



S E C O N D   E D I T I O N

# *Theories of Delinquency*

*An Examination of Explanations  
of Delinquent Behavior*

*Donald J. Shoemaker*

# THEORIES OF DELINQUENCY

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of Delinquent Behavior

SECOND EDITION

DONALD J. SHOEMAKER

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# THEORIES OF DELINQUENCY

*To Kim and Holly*

## FOREWORD

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Ours is a youth-oriented society, and it is the youth of society that is our asset and future. We exult in the accomplishments of youth, be it Little League home run, high school election victory, selection as homecoming queen, debating team prize, or academic attainment in college. We sorrow in the premature and needless death of a teenaged accident victim or the tragedy of a fatal drug overdose. We relive our own youth through adolescent romantic escapades, recreational high jinks, the excitement and the discovery of life's vicissitudes through the experiences of the younger generation. It is not surprising, therefore, that as a society we are distressed, annoyed, disappointed, and diminished by the deviance and delinquency of our society's youth.

Deviance is relative, however, and subject to interpretation and differential social reaction. What is viewed by some as youthful exuberance or pranks on the part of a group of middle-class adolescent males may be seen as malicious, anti-social criminal behavior by others. The theft of watermelons from a farmer's field may be labeled as an adventurous excursion or serious larceny, depending on the viewpoint. In the mellow glow of the middle years some elders may recall their youthful misadventures as merely "sowing wild oats," but closer historical inspection may reveal normative vagrancy of a more serious variety. "Streaking," or drunken pranks after the fraternity party, may be dis-

missed as simply "letting off steam" after spring midterm exams, or adjudged more seriously as irresponsible hooliganism by some. Similarly, nighttime forays by fourteen-year-old boys to peek into the windows of females while undressing, reading pornography, visiting the community brothel, or seducing a sixteen-year-old girl at the school picnic with the aid of hard liquor, may be labeled in some instances as repugnant sexual degeneracy, or categorized by others as simply inevitable sexual "awakening" or "maturing" by those of more permissive bent. (After all, in some neighborhoods, both males and females may become sexually active in their pre-teens, unhandicapped by adult interference.)

The mixed array of perspectives on juvenile violations of social norms is not without consequences. Because there is such a range of toleration for youthful non-normative behavior, there is also a lack of firm social consensus as to the definition of juvenile delinquency. Lacking consensus, intervention at any level of social control is far from uniform. One family may be quite permissive in regard to the behavior of their adolescent offspring while another family may be inordinately strict. A given community may willingly endure the raucous activities of the local teenagers while another may be more inclined to sanction even the more common vagrancies of its juveniles. Even the process of transformation from adolescent to adult is subject to a relatively lengthy and loosely structured metamorphosis. Youngsters acquire adult privileges and adult responsibilities on such a sporadic basis that they may not be completely certain when they approach adult status and, accordingly, do not attempt to engage in adult comportment.

Furthermore, American society is quite heterogeneous, both in terms of the composition of its population and the multiplicity of subcultural value systems within the larger cultural entity. In our society, social placement and circumstances may have much to do with the existence of social norms, the bearing of these norms on the youth, the youth's perception of norms, his or her propensity to conform to or violate the norms, and the social reaction to the violation of (or conformity to) the norms. Thus,

no two children nor any two adolescents have the same delinquent or non-delinquent "destiny," as it were. And herein lies the central enigma of juvenile delinquency (and indeed, of crime). It is not so much why one child, when tempted, violates the norm, but rather why the other child with a similar social placement and in similar circumstances does not.

Willie "The Actor" Sutton, the infamous bank robber, when asked why he robbed banks, is said to have replied sagely, "Because that's where the money is." This line of logic is simple enough to fathom. The logic that is difficult to grasp here is why multitudes do not rob banks for the same reason. After all, deviant behavior, even for juveniles, may be functional. The school cut up or showoff may be cheered rather than condemned for his nonconformist antics by his fellow students. The teenager who successfully perpetrates some petty theft may be the object of respect or adulation on the part of his peers. The sixteen-year-old female who loses her virginity may not suffer a loss of status with her friends, but rather may now be viewed as a *female fatale*, and as an experienced woman-of-the-world, rather than as a "fallen woman." In such instances, delinquency may be an instrument of social mobility. In the longer pull, however, juvenile delinquency is dysfunctional for both the individual offender and for society.

