

Crime and the Life Course

An Introduction

Second Edition

Michael L. Benson



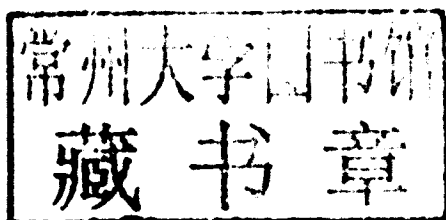
Criminology and Justice Studies

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Crime and the Life Course, Second edition

In recent years, the life course perspective has become a popular theoretical orientation toward crime. Yet despite its growing importance in the field of criminology, most textbooks give it only cursory treatment. *Crime and the Life Course: An Introduction* by Michael L. Benson provides a comprehensive overview of contemporary research and theory on the life course approach to crime. The book emphasizes a conceptual understanding of this approach. A special feature is the integration of qualitative and quantitative research on criminal life histories. This book:

- provides an overview of the life course approach and describes the major concepts and issues in life course theory as it applies to criminology
- reviews evidence on biological and genetic influences on crime
- reviews research on the role of the family in crime and juvenile delinquency
- provides a detailed discussion of the criminological life course theories of Moffitt, Hagan, Sampson and Laub, and others
- discusses the connections between youthful crime and adult outcomes in education, occupation, and marriage
- discusses how macro sociological and historical developments have influenced the shape of the life course in American society as it relates to patterns in crime
- presents an application of the life course approach to white-collar crime (in Appendix).

Michael L. Benson is Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Cincinnati. He is a past President of the White-Collar Crime Research Consortium. In addition to numerous journal articles on white-collar crime, he co-authored *White-Collar Crime: An Opportunity Perspective* and *Combating Corporate Crime: Local Prosecutors at Work*.

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Preface to the Second Edition

In the years since the first edition of this book was published the life course perspective has become such a dominant force in criminology that an eminent criminologist, indeed a former president of the American Society of Criminology, has declared it to be one and the same thing as the discipline of criminology itself. In the words of Francis T. Cullen, “Life course criminology now is criminology” (Cullen 2011). This is a view to which this author wholeheartedly subscribes. That the origins of juvenile and adult criminality lie early in life (perhaps as early as in the womb), that there is substantial (though not perfect) continuity in behavior over time, that there are different types of trajectories in crime and that these trajectories are interlinked with and influenced by trajectories in other domains of life (and vice versa) seem now to be unassailable points. And from these points, it follows that the life course perspective’s focus on age-graded intra-individual development and change provides the best theoretical route to understanding crime at the individual level and to integrating the diverse theoretical perspectives that populate the discipline of criminology. As Cullen (2011) notes, accepting the life course perspective does not mean we have to completely jettison other perspectives such as learning, strain, or control. Rather, it means that theoreticians need to develop age-graded versions of these theories that specify when and how their particular causal factors operate throughout the full spectrum of the modern life course. Some theorists have already taken up this challenge (Agnew 2006; Akers and Jensen 2007), and that is a positive development.

Although the life course perspective is now a dominant force in criminology, its literature is often highly technical, involving as it does theoretical issues and statistical techniques that are not easily grasped by most undergraduate and beginning graduate students. Introductory texts now routinely include chapters or sections on life course and developmental theories, but these treatments are often relatively short and cursory recitations of the views of one theorist and then another and then another. Little attempt is made to integrate or to compare and contrast the different theoretical positions or to show how they revolve around certain fundamental issues, such as continuity versus change in the life course. Even less attention is paid to thinking about how macro-sociological conditions and historical change influence the structure of the life course. In short, the treatment given to life course criminology in introductory texts does not do justice to the complexity, diversity, and depth of this perspective. Given the fundamental importance of life course criminology, it is my hope that this book will provide students with an introduction that charts a middle course between the cursory treatment found in introductory texts and the statistical technicalities of the primary literature. If Frank Cullen is correct, then the students who are just starting to learn the discipline of criminology and who hope eventually to teach and practice it will inevitably be life course criminologists. This book is designed to give them a solid platform on which to stand and develop their own thinking. And for those students who do not plan to become professional criminologists, it is hoped that this book will at least help them understand where the field is going, so that they can become educated consumers of the information about crime and criminals that they receive from the media and politicians.

