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DEVELOPMENTAL  
AND LIFE-COURSE  
CRIMINOLOGICAL  
THEORIES

TARA RENAE MCGEE  
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# Developmental and Life-course Criminological Theories

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# Developmental and Life-course Criminological Theories

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# Series Preface

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Because of its pervasive nature in our mass mediated culture, many believe they are experts in understanding the reasons why offenders violate the law. Parents and schools come high on the public's list of who to blame for crime. Not far behind are governments and legal systems that are believed to be ineffective at deterring offenders – too many legal protections and too few serious sentences. Some learn how to behave inappropriately as children, while others are said to choose crime because of its apparent high reward/low cost opportunity structure. Yet others hang out with the wrong crowd, or live in the wrong neighborhood, or work for the wrong corporation, and may get their kicks from disobeying rules in the company of like-minded others. A few are seen as evil, insane or just plain stupid. While such popular representations of the causes of crime contain glimpses of the criminological reality, understanding why people commit crime is a much more complex matter. Indeed, for this reason the quest to establish the causes of crime has been one of the most elusive searches confronting humankind.

Since the mid-19th century, following the advent of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, those who sought scientific knowledge to understand crime abandoned philosophical speculation and economic reductionism. In its place they founded the multifaceted interdisciplinary field of criminology. Unlike criminal law and legal theory that explored the logic of prohibitions against offensive behavior, and in contrast to criminal justice that examined the nature and extent of societies' responses to crime through systems of courts, police and penology, criminology's central focus is the systematic examination of the nature, extent and causes of crime. Criminological theory, as a subset of criminology, comprises the cluster of explanations seeking to identify the causes or etiology of crime. This *Library of Essays in Theoretical Criminology* is designed to capture the range and depth of the key theoretical perspectives on crime causation.

While there are numerous criminological theories, most can be clustered into 10 or 12 theoretical perspectives. Moreover, each of these broad theoretical frameworks is, itself, rooted in a major academic discipline. The most predominant disciplines influencing criminological theory include: economics, anthropology, biology, psychology, geography, sociology, politics, history, philosophy, as well as the more recent multi-disciplinary fields such as gender studies, critical race studies and postmodernist social theory.

Criminological theories are rarely discrete. Although they often emphasize a particular disciplinary field, they also draw on aspects of other disciplines to strengthen their explanatory power. Indeed, since 1989 a major development in criminological theory has been the emergence of explicitly integrative theoretical approaches (see Gregg Barak, *Integrative Criminology*; Ashgate, 1998). Integrative/interdisciplinary approaches bring together several theories into a comprehensive explanation, usually to address different levels of analysis; these range from the micro-individual and relational approaches common in biology and psychology, to the meso-level institutional explanations that feature in sociological analysis, to the macro-level geographical, political, cultural and historical approaches that deal with

societal and global structures and patterns. Recent developments in criminological theory have seen an acceleration of this trend compared with that of single disciplinary explanations of crime (see Stuart Henry and Scott Lukas, *Recent Developments in Criminological Theory*; Ashgate, 2009).

Although there are now over 20 English-language criminological theory textbooks and numerous edited compilations, there is a need to make available to an international audience a series of books that brings together the best of the available theoretical contributions. The advantage of doing this as a series, rather than a single volume, is that the editors are able to mine the field for the most relevant essays that have influenced the present state of knowledge. Each contribution to the series thus contains many chapters, each on a different aspect of the same theoretical approach to crime causation.

In creating this series I have selected outstanding criminologists whose own theories are discussed as part of the literature and I have asked each of them to select a set of the best journal essays to represent the various facets of their theoretical framework. In doing so, I believe that you will receive the best selection of essays available together with an insightful and comparative overview placing each essay in the context of the history of ideas that comprises our search to better understand and explain crime and those who commit it.

STUART HENRY

*Series Editor*

*School of Public Affairs*

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# Introduction

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Crime and criminal behavior continue to shape families and communities across the world. Crime touches many aspects of the human condition. It frames how children are raised, where families choose to reside, school choices, friendship selections and the kinds of social engagements that people embrace. Indeed, there are few instances of social life that do not have some relationship to considerations of crime, its prevention and control.