Juvenile delinquency is hardly new. Such behavior has been well documented throughout the history of civilization. Both juveniles and civilization have somehow survived. There is a frightening quality about juvenile delinquency in recent years, however. Such behavior is no longer defined as tipping over the outhouse at the rural school, or throwing rocks at streetlights, or soaping windows on Halloween. Today there are severe alcohol abusers and hard narcotic addicts, and even drug pushers at pre-teen ages. Rape and murder at fifteen or sixteen is far from uncommon. Shoplifting, auto theft, burglary, or hold-ups in the early to mid-teens is widespread. There has even been an instance of a pre-teen attempted bank robber. Teen gangs operate gangster-style in many cities, and accounts of juvenile group assaults and group rapes are relatively common in the newspapers. There

are runaways by the thousands who, rather than return home when it is dark and their lunch is gone, may well embark on a career of prostitution and drugs. Sexual activity now extends into the pre-teen years in some instances, and sexual promiscuity and illegitimate pregnancies have become the norm among some segments of the youth population. Truancy, dropping out of school, street vagrancy, and a general contempt for rules and authority are all too widespread.

Most outgrow delinquency but, unfortunately, some do not and continue their deviant career as adult criminal offenders. The juvenile crime problem is serious. As Ed Sagarin observed in the foreword to the first edition of this book, juvenile offenders tend to be overrepresented in arrests, not only for the index crimes, but for crimes in general. Some of the prevailing social conditions and circumstances today that may be conducive to juvenile delinquency may be exacerbated in the future with an even more pessimistic outcome. Such conditions and circumstances might include an ineffective secondary education system, widespread unemployment and underemployment among some minority groups, the continued trend in disintegration of a stable family life, the dysfunctional aspects of the mass media with the vivid contrasts in economic life-styles, the easy availability of drugs and the potential for vast profits in drugs, and the continued decline in respect for authority and social order.

The social costs of juvenile delinquency, of course, go far beyond the damages of the offenses. There are the additional costs incurred with the juvenile justice system in terms of enforcement, judicial procedures, parole supervision, and incarceration. The greatest cost of all, however, is the deterioration in the very fabric of social life and the loss of the social potential of the juvenile offenders, who might have accomplished much good had they not been sidetracked by their deviant activities.

The problem of juvenile delinquency is of such dimensions that it must be addressed. In this regard, juvenile delinquency has intrigued researchers and scholars for many decades, with the result that there is a veritable wealth of research writings and juvenile criminological literature. The trouble with a vast and

growing literature is, of course, that care must be taken not to reinvent the wheel. Research findings need to be consolidated, integrated, and assimilated for the insights they contain. Ideally, this should be done at significant intervals. Unfortunately, this process has not been accomplished to the degree necessary to make the body of accumulated research optimally useful and informative. Thus, there was a pressing need for a work such as this book and Dr. Shoemaker undertook to fill this need. As Ed Sagarin so eloquently phrased it in the foreword to the first edition:

With this medley of material at hand there was surely a need to sit back, recapitulate, and take a look at the vista that was jointly created by the youths themselves and the adult scholars. This is precisely what Donald Shoemaker has done, with excellence, perceptivity, willingness to listen, and eagerness to be skeptical.

Dr. Shoemaker attacked a formidable task, for there was, indeed, a plethora of juvenile delinquency literature based on an inordinately wide range of methodological undertakings and theoretical perspectives. To compound the dilemma of multiple conceptualizations of the juvenile delinquency problem and dynamics, many of the research findings generated over the years were conflicting or at best oblique to one another. Undaunted, Shoemaker entered this scientific thicket and painstakingly unravelled and deciphered the mass of research findings, weaving the sometimes disparate threads into a cohesive and coherent fabric. He has examined and discussed all of the traditional and mainstream theories of delinquency, ranging from the early biological theories to the mainstay anomie and control theories to the more disputatious labeling and radical theories. In addition, he has explored concepts, theories, methodological strategies, analytical approaches, and interpretive findings. The book provides both meticulous inventory and critical assessment, and the results are comprehensive, informative, insightful, and eminently useful. The volume will stand as standard reference, core theoretical text, and literature guide, and will no doubt serve yeoman duty for advanced student, scholar, and researcher alike.

This second edition, in addition to fulfilling its earlier intentions, fills some gaps by adding significant references from place to place, clarifying some critical concepts, strengthening some important arguments that were not always fully communicated, augmenting the exposition in parts of the text and in a few cases discussing some newer theories and research, and, perhaps more important, giving new and detailed consideration and assessment to integrative theoretical approaches. The first edition was quite sound; the second edition provides important updating, making the text more persuasive and compelling, and adds utility to the volume.

The book has proved to be popular. It is unquestionably useful. I predict it will prove to be durable.