Even though criminology does not seem to go through the paradigmatic revolutions that apparently characterize progress in the physical sciences, the past decade has witnessed significant advances in the life course perspective. Continuing their exploration of the Gluecks' data, Robert Sampson and John Laub have refined and extended their highly regarded age-graded theory of informal social control to give a more explicit accounting of desistance and persistence in criminal trajectories among adult offenders. Likewise, Terrie Moffitt has revised her complementary pair of developmental theories in light of continuing research on life course persistent offending and trajectories in crime. Finally, the whole field of criminology has been slowly coming to grips with the implications of biosocial theory and research for our understanding of individual level variation in criminality. Thus, much has changed since the first edition of this book appeared in 2001.

In this second edition, each of the chapters has been revised and updated. Before discussing the changes that have been made to the individual chapters, however, it may be helpful to note some matters of reorganization and

presentation that apply throughout the book. First, in regards to reorganization, Chapter 2 in the first edition covered both biological and family influences on early development. Because of the tremendous growth in biosocial research in the past decade, the material on biological influences on criminality has been moved to a separate chapter (number 2) followed by a standalone chapter on the family. Chapter 5 of the first edition, which treated white-collar crime, has been removed and a shortened version of it is included as an appendix at the end of the book. This change was made because there has been almost no effort to apply the life course perspective to white-collar crime, and it seemed inappropriate to continue to shoehorn it into a book about life course criminology. Finally, a new Chapter 7 has been added that focuses on the issue of social programs and rehabilitative interventions in the life course. Much of the material in Chapter 7 originally appeared at the end of the chapters on childhood, adolescence, and adulthood in the first edition. Moving this material to a separate chapter makes for a more coherent and focused treatment of the potential role of public policy in the life course. Besides reorganized material, each chapter of the second edition also now includes a list of main points at the end to help students review.

Chapter 1 includes a revised and updated discussion of the basic principles of the life course perspective. Most important, a discussion of the concept of human agency has been added and its current role in life course theory explicated.

As noted above, Chapter 2 is now a standalone chapter on biological influences on crime. It has been substantially updated and contains an expanded discussion of current research on behavioral genetics, including what is known to date regarding the heritability of antisocial behavior. New research on molecular genetics and crime is reviewed, and a new section has been added on non-genetic biological effects. The other chapter that relates to early childhood, Chapter 3 on the family, contains new material regarding violence and aggression in early childhood and culturally based differences in parenting styles. It also discusses the provocative contention made by some contemporary researchers that parents may really not matter that much in regards to the intelligence, personalities and behavior of their children.

Like in the first edition, Chapter 4 on adolescence remains the most substantial chapter in the book. In general, new research is referenced throughout, including an expanded discussion of brain development and functioning during adolescence and new research on trajectories in crime. A section on the so-called “general theory of crime” has been added because life course theories are often presented as being incompatible with the stable trait perspective of low self control theory. The current empirical status of Moffitt’s complementary pair of theories of delinquency is assessed, and a

discussion of the revisions that Sampson and Laub have made to their age-graded theory of informal social control is included. Finally, new qualitative material on MacLeod's Hallway Hangers is presented.

Chapter 5 focuses on adulthood as a stage in the life course and includes updated statistics on adult outcomes in regards to desistance, marriage, and employment. The most important revision in this chapter is the inclusion of an extended discussion of Laub's and Sampson's new theories of persistence and desistance, especially in regards to the structuring effects of routine activities and the importance of human agency (Laub and Sampson 2003), and a discussion of the theory of cognitive transformations recently developed by Giordano and colleagues (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). In addition, material has been added on how involvement in crime in adolescence may affect health outcomes in adulthood.

Chapter 6 deals with the effects of historical change and macro sociological conditions on the structure of the modern life course in the United States. The chapter has been reorganized to start with a discussion of the war on drugs and the prison experiment. Updated statistics on incarceration and on the link between race and lifetime risks of incarceration are presented. This section of the chapter also includes a discussion of the effects of concentrated incarceration on families and communities. In addition to an expanded discussion of the effects of the war on drugs and the prison experiment on the life course of minority men, this chapter also includes new statistics on changes in families and households, especially in regards to the fall in the marriage rate and the delay in the age at which women first marry. A new interpretation of how these changes may affect the desistance process is outlined. Finally, this chapter now addresses the effects that growing up in a neighborhood of concentrated disadvantage may have on the health and psychological development of children.

As noted above, the new Chapter 7 focuses on the role that social policies and rehabilitative interventions can have in redirecting the life course for both potential and actual offenders. It presents a brief review of some of the policies and programs that are supported by evidence from evaluation research as being effective at each stage of the life course—childhood, adolescence, and adulthood—in reducing future offending. This chapter endeavors to make the point that rehabilitative interventions should not be overlooked as potentially important prosocial turning points in the life course.