At the same time conceptions about crime and criminality have been experiencing a quiet revision for most of the last twenty-five years. Historically, theories of criminal behavior have been somewhat static. Extant theories described a process of crime causation that was one directional and compared individuals at one point in time. For example, delinquent and/or criminal behavior was claimed to be caused by different causal factors, depending on the theory: deficits in socialization involving weak social bonds (Hirschi, 1969), or by exposure to attitudes, associations or by behavioral patterns endorsing criminal conduct (Sutherland, 1939; Burgess and Akers, 1966), or by social structural strain arising from a disjuncture in the societal opportunities to pursue and achieve success as defined by mainstream social values (Merton, 1938; Cohen, 1955). Thus, criminality was largely understood through a narrow lens; a lens that painted a time-limited or constrained picture of crime causation that did not address the consequences of crime, the response to crime or the impact of crime on individuals over their life-course. In short, deficiencies in how criminality was explained had impoverished its comprehensive understanding. Absent from the static model was a conception of human development that considered the dynamic changing influences on individuals over time that shaped and channeled their subsequent actions. Considering the role of development, age and time provides a more dynamic approach for understanding and explaining criminal behavior.

The emergence of developmental criminology (Loeber and Le Blanc, 1990) and the life-course approach for understanding criminal offending occurred at a time when the field of criminology had been experiencing a period of theoretical stagnation (Wellford, 1989). Moreover, the rise of the developmental and life-course theoretical approach coincided with a break from studies of offending that employed cross-sectional research designs to an embrace of longitudinal studies of offending behavior. In short, the increasing availability of, and access to, longitudinal data fostered empirical research that raised theoretical and developmental questions about criminal offending across the life-course.

In this volume we present current theories and research on developmental criminology and the life-course approach for understanding criminal offending. The book is organized into three sections. Part I comprises six papers that describe some of the more popular and salient theoretical statements about developmental and life-course approaches to criminal behavior. Part II comprises recent empirical studies testing and assessing the theories included in Part I. In Part III we present papers that address several of the main controversies or challenges to understanding criminal behavior across the life-course. Despite the recency of this approach, a number of different theories were considered and literally hundreds of empirical studies

were reviewed. In this volume, we present some of the more seminal and pertinent statements representing this perspective.

### **Background: Developmental Criminology and the Life-course Perspective on Understanding Criminal Behavior**

The rise of developmental criminology and the life-course approach is linked with a number of general trends and developments in the field of criminology over the last twenty-five years. The late 1980s bore witness to new ways of thinking about the study of crime and criminal behavior with the focus on a criminal career perspective (Blumstein *et al.*, 1986), the emergence of studying crime as social events through the life-course (Hagan and Palloni, 1988), as well as the emergence of developmental approaches for studying criminal behavior, in particular within-person change and continuity over time (Loeber and Le Blanc, 1990). In some ways, the movement toward these approaches was prompted by a series of vigorous debates about the interpretation of various criminological facts, as well as debates about the nature of theory and the research designs necessary to test theories of crime causation (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1986; Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983). One of the foremost debates at this time related to the interpretation of the age-crime curve.

#### *Understanding the Age-Crime Relationship*

The importance of understanding the relationship between age and crime was observed in the early 1800s by statistician Adolphe Quetelet (1833). Many researchers studying the relationship between age and crime have observed that the aggregate pattern shows that criminal activity tends to peak in the late teens and declines throughout adulthood. Thus, age is inversely related to criminality with younger people being more likely to be involved in crime. The observed relationship between age and crime, however, raises the question of whether the aggregate pattern is similar or different across individuals. And also, whether the peak in the age-crime curve is a function of active offenders committing more crime during adolescence or a function of more individuals actively offending in the peak years.

There is compelling evidence that a very small proportion of offenders are responsible for the majority of offences; the frequency at which offences are committed causes the peak in the age-crime curve (Wolfgang *et al.*, 1972; Tracy *et al.*, 1990). By contrast, Farrington (1986) suggests that the aggregate peak age of offending primarily reflects variation in prevalence (that is, participation rate) and not frequency; more individuals engage in offending behaviors during adolescence rather than those who were offending previously engaging at higher rates.

