



CRIME IN THE MAKING

PATHWAYS AND TURNING POINTS
THROUGH LIFE

ROBERT J. SAMPSON
AND JOHN H. LAUB

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T H R O U G H L I F E

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INTRODUCTION

The origins of this book can be traced to two puzzles. Eight years ago we stumbled across the first puzzle in the form of dusty cartons of data in the basement of the Harvard Law School Library. Originally assembled by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck of Harvard University, these cartons contained the original case files from their classic study, *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* (1950). These data, along with the Gluecks' eighteen-year follow-up of the 1,000 subjects from *Unraveling*, were given to the Harvard Law School Library in 1972. The Gluecks also gave the library their personal papers, correspondence, books, photographs, and the like. The papers and other items were sorted and fully cataloged as part of the Glueck archive. The cartons of data were simply stored in the sub-basement of the library.

We sensed that these data were of immense importance. Yet the obstacles to analyzing them were formidable. For example, the data for the 500 delinquent subjects alone were contained in more than fifty 12-by-15 cartons and seemed nearly impenetrable. How could we possibly recode and computerize these data? Moreover, as we began to sort through the case files, we soon discovered that these were not conventional data. And, as we went on, we found out that the Gluecks themselves were not conventional researchers (Laub and Sampson, 1991). Nevertheless, after several years of a true group and institutional effort, we reconstructed a good portion of the Gluecks' data. These data are the major source of information analyzed in this book.

While we were trying to piece together the Gluecks' data, we were confronted with a rancorous debate that has embroiled recent criminology over age and crime, longitudinal and cross-sectional research, and the usefulness of the concept of "criminal careers" (see especially Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1986, 1990; Blumstein et al., 1986, 1988a). On the one hand, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue for the importance

of effective child rearing in producing self-control during the early formative years of a youth's development. Since self-control is posited as a stable phenomenon that is sufficient for understanding patterns of crime throughout the life course, they view the longitudinal study of lives as unnecessary. We were attracted to this theoretical conception because of its emphasis on the importance of families in explaining the origins of juvenile delinquency.

On the other hand, we were troubled by key aspects of their stability argument. Is efficacy in child rearing all we need to know to explain patterns of adult crime? What about individual change and salient life events in adulthood? Are longitudinal data really unnecessary for understanding crime? In probing these issues we came to believe that the critics of Hirschi and Gottfredson (for example, Farrington, 1986a; Blumstein et al., 1988a, 1988b) had some important things to say regarding the study of crime. By using longitudinal data properly (that is, longitudinally) and in a theoretically informed fashion, we believed new insights could be gained into the causes of crime. In our view, the theoretical puzzle provided by the two sides in the debate in essence can be reduced to the following challenge: can we develop and test a theoretical model that accounts for the unfolding of childhood antisocial behavior, adolescent delinquency, and adult crime in longitudinal perspective? In other words, can we unravel crime and deviance over the full life course?

In the end, our solutions to both puzzles, and hence our attempt to forge some integration and reconciliation in the criminology debate, remain to be judged by the reader. Rather than trying to be all things to all theories, we take what we believe to be empirically and theoretically correct from each side of the debate, and weave together what we hope is a coherent argument that is greater than the sum of its individual parts.

These debates, of course, are not merely academic. We believe that our analyses of the Gluecks' data can contribute to public discourse on crime and crime policy. In particular, the Gluecks' data provide an unusual opportunity to advance a comparative understanding of crime in contemporary society as well as in the past. The overemphasis on "current data" stems from a mistaken belief that the time dimension is irrelevant in social research. As Thernstrom argued in his seminal study of social mobility among Boston residents: "Historical analysis of social phenomena is thus not a luxury for those interested in the past for its

own sake. A study of the present that neglects the processes of change by which the present was created is necessarily superficial" (1973: 3). In this sense, we believe that our book has a bearing on general discussions of the crime problem in contemporary society.

For example, today we often hear discussions of crime that assume criminal behavior is inevitably linked to race and drugs (see Kotlowitz, 1991). Yet crime in the historical context we are analyzing was not committed primarily by blacks, but rather by members of white ethnic groups in structurally disadvantaged positions. And even though drugs were not pervasive, crime and alcohol abuse were quite rampant. The men in the Gluecks' delinquent sample were persistent, serious offenders, and many of them can be labeled "career criminals" using contemporary language. Therefore, the fact that sample members were drawn from settings of social and economic disadvantage yet were all white provides an important comparative base for assessing current concerns of race, crime, and the underclass (see Jencks, 1992). Furthermore, because the use and sale of drugs like cocaine and heroin were not prevalent in this study, a unique opportunity is presented to learn about the relationship between alcohol and criminal behavior. In our view, the crime policy agenda is too often determined without data, theory, or a historical/longitudinal perspective; our book embraces all three dimensions.