Michael L. Benson
January, 2012

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As always, thanks to Shelley and Christopher who continue to make my own life course more interesting, more fun, and richer than I deserve.

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CHAPTER 1

An Overview of Life Course Theory and Research

Four Million Babies

In his famous “Essay on Man,” the great eighteenth-century poet, Alexander Pope, wrote that “on life’s vast ocean diversely we sail.” This quotation captures one of the central themes of the life course perspective. As individuals, we take diverse paths through life, and one of the chief goals of the life course perspective is to understand this diversity, to understand, for example, why two children born at the same time and into similar circumstances sometimes follow dramatically different paths through life. Why does one child born into a poor family in a disadvantaged neighborhood become a hardened criminal, while another child born right next door into an equally poor family becomes a doctor? This question can be asked of the close to four million babies that are born in the United States every year. Why do their lives turn out the way they do?

In 2008, according to the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, the exact number of newborns in the U.S. was 4,247,694. At birth, the average life expectancy of this cohort was about 75 years for males and 80 years for females. In the three-quarters of a century that most of these children will live, they will do many things and many things will happen to them. Half of the children will grow up in stable two-parent households with their biological parents. The other half will live in households with only one parent at least some of the time before they are 18 years old (National Marriage Project 2007). Almost all of the children will go to school, and of those who graduate from high school close to three-quarters will attend college (Snyder,

Dillow, and Hoffman 2008). After finishing their schooling, they will get jobs, lose jobs, and eventually retire from the workforce. Around 85 percent will get married at least once during their lives, but about half of the marriages will end in divorce (National Marriage Project 2007). Many of these children eventually will have children of their own.

In addition to the normal and expected activities of going to school, marrying, and working, these individuals will also engage in a variety of other activities as they age through the life course. Some of these activities will not be “normal” in the sense of being expected and approved by society. Rather, they will be defined by society as abnormal or deviant or criminal. There is a difference, however, between moral deviance and statistical deviance. Self-report studies indicate that a large majority of the boys will commit some kind of minor delinquency sometime during their teenage years, and so will a substantial proportion of the girls (Short and Nye 1958; Gold 1966; Hindelang 1973). Indeed, minor delinquency is so common that it is statistically “normal” in the sense that the vast majority of kids do it (Moffitt 1993; Moffitt 1997; Nagin and Tremblay 1999; Wiesner and Capaldi 2003). A small percentage of the boys, anywhere from 3 to 8 percent, will engage in forms of delinquency that are not normal in either the statistical or moral sense of the word. They will repeatedly commit serious personal and property offenses (Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin 1972; West and Farrington 1977; Shannon 1982). They stand a good chance of becoming career criminals and spending large parts of their lives in jail or prison, or they will die early in life.

From the viewpoint of each individual child, the procession of events between birth and death will make up a life, a life that will feel to the individual as though it is filled with unique, one-of-a-kind experiences. Everyone knows, of course, that other people go to school, get jobs, marry, have children, and break the law. Only an astonishingly dull-witted and self-centered person would not recognize that these events and activities are commonplace. Nevertheless, as they travel along the paths of their lives, each individual will have experiences and emotions that will feel unique to her or him. And in a sense, they are. For example, the accidents of time and place that bring two people together to marry are unique to the individuals involved, just as are the intimate disagreements and fights that may cause them to divorce. Likewise, the teenager who vandalizes his school while hanging out with the wrong people one night may feel that his misadventure happened only because of a really exceptional and weird set of circumstances.

Because each of us has a unique inner emotional experience of the events that make up our life, it is difficult for us to step back and look at the broader patterns of common experience. Yet, stripped of their singular details of time, place, and personality, the events of our lives form a not unlimited number

of patterns, and many people experience similar patterns. For example, in the United States most people enter the workforce full time sometime in their twenties and work more or less continuously until they retire sometime in their sixties. There are, of course, variations and exceptions to this general pattern, and a certain amount of disorder in the life course is common (Rindfuss, Swicegood, and Rosenfeld 1987). Some people switch careers and jobs frequently; others stay put for decades. Some people become disabled and have to stop working early, or they may experience prolonged unemployment for other reasons, or they may win a lottery and retire early. Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of the population follows the general pattern of full-time work until around age 65.