*Virginia Polytechnic Institute  
and State University  
May 1990*

Clifton D. Bryant

## FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

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The world of science, of which social science is a part, albeit often with disclaimers, is no longer as concerned with ultimate origins or beginnings as was true in the century of Darwin, but it has not abandoned its search for causal explanations. If anything, causes have assumed the central stage in scientific inquiry, as the twentieth century abandoned belief in miracles, supernaturalism, angels, and demons, except in the most symbolic and metaphoric sense. That monosyllabic question that appears at times to be the entire vocabulary of children—Why?—guides us when it does not plague us.

Thus it is with crime, and with the junior partner of crime: the delinquent behavior of young people, which can range from the annoying, mischievous, and unruly rascality of the frequently lovable rogue to the vicious, violent, and persistent criminality of the most unlovable, and often unloved, boy or girl. If efforts to explain crime have been abundant, often cyclical, those that seek to answer the same “Why?” for juvenile delinquency are not less so. In fact, many of the major theories of crime that have been promulgated appear to be more applicable to youthful than to adult misbehavior: surely this would be the case with a theory that almost dominated American criminology for several decades, Edwin Sutherland’s differential association, with its emphasis on peer group influence.

Would it not, in fact, be self-evident, inevitable, even axiomatic to some, that a criminological theory—a study of the causes, including the origins, of crime (to use the expression of the McCords)—must be reflective of an assessment of juvenile delinquency? For is not the child the father of the man, and where is one to locate the beginnings of the criminality of adults if not in their youth and childhood (or infancy, too, as the Freudians would insist, but that is something else entirely, because although these would be the roots of antisocial adults, at least for those who adhere to Freudian hermeneutics, they would not be manifestations of it).

As I look at the vast social science literature on crime and delinquency, it strikes me as more than incidental that it is richer in works that focus on juvenile delinquency than adult criminology. This would include the ecological studies of Shaw and McKay, the matched samples of the Gluecks, the largely psychological or perhaps psychosocial studies of Healy, the methodological analyses of Hirschi and Selvin, and such elegant adumbrations, speculative but not the less insightful, as Cohen's *Delinquent Boys*, Cloward and Ohlin's *Delinquency and Opportunity*, and Matza's *Delinquency and Drift*, among many others. It is surely worthy of consideration to note that this body of literature overshadows the corresponding material concerned with adult lawbreaking.

There appear to be several reasons for the concentration of empirical, descriptive, and theoretical studies concerning society's younger rather than its older mischief makers (a somewhat mild epithet for many, it should be admitted).

At the outset, youngsters are our center of hope. They are our responsibility, our children, the people that we, the adults, have created and shaped and fashioned. They are, or are supposed to be, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the nobility of the land. And in a land that recognizes no other nobility, at least in its official stance, we look to the youth. There is a cult of youth, a belief that beauty and strength are concentrated in a few years of a brief age span, and that one is over-the-hill, or at least on the road to decline, only a short time after maturity. Death at an early age, the apt phrase that describes the bleak hopelessness of some of the

very young, may be said also to describe the widely shared attitudes that characterize those no longer children or adolescents. Even as people relinquish their once strongly held beliefs and illusions of pristine childhood, they continue to idolize youth—its beauty and energy and strength. Yet, something is wrong: a nation cannot worship at the temple of youth and at the same time look with fear and disdain at those they label “teenagers” while they make that word synonymous with raucous, noisy, ungovernable, and even delinquent, if not criminal.

The young are not only our future, they are our present, in a sense and to a degree that cannot be said of those who have reached maturity and yet are still in need of care and aid. All juveniles, not only delinquents, are “persons in need of supervision,” to use the now terrible and damning phrase that has become part of the juvenile justice system. When they become what society cannot or will not tolerate, it seems clear on the face of it that supervision must somewhere have broken down, which means, in short, that we, the elders, have failed. Not only as parents, as teachers, as police officers, but as a community and as a society. Faced with this specter, people often turn away from the awesome reality of their own responsibility for a creation that must sometimes seem monstrous. In short, none of us wants to be Frankenstein, although some may believe that it is better than being the monster that he created.

There are other reasons for the relative richness of delinquency theory and research, and for the deep concern with youthful crime. A disproportionate part of America's crime problem can be laid at the door of the young. According to the U.S. Census of 1980, those between the ages of 15 and 19 constituted 9.4 percent of the total population, but when we turn to the FBI official statistics for arrests involving the eight crimes used to make up an index of serious criminality in the United States, this age group accounts for just about twice that number. However, the figures here are misleading, although a public that is fed this information is not always aware of this. One should certainly remove from the general population with which adolescents are compared those 9 years and younger, as well as those 75 years and over. This would bring the

15- to 19-year-olds up to about 11.3 percent of the total populace, and yet they continue to be overrepresented in arrests, not only for the index crimes, but for crimes in general. And when only violent index crimes are counted, the disproportionate representation of the youth is even more striking.