Along similar lines, we strongly disagree with the narrow focus on incarceration as the solution to the crime problem. We believe that crime policy must be broader in scope and look to nongovernmental institutions like families, schools, work settings, and neighborhoods as the centerpiece of a crime reduction policy. The government can and should take the lead in strengthening these basic institutions of our society. We do not mean to imply that individuals who commit serious crimes should never be incarcerated. Rather, our reservations about current crime policies that rely heavily on long terms of incarceration—especially for juvenile offenders—reflect our fears that such policies do not reduce crime and may in fact be counterproductive.

We believe that crime is a pressing social problem that demands attention. Both of us have written in the past about the devastating effects of crime and the fear it produces in communities, especially with respect to quality of life and social cohesion (Sampson, 1987, 1988; Garofalo and Laub, 1978; Laub, 1983a). Reflecting this concern, we offer in this book a theoretical and empirical framework with which to

think in new ways about policies on crime. Public discourse about crime is dominated by television shows and radio call-in programs, forums we believe are inappropriate for discussing the causes of crime and the solutions to the crime problem. In our view, it is foolhardy to think that the study of crime can be reduced to a 10-second sound bite, as we have in fact been asked to do in the past. Media accounts notwithstanding, we believe that most citizens realize and appreciate the complexity of the crime problem, a complexity that is realized in our analyses that follow. Although at times these analyses may seem daunting, they are necessary as a foundation from which to extract the “big picture.” Building on this knowledge, we aim to reach those who are concerned about crime and who, like us, remain optimistic that social science research can inform dialogue on crime policy. We maintain that a well-reasoned and informed crime policy is possible, and we hope that our work can contribute to the development of that policy.

Our piecing together of the empirical and theoretical puzzles and our larger concerns with current policy debates take the following form. The first three chapters present the major theoretical strategy of the book. More specifically, Chapter 1 outlines the life-course framework and the main tenets of our theoretical model of age-graded informal social control and crime. Chapter 2 describes in detail the Gluecks’ *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* study together with the follow-up longitudinal data. In this chapter, we also situate the “Glueck perspective” on criminology in its historical and institutional context and respond to both the methodological and ideological critics of the Gluecks’ research. Chapter 3 delineates how the Gluecks’ data were recast for modern use, including our efforts at empirical validation. We also place the subjects of the Gluecks’ study in history and discuss the role of cohort and period effects in understanding individual lives through time.

The two following chapters examine the causes of antisocial and delinquent behavior in adolescence. Chapter 4 presents and assesses our theory of informal family social control, and Chapter 5 focuses on school factors, siblings, and peer groups. Within these chapters we analyze the cross-sectional data originally generated in the *Unraveling* study.

The next three chapters explore stability and change in crime and deviance in the adult life course. This analysis centers on an examination of persistence in and desistance from crime among the 1,000 men in the *Unraveling* study. We begin in Chapter 6 with an examination of

continuity between childhood delinquent behavior and adult outcomes. Chapter 7 explores the effects of adult social bonds on changes in criminal behavior for the original 500 delinquent subjects. Chapter 8 examines the late onset of crime and deviance for the original group of 500 nondelinquent subjects. In these sets of analyses we use the Gluecks' follow-up data collected from official records and interviews with the men at age 25 and again at age 32. New data are also presented regarding criminal activity for the men between the ages of 32 and 45.

Chapter 9 merges the quantitative and qualitative data collected by the Gluecks' research team. Drawing on the rich narrative information, we explore the life histories of antisocial behavior and social control of 70 men who represent key contrasts in our theory. Finally, in Chapter 10, we provide a synthesis of findings and discuss the implications of our results for criminological theory and research. We conclude with the implications of our study for current policy debates on crime.

TOWARD AN AGE-GRADED THEORY OF INFORMAL SOCIAL CONTROL

1

AAccepted wisdom holds that crime is committed disproportionately by adolescents. According to data from the United States and other industrialized countries, rates of property crime and violent crime rise rapidly in the teenage years to a peak at about ages 16 and 18, respectively (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983; Farrington, 1986a; Flanagan and Maguire, 1990). The overrepresentation of youth in crime has been demonstrated using multiple sources of measurement—official arrest reports (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1990), self-reports of offending (Rowe and Tittle, 1977), and victims' reports of the ages of their offenders (Hindelang, 1981). It is thus generally accepted that, in the aggregate, age-specific crime rates peak in the late teenage years and then decline sharply across the adult life span.