Whether the aggregate age-crime curve reflects changes in the prevalence of offending or changes in the frequency of offending among active offenders is immaterial to the view presented by Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983). To them, the relationship between age and crime is invariant. In other words, the relationship is direct and invariant across individuals, social groups, crime types and time periods. According to this view, crime declines for everyone as they age. This position is very much in contrast to the view put forth by Blumstein and colleagues (1986) which holds that there is substantial variation beneath the aggregate age-crime curve which includes some youth who are desisting from crime, others who may be late

starting and still others who are maintaining constant rates of offending of long duration. In short, the relationship between age and crime is highly variable across individuals.

The age–crime relationship is one of the most well documented and also one of the most contentious of all criminological findings. Most researchers agree that there is a relationship between age and crime, with crime rates declining as offenders age (Laub and Sampson, 1991; Piquero *et al.*, 2003). Points of disagreement arise in the explanation of this phenomenon.

### *The Rise of the Criminal Career Approach*

The rise of developmental and life-course approaches for understanding criminal offending owes much to the criminal career perspective developed by Blumstein and his colleagues (1986). Indeed, the criminal career perspective has shaped and informed literally hundreds of research papers over the last twenty-five years.

A *criminal career* is defined as ‘the longitudinal sequence of offences committed by an individual offender’ (Farrington, 1992, p. 521). The criminal career approach involves describing the sequence of offences during some part of an individual’s lifetime and provides a means of structuring and observing the longitudinal sequence of criminal events associated with an individual. Research on criminal careers came to prominence in 1983 when the US National Institute of Justice requested that the National Academy of Sciences convene a panel examining research on criminal careers. The task was to: (1) evaluate the feasibility of predicting the future course of criminal careers; (2) assess the effects of prediction instruments in reducing crime through incapacitation; and (3) review the contribution of research on criminal careers (Blumstein *et al.*, 1986). This resulted in the two-volume publication *Criminal Careers and “Career Criminals”* (Blumstein *et al.*, 1986). These volumes saw the explication of a number of core concepts, such as onset and desistance and the relationship between age and crime. These concepts remain part of the core focus of researchers working within the criminal career paradigm (Piquero *et al.*, 2003).

Embracing a longitudinal perspective, the criminal career paradigm recognizes that individuals start their criminal activity at some age, engage in crime at some individual crime rate, commit a mixture of crimes and eventually stop committing crime (Piquero *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, the approach emphasizes the need to investigate issues relating to *onset* – why people start offending; *persistence* – why people continue offending; and *desistance* – why people stop offending. This approach also encompasses the investigation of the length of the criminal career (Piquero *et al.*, 2004). Given the focus on onset, persistence and desistance of offending, as well as other dimensions (for example seriousness, escalation and so forth), there is a range of evidence regarding these concepts and such evidence has been informative for developmental research and life-course approaches for understanding criminal offending.

The onset of offending has been identified as a salient feature of the criminal career and an issue that is demonstrably related to other aspects of the criminal career, including its length and the frequency of offending as well as the seriousness of offending (Moffitt, 1994). Early onset of offending is argued to be important because it is related to serious and persistent offending (Patterson *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume; Moffitt *et al.*, 1996; Piquero *et al.*, 2003, p. 366). In comparison, a later onset, in adolescence for example, is considered to be less problematic as it is characterized by less serious offending, of a shorter duration (Patterson *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume; Moffitt *et al.*, 1996).

The issue of offending onset has generated a wide range of research. For example, Elliott (1994) found that the onset of serious violent offending occurs between ages 12 and 20 and that the risk for initiation after age 20 is close to zero. By contrast, in the Philadelphia Birth Cohort study, while recognizing the limitations of using official sources of data to measure delinquency, Wolfgang, Figlio and Sellin used police data and observed marked differences between juvenile- and adult-onset adult offenders, where the juvenile-onset offenders tended to be high-level recidivists (Tracy and Kempf-Leonard, 1996, p. 207). Further research has linked the timing of onset to other aspects of offending such as offending versatility (Mazerolle *et al.*, 2000). As a key dimension of the criminal career, offending onset is salient for researchers and has implications for understanding offending across the life-course.