By the mid-thirties, participation in crime goes into a decline; the street criminal is about burned out. (White-collar, corporate, organized, computer, and political crimes, those most important categories, are never the domain of the adolescent.) Furthermore, while many delinquent and crime-oriented youth have relinquished the criminal life for job, family, and a life-style that is called "going straight" by the time they are in their twenties, those in that decade or the following one who are pursuing the road in and out of violence, arrests, courtroom encounters, jails, release, and prisons, in a recurrent and patterned manner, appear to have launched their lawbreaking careers in their teens (perhaps earlier).

Of course, it is entirely possible that the Uniform Crime Reports issued by the FBI do not accurately reflect youthful crime, but only youthful arrest rates, for two opposing reasons that probably do not just neatly cancel out each other. It is widely assumed that youth are more likely to be apprehended than adults committing similar crimes: they do not have the wherewithal, the experience, to escape arrest. But if arrested, by contrast, they may more frequently be diverted to community centers, and thus never appear in the statistics: in short, they may be apprehended, but not officially booked as arrested.

From an examination of the relatively high participation of youth in crime, people conclude that a successful attack on juvenile delinquency will not only reduce the predatory activities that presently plague us, but will bring benefits in the years ahead, in the form of reduced crime rates a decade or two in the future. If these are accurate figures and assumptions, it is no wonder, then, that public, journalistic, political, and criminological attention becomes focused on youth.

When criminologists have turned their attention to youth, they have discovered a rich and highly researchable field of study awaiting them. It is sometimes said—not without irony, I would

hope—that the two best populations for careful examination of behavior appear to be youths and rats, for both are captive groups in which 100 percent samples and excellent controls are not difficult to come by. Porterfield launched his self-report studies with young people, for where else could he have so easily and so inexpensively located a cross section of an age cohort? Indeed, almost all self-report studies of lawbreaking activities since have concentrated on young people. Countless college professors have asked their students (anonymously, I hope) of their background in deviant activities, which in the end means their participation in acts of juvenile delinquency. Correlations of violent and other criminal activity with IQ scores, school achievement, and home background are far easier to make with young people than with older people. The massive study of Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin, in which an entire age cohort in a large city was followed to study brushes with the law, recidivism, and serious criminality, would have been far more difficult to carry out with older people. Youths seem to lend themselves more easily to studies that determine the effectiveness of various intervention programs or of various therapeutic techniques; and the young can be followed in the years of their maturity to determine what occurred in their lives as a result of different factors.

Out of the concerns of society, on the one hand, and opportunities for study, on the other, has come rich research, the monographs, essays, descriptions, and theories that punctuate the literature on juvenile delinquency. These works are numerous, sometimes apparently contradictory, at other times mutually complementary, and their explanatory values are not always readily seen. With this medley of material at hand, there was surely a need to sit back, recapitulate, and take a look at the vista that was jointly created by the youths themselves and the adult scholars. This is precisely what Donald Shoemaker has done, with excellence, perceptivity, willingness to listen, and eagerness to be skeptical.

The author of this book has taken the theories, perspectives, orientations, and emphases that have been found in the literature on delinquency and has organized his analysis around some

recurrent themes. He has sought to discover the underlying assumptions of a theory, the key terms and how the theory builders have used and defined them, the empirical testing that tends to validate or disconfirm the theory, and from this he offers a summary and assessment of his own.

Reading this book, one can only be surprised that the task that Shoemaker set out for himself was not attempted before. There is a need for this work, precisely because of the wealth of material from which it draws. That the task of sifting through, analyzing, summarizing, and critically assessing the corpus of social science was done so well is something for which we will all be grateful and long indebted to the author.

Furthermore, it appears that the work comes at an excellent moment, for two reasons: first, and most obvious, because of public agitation over crime generally, and youthful depredations more specifically; second, because a discipline that has been offered such a wealth of facts, studies, insights, perspectives, and theories should stop to catch its breath, so to speak, to look over its prized holdings, to take inventory, so that it can synthesize, retain, and discard. It is difficult to imagine any reader of this book failing to be enthusiastic about the manner in which Donald Shoemaker has accomplished this task.

Now I have said enough. Turn the page and you will be in for a scholarly treatise and a personal treat.

*City University of New York*  
*November 1983*

Edward Sagarin