The age-crime curve has had a profound impact on the organization and content of sociological studies of crime by channeling research to a focus on adolescents. As a result, sociological criminology has traditionally neglected the theoretical significance of childhood characteristics and the link between early childhood behaviors and later adult outcomes (Robins, 1966; McCord, 1979; Caspi et al., 1989; Farrington, 1989; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Loeber and LeBlanc, 1990; Sampson and Laub, 1990). Although criminal behavior does peak in the teenage years, evidence reviewed in this chapter indicates an early onset of delinquency as well as continuity of criminal behavior over the life course. By concentrating on the teenage years, sociological perspectives on crime have thus failed to address the life-span implications of childhood behavior.

At the same time, criminologists have not devoted much attention to the other end of the spectrum—desistance from crime and the transitions from criminal to noncriminal behavior in adulthood (Cusson and Pinsonneault, 1986; Shover, 1985; Gartner and Piliavin, 1988). As

Rutter (1988: 3) argues, we know little about "escape from the risk process" and whether predictors of desistance are unique or simply the opposite of criminogenic factors. Thus, researchers have neglected not only the early life course, but also the relevance of social transitions in young adulthood and the factors explaining desistance from crime as people age.

Finally, in all phases of the life course, criminologists have largely ignored the link between social structural context and the mediating processes of informal social control. Most researchers have examined either macro-level/structural variables (for example, social class, ethnicity, mobility) or micro-level processes (for example, parent-child interactions, discipline) in the study of crime. We believe both sets of variables are necessary to explain crime, but from the existing research we do not know precisely how structural variables and the processes of informal social control are related.

In this book we confront these issues by bringing both childhood and adulthood back into the criminological picture of age and crime. To accomplish this goal, we synthesize and integrate the research literatures on crime and the life course and develop a theory of age-graded informal social control and criminal behavior. The basic thesis we develop is threefold in nature: (1) structural context mediated by informal family and school social controls explains delinquency in childhood and adolescence; (2) in turn, there is continuity in antisocial behavior from childhood through adulthood in a variety of life domains; and (3) informal social bonds in adulthood to family and employment explain changes in criminality over the life span despite early childhood propensities. Our theoretical model thus acknowledges the importance of early childhood behaviors and individual differences in self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990) but rejects the implication that later adult factors have little relevance (Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). In other words, we contend that social interaction with both juvenile *and* adult institutions of informal social control has important effects on crime and deviance. Thus, ours is a "sociogenic" model of crime and deviance that seeks to incorporate both stability and change over the life course.

We test our theoretical model through a detailed analysis of unique longitudinal data consisting of two samples of delinquent and nondelinquent boys followed from childhood and adolescence into their forties. Before describing our research strategy, we present a brief overview of the life-course perspective.

THE LIFE-COURSE PERSPECTIVE

The life course has been defined as “pathways through the age differentiated life span,” where age differentiation “is manifested in expectations and options that impinge on decision processes and the course of events that give shape to life stages, transitions, and turning points” (Elder, 1985: 17). Similarly, Caspi, Elder, and Herbener (1990: 15) conceive of the life course as a “sequence of culturally defined age-graded roles and social transitions that are enacted over time.” Age-graded transitions are embedded in social institutions and are subject to historical change (Elder, 1975, 1992).

Two central concepts underlie the analysis of life-course dynamics. A *trajectory* is a pathway or line of development over the life span, such as work life, marriage, parenthood, self-esteem, or criminal behavior. Trajectories refer to long-term patterns of behavior and are marked by a sequence of transitions. *Transitions* are marked by life events (such as first job or first marriage) that are embedded in trajectories and evolve over shorter time spans—“changes in state that are more or less abrupt” (Elder, 1985: 31–32). Some transitions are age-graded and some are not; hence, what is often assumed to be important are the normative timing and sequencing of role transitions. For example, Hogan (1980) emphasizes the duration of time (spells) between a change in state and the ordering of events such as first job or first marriage on occupational status and earnings in adulthood. Caspi, Elder, and Herbener (1990: 25) argue that delays in social transitions (for example, being “off-time”) produce conflicting obligations that enhance later difficulties (see also Rindfuss et al., 1987). As a result, life-course analyses are often characterized by a focus on the duration, timing, and ordering of major life events and their consequences for later social development.