In terms of the persistence of offending, there is evidence that suggests antisocial behavior is stable across an individual's life-course (Piquero *et al.*, 2003). For example, in the Philadelphia Birth Cohort, Tracy and Kempf-Leonard (1996) followed up the 1958 birth cohort at age 26 to examine persistence in offending and found that adult offenders were more likely to have continued from juvenile offending into adult offending and law-abiding juveniles usually remained non-criminal as adults (Tracy and Kempf-Leonard, 1996, pp. 203, 206). Participants in the Cambridge Study have also demonstrated considerable persistence in offending from adolescence into adulthood (Farrington, 1992). Approximately three-quarters of individuals who were convicted as juveniles were also convicted when aged 17–24 and half who were convicted as juveniles were convicted when aged 25–32 (Farrington, 1992, p. 530). After committing a third offence the probability of recidivism was around 80 per cent. In short, prior offending as a juvenile was strongly related to future offending.

Desistance refers to the cessation of antisocial behavior or criminal behavior. Desistance is an important aspect of the criminal career and until recently was relatively under-researched. Moreover, desistance as a concept has generated varying views about how it is best conceptualized and measured (Bushway *et al.*, 2001). A historically popular view has been that desistance is a state, as opposed to a process over time (Bushway *et al.*, 2001). Desistance is a fundamentally important concept for criminal career research and is salient for development criminology, as well as life-course approaches for understanding criminal offending. Understanding desistance requires researchers to observe individual patterns of offending over time, either through official records or through long-term follow-up studies using longitudinal designs. Thus, long-term studies of desistance are rare (but see Laub and Sampson, 2003).

### *Toward Developmental Criminology*

The motivation for advancing developmental approaches for the study of criminal offending rests with the need to inform current understanding about crime, its nature and its causes (Loeber and Le Blanc, 1990). Departing from earlier, static approaches, developmental criminology, which has borrowed much from developmental psychology, provides a dynamic framework to examine developmental transitions and phases as people age. Moreover, the approach allows for examination of how individuals interact with their social environments and importantly how individuals change over time. Thus, developmental criminology represents a significant departure from the dominant approach in criminology that focused on between-individual, as opposed to within-individual, change.

Developmental theories have emerged in recent years, offering important statements about the causes of criminal behavior and illicit drug use. Developmental theories provide 'dynamic' (as opposed to 'static') explanations of behavior. Dynamic approaches identify how processes causing criminal behavior can change over time. Developmental theories recognize how behavior is shaped over the life-course, including the processes that impact the initiation, escalation and ultimate termination of criminal and/or drug use. Despite differing in content, many developmental theories recognize the progression of offending behavior over time, the reciprocal consequences of offending, as well as how important life events (for example marriage) systematically shape the likelihood of the persistence or cessation of offending.

### **Applying the Life-course Approach to the Study of Criminal Offending**

As mentioned earlier, the emergence of the life-course approach in criminology coincided with the development of the criminal career paradigm as well as the increasing emphasis on developmental criminology. First developed in sociology by the early work of Janet Giele and Glen Elder Jr. (1998), the life-course approach has emerged as the foremost perspective for understanding criminal offending across the lifespan. As Hagan and Palloni (1988) observe, the life-course approach situates the study of criminal offending within a wider social context of social events through the life-course. In short, it provides a wider platform for observing processes of continuity, change and interaction through time beyond other perspectives.

The life-course approach examines human lives over time, with an understanding that 'changing lives alter developmental trajectories' (Elder, 1998, p. 1). There are four central themes of the life-course paradigm: the interplay of human lives and historical times, the timing of lives,<sup>1</sup> linked or interdependent lives, and human agency in choice-making (Elder, 1994, p. 5; Giele and Elder, 1998). Therefore, the life-course perspective within criminology focuses on the examination of criminal behavior within these contexts. It requires longitudinal data – that is, data collected over time for each individual in a particular group. This allows for the examination of changes over time, the impact of critical life events, the importance of the social environment and 'pathways, transitions and turning points' (Piquero and Mazerolle, 2000, p. 1).

