C. (Eds.). (1986). *Criminal careers and career criminals* . Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Eggleston, E. P., and Laub, J. H. The onset of adult offending: A neglected dimension of the criminal career . *Journal of Criminal Justice* 30 603–622. (2002). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0047-2352%2802%2900193-9>

Eggleston, E. P., Laub, J. H., and Sampson, R. J. Methodological sensitivities to latent class analysis of long-term criminal trajectories . *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 20 1–26. (2004). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/B:JOQC.0000016696.02763.ce>

Elder, G. H.Jr. Time, human agency, and social change: Perspectives on the life course . *Social Psychological Quarterly* 57 4–15. (1994).

Glueck, S., & Glueck, E. (1950). *Unraveling juvenile delinquency* . New York: Commonwealth Fund.

Gottfredson, M., and Hirschi, T. The true value of lambda would appear to be zero: An essay on career criminals, criminal careers, selective incapacitation, cohort studies, and related topics . *Criminology* 24 213–234. (1986). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1986.tb01494.x>

Gottfredson, M., and Hirschi, T. The methodological adequacy of longitudinal research on crime . *Criminology* 25 581–614. (1987). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1987.tb00812.x>

Gottfredson, M., and Hirschi, T. Science, public policy, and the career paradigm . *Criminology* 26 37–55. (1988). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1988.tb00830.x>

Gottfredson, M., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A general theory of crime* . Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Hirschi, T. (1969). *Causes of delinquency* . Berkeley: University of California Press.

Laub, J. H., Nagin, D. S., and Sampson, R. J. Trajectories of change in criminal offending: Good marriages and the desistance process . *American Sociological Review* 63 225–238. (1998). <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2657324>

Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2001). Understanding desistance from crime . In M. H. Tonry (Ed.), *Crime and justice: A review of research* (Vol. 28, pp. 1–69). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2003). *Shared beginnings, divergent lives: Delinquent boys to age 70* . Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lewontin, R. (2000). *The triple helix: Gene, organism, and environment* . Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Moffitt, T. E. Adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent adolescent behavior: A developmental taxonomy . *Psychological Review* 100 674–701. (1993). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.100.4.674>

Moffitt, T. E. (1994). Natural histories of delinquency . In E. G. M. Weitekamp, ed. , & H. Kerner (Eds.), *Crossnational longitudinal research on human development and criminal behavior* (pp. 3–64). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic.

Paternoster, R., Dean, C. W., Piquero, A., Mazzerolle, P., and Brame, R. Generality, continuity, and change in offending . *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 13 231–266. (1997). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF02221092>

Patterson, G. R., & Yoerger, K. (1993). Developmental models for delinquent behavior . In S. Hodgins (Ed.), *Mental disorder and crime* (pp. 140–172). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Robins, L. N. Sturdy childhood predictors of adult antisocial behavior: Replications from longitudinal studies . *Psychological Medicine* 8 611–622. (1978). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0033291700018821>

Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1993). *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life* . Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Sampson, R. J., and Laub, J. H. Urban poverty and the family context of delinquency: A new look at structure and process in a classic study . *Child Development* 65 523–540. (1994). <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1131400>

Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1997). A life-course theory of cumulative disadvantage and the stability of delinquency . In T. P. Thornberry (Ed.), *Developmental theories of crime and delinquency* (pp. 133–162). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Sampson, R. J., ed. , & Laub, J. H. (Eds.). (2005). *Developmental criminology and its discontents: Trajectories of crime from childhood to old age* (The Annals of the American Academic of Political Science No. 602) . Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sampson, R. J., Laub, J. H., and Wimer, C. Does marriage reduce crime? A counterfactual approach to within-individual causal effects . *Criminology* 44 465–508. (2006). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2006.00055.x>

Shaw, C. R., & McKay, H. (1942). *Juvenile delinquency and urban areas* . Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shover, N. (1996). *Great pretenders: Pursuits and careers of persistent thieves* . Boulder, CO: Westview Press.