The interlocking nature of trajectories and transitions may generate *turning points* or a change in the life course (Elder, 1985: 32). Adaptation to life events is crucial because the same event or transition followed by different adaptations can lead to different trajectories (Elder, 1985: 35). The long-term view embodied by the life-course focus on trajectories implies a strong connection between childhood events and experiences in adulthood. However, the simultaneous shorter-term view also implies that transitions or turning points can modify life trajectories—they can “redirect paths.” Social institutions and triggering life events that may modify trajectories include school, work,

the military, marriage, and parenthood (see Elder, 1986; Rutter et al., 1990; Sampson and Laub, 1990).

In addition to the study of patterns of change and the continuity between childhood behavior and later adulthood outcomes, the life-course framework encompasses at least three other themes: a concern with the social meanings of age throughout the life course, intergenerational transmission of social patterns, and the effects of macro-level events (such as the Great Depression or World War II) on individual life histories (Elder, 1974, 1985). As Elder (1992) notes, a major objective of the life-course perspective is to link social history and social structure to the unfolding of human lives. To address these themes individual lives are studied through time, with particular attention devoted to aging, cohort effects, historical context, and the social influence of age-graded transitions. Naturally, prospective longitudinal research designs form the heart of life-course research.

Of all the themes emphasized in life-course research, the extent of stability and change in behavior and personality attributes over time is probably the most complex. Stability versus change in behavior is also one of the most hotly debated and controversial issues in the social sciences (Brim and Kagan, 1980; Dannefer, 1984; Baltes and Nesselroade, 1984; Featherman and Lerner, 1985; Caspi and Bem, 1990). Given the pivotal role of this issue, we turn to an assessment of the research literature as it bears on stability and change in crime. As we shall see, this literature contains evidence for both continuity *and* change over the life course.

STABILITY OF CRIME AND DEVIANCE

Unlike sociological criminology, the field of developmental psychology has long been concerned with the continuity of maladaptive behaviors (Brim and Kagan, 1980; Caspi and Bem, 1990). As a result, a large portion of the longitudinal evidence on stability comes from psychologists and others who study "antisocial behavior" generally, where the legal concept of crime may or may not be a component.¹ An example is the study of aggression in psychology (Olweus, 1979). In exploring this research tradition our purpose is to highlight the extent to which deviant childhood behaviors have important ramifications in later adult life, whether criminal or noncriminal in form.

Our point of departure is the widely reported claim that individual

differences in antisocial behavior are stable across the life course (Olweus, 1979; Caspi et al., 1987; Loeber, 1982; Robins, 1966; Huesmann et al., 1984; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Jessor et al., 1977, 1991). The stability of crime and antisocial behavior over time is often defined as *homotypic continuity*, which refers to the continuity of similar behaviors or phenotypic attributes over time (Caspi and Bem, 1990: 553). For example, in a widely cited study of the aggressiveness of 600 subjects, their parents, and their children over a 22-year period, Huesmann and colleagues (1984) found that early aggressiveness predicted later aggression and criminal violence. They concluded that "aggression can be viewed as a persistent trait that . . . possesses substantial cross-situational constancy" (1984: 1120). An earlier study by Robins (1966) also found a high level of stability in crime and aggression over time.

More generally, Olweus's (1979) comprehensive review of more than 16 studies on aggressive behavior revealed "substantial" stability: the correlation between early aggressive behavior and later criminality averaged .68 for the studies reviewed (1979: 854–855). Loeber (1982) completed a similar review of the extant literature in many disciplines and concluded that a "consensus" had been reached in favor of the stability hypothesis: "Children who initially display high rates of antisocial behavior are more likely to persist in this behavior than children who initially show lower rates of antisocial behavior" (1982: 1433). Recent empirical studies documenting stability in criminal and deviant behavior across time include West and Farrington (1977), Wolfgang et al. (1987), Shannon (1988), Elliott et al. (1985), and Jessor et al. (1991).

Although perhaps more comprehensive, these findings are not new. Over 50 years ago the Gluecks found that virtually all of the 510 reformatory inmates in their study of criminal careers "had experience in serious antisocial conduct" (Glueck and Glueck, 1930: 142). Their data also confirmed "the early genesis of antisocial careers" (1930: 143). In addition, the Gluecks' follow-up of 1,000 males originally studied in *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* (1950) revealed remarkable continuities. As they argued in *Delinquents and Non-Delinquents in Perspective*: "While the majority of boys originally included in the nondelinquent control group continued, down the years, to remain essentially law-abiding, the greatest majority of those originally included in the delinquent group continued to commit all sorts of crimes in the 17–25 age-span" (1968: 170). Findings regarding behavioral or homotypic continuity are thus supported by a rich body of empirical research that