While the life-course perspective provides a comprehensive platform for examining and understanding criminal offending across the lifespan, it also provides a framework for incorporating other aspects of criminological theories. For example, many criminological theories offer general explanations for offending. General theories account for why most people offend and propose that one general process can explain why people participate in criminal behavior. This is in contrast to typological approaches that identify unique types of offenders or unique pathways toward offending behavior (see Moffitt, 1993). In addition to this view, some theories of criminal behavior assert that once criminality propensities are established, the social environment is largely benign in shaping future behavior (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990) which is in contrast to a more dynamic view that the social environment is crucial in shaping risks for offending as well as for changes over time (Sampson and Laub, 1993).

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<sup>1</sup> Here Elder is referring to the age-graded expectations of particular social roles such as marriage and childbirth.

To more easily compare competing theoretical explanations for offending, Paternoster and his colleagues (Chapter 16 in this volume) developed a classification scheme that compared theories on the dimensions of static/dynamic and general/developmental. Theoretical approaches that are static in nature incorporate the view that criminality is the result of some underlying criminal propensity (for example low self-control (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1995)). Change in criminality is not expected given that the causes of crime are viewed as fixed. However, if change does occur, it is believed that it is due to self-selection (that is, a conscious decision to stop offending) (Gottfredson, Chapter 14 in this volume) and is not causally related to changes in the individual's environment. Alternatively, a dynamic approach to understanding offending is found in theories that posit life events as central to understanding transitions in and out of offending.

Theoretical explanations of criminality can also be divided into general and developmental theories. The common theme among all general theories of crime is that a single factor or process is posited to be the cause of all criminal behavior. Examples include low self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990) and informal social control (Sampson and Laub, 1993). In contrast, developmental theorists argue that there are different types or typologies of offenders and that the offending of individuals within these different typological groupings has different origins. For example, it is argued that some individuals' offending is due to poor socialization and will be persistent across the life-course regardless of life events (Patterson *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume; Moffitt *et al.*, 1996). As a result, this element of developmental theory can be considered static in nature. Alternatively, developmental theorists also argue that some individuals engage in offending that is constrained to a particular time period, such as adolescence, and is dependent on life events such as antisocial peers (Patterson *et al.*, Chapter 2 in this volume) or the strain caused by the gap between biological and social maturity (Moffitt *et al.*, 1996). These theoretical arguments are dynamic in nature due to their focus on life events. The classification in Figure 1, adapted from that developed by Paternoster and his colleagues (Chapter 16 in this volume), provides a summary of how these various explanations of criminality relate to each other.

	General	Developmental
Static	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criminality is the result of persistent differences between individuals (general theory) such as personality (Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985) or low self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990).</li> <li>• Decisions to change, not life events, lead to change in offending (static theory).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are different typologies of offenders (developmental theory).</li> <li>• Some individuals exhibit persistent offending due to ineffective socialization (static theory) (Patterson <i>et al.</i>, Chapter 2 in this volume; Moffitt <i>et al.</i>, 1996).</li> </ul>

	General	Developmental
Dynamic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criminality is the result of social forces (general theory) such as strain (Agnew, 1997) and informal social control (Sampson and Laub, 1993).</li> <li>• Life events (e.g. marriage and employment) have an effect on offending behavior (dynamic theory).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are different typologies of offenders (developmental theory).</li> <li>• Some individuals exhibit offending that is constrained to a particular time period (e.g. adolescence). This offending is dependent on life circumstances (dynamic theory) (Patterson <i>et al.</i>, Chapter 2 in this volume; Moffitt <i>et al.</i>, 1996).</li> </ul>

Figure 1. Classification of theoretical perspectives

Source: adapted from Paternoster *et al.* (Chapter 16 in this volume)

## Overview of the Book

Developmental and life-course criminology represents a dynamic and exciting area of inquiry and the substantial interest and attention generated to this area over the last twenty-five years is due in part to the richness of the theories that have been developed. In this section we provide an overview of the contents of the book, divided into three sections: key developmental theories which each offer distinctive explanations of criminal offending across the life-course, empirical tests of these theories, and the key debates and challenges to and within the perspective.

### *Key Theoretical Papers*

Part I comprises papers that showcase the key theoretical arguments in the field of developmental and life-course criminology. The six theories included in this section of the book illustrate the depth and diversity in this field. Of course, in a volume such as this, it is not possible to include all developmental and life-course theories. Those included here have been chosen because they have been particularly influential in the field, provide a novel insight into understanding the development of offending across the life-course, and/or have been the focus of wide empirical testing. This is not to say that those theories not included are without influence. Indeed, the exclusion of some developmental theories illustrates the size and sophistication of this emerging and important field of knowledge. Our attempt has been to illustrate six of the more salient statements available at the present time.

The social development model is one of the earliest developmental and life-course theories and the paper by David Hawkins and Joseph Weis (Chapter 1) is one of the first articulations of the theory. More recent descriptions or refinements of the theory are also available elsewhere (Catalano and Hawkins, 1996; Catalano *et al.*, 2005), as are tests of the theory (Catalano *et al.*, 1999; Fleming *et al.*, 2002).

Hawkins and Weis argue that there are a range of established risk factors or predictors for antisocial behavior but the contribution of the social development model is that it incorporates these predictors into a theory of human behavior (Catalano *et al.*, 2005). The model draws on three traditional criminological theories: social control theory, social learning theory and differential association theory. It is argued that children learn both prosocial and antisocial behaviors through the same socialization process (see Figure 1, p. 9 for a key summary of the socialization processes). The key stages in this process include: 1) perceived opportunities for involvement and interaction with others, 2) the skills that they have for involvement and interaction, and 3) the perceived reinforcement of their involvement and interactions. Successfully navigating each of these stages leads to social bonding to the socializing unit. In other words, the social developmental model allows for divergent pathways toward socialization, one conforming while the other is deviant and/or criminal. In short, while the process of socialization is similar, the content and context of who the person is socialized with can reflect a non-confirming or deviant pathway.

More recent empirical testing of the social developmental model has shown that predictors of antisocial behavior, such as position in the social structure (gender and socioeconomic status) and constitutional factors (poor concentration, shyness and aggressiveness), are partially mediated by the social development model. Furthermore, the effect of external constraints (parenting, schooling and legal constraints) on antisocial behavior is fully mediated by the social development model (Catalano *et al.*, 2005).

In Chapter 2 Gerald Patterson, Barbara DeBaryshe and Elizabeth Ramsey provide a succinct overview of their model for explaining antisocial behavior. Antisocial behavior in adolescence is argued to be the result of a cumulative chain of experiences including ineffective parenting, academic failure, peer rejection and affiliation with deviant peers. The core element of the model is poor parenting and ineffective discipline practices, and it is argued that this occurs in the context of family disruption. Family disruption can occur due to the antisocial behavior of parents and grandparents, demographic variables related to low socioeconomic status and/or family stress such as violence, discord and divorce. Patterson (1993, p. 918) uses the term 'chimera' as a metaphor for the cumulative effects that result for a person with an antisocial trait. He views antisocial behavior as symptomatic of a trait that creates an underlying dynamic process that is stable across time and impacts all interactions. However, he also recognizes that the age of onset for antisocial behavior is important and discusses the differences between early and late starters. Those individuals with a later onset have a much higher likelihood of an earlier desistance and it is argued that this is because they lack early training in antisocial behaviors. This type of argument, which identifies distinctive developmental pathways to offending, can also be seen in Moffitt's theory (1993) (discussed below).

Chapter 3 by Robert Sampson and John Laub is a summary of the key findings published in their book *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives* (Laub and Sampson, 2003). Building on the social control theory presented in *Crime in the Making* (Sampson and Laub, 1993), they provide a revised and expanded age-graded theory of informal social control. Their theory