The study of patterns and variations in people's experiences as they age is the subject of life course theory. The particular patterns that we as individuals experience are shaped by many factors. These factors include our genetic makeup, our social and demographic characteristics, our family, our friends, the neighborhood in which we grow up, the historical period in which we traverse the life course, and the random unpredictable events that happen throughout life. This book explores how the life course approach may be used to better understand patterns in the involvement of individuals in crime and deviance.

The Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective is a broad multidisciplinary intellectual movement. It encompasses ideas and empirical observations from a variety of disciplines, including biology, psychology, sociology, and history, to name a few. It is not an explicit theory of anything, but rather a way of thinking about and studying human lives and development; it is an emerging paradigm (Elder 1996).

The concept "life course" refers to more than just the duration of a person's existence. That is, it is more than just the time between birth and death. Rather, the life course refers to a sequence of age-graded stages and social roles that are socially constructed and recognized as being different from one another. The different stages typically are separated from each other by normatively defined transitions and tend to be ordered in the sense that certain events are expected to precede or follow other events most of the time (Mayer and Muller 1986). For example, from a normative point of view getting married is expected to precede having children, even though the ordering of these two events often is reversed in practice.

The life course can be defined as the set of interconnected trajectories that a person has as he or she ages through life (Elder 1985). A trajectory is a sequence of linked states within a conceptually defined domain of behavior

or experience. For example, we can speak of a person's educational trajectory, which is a series of linked states related to education. For most people the standard educational trajectory consists of passage through elementary school, junior high school, high school, and college, leading eventually to a college degree and cessation of the formal educational trajectory around age 22 or 23. As people move through this trajectory, they graduate from one level of schooling to another. Each graduation marks a change in state that is called a transition. Entering college marks a transition from one stage to another in an educational trajectory. Transitions are always embedded in trajectories, and the stages that make up a trajectory are always linked to one another by transitions (Elder 1996).

Although we typically think of development and growth primarily in regard to children or adolescents, the life course perspective holds that "aging is not simply growing old beyond some arbitrary point in the life course" (Riley 1986). Rather, aging and development are continuous processes. Adulthood is not a static unchanging condition. As adults age, they undergo continuous biological, psychological, and social changes, though perhaps at slower rates than children and adolescents. Aging and development go on continuously from the moment of one's conception in the womb to one's last breath. From beginning to end, we change and develop biologically, psychologically, and socially.

Life course researchers typically conceive of trajectories in three different domains of human behavior and functioning—biological, psychological, and social. Trajectories in these different realms are intimately connected and have reciprocal effects on each other. Biological developments can influence our psychological and social trajectories. For example, as biological beings, we are born without the ability to reproduce. We develop reproductive capacity when we go through puberty. Puberty is a biological transition that has important implications for psychological and social trajectories. Teenagers, for example, often experience mood swings when they go through puberty because of surging hormones (Miller Buchanan, Eccles, and Becker 1992). Young women in particular at this stage of life sometimes experience depression and anxiety because of concerns about their body image (Hayward and Sanborn 2002). Thus, puberty may lead to a transition in psychological trajectories of young women, which may in turn affect how they perform in school and hence have the potential to alter their educational trajectories. Indeed, researchers have found that in some settings girls who reach menarche at age 11 or younger are more likely to exhibit multiple forms of behavioral deviancy than girls who mature later (Magnusson and Cairns 1996). Thus, a transition in a biological trajectory can have ramifications for psychological and social trajectories. In turn, social events also may influence psychological and even biological trajectories (Sapolsky 1997). Trajectories

across and within the different domains of human behavior and functioning have mutual interactive effects on one another.

As the life course perspective has evolved over time, four core principles have emerged that now serve to guide research and theorizing (Elder 1998). These principles include:

- 1 Historical time and place
- 2 Timing in lives
- 3 Linked lives
- 4 Human agency.

Historical Time and Place

Human development is multi-determined and influenced by social and historical conditions and changes (Magnusson and Cairns 1996). To put it bluntly, where and when you are born and live out your life matters. The historical time and place in which we live has profound effects on how we as individuals develop and on the life course that we follow (Elder 1998). Our lives carry the imprint of what happens in our particular social worlds (Elder 1995). Rapid social change can disrupt our lives and change the timing and direction of important social events, such as marriage, having children, or pursuing an occupational career. For example, during the Cultural Revolution in China in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Chinese government implemented a policy of “sending-down” urban youths to live and work in rural areas. Being sent-down affected the youths’ educational, family, and occupational trajectories. The longer the duration of the send-down experience, the more likely that marriage and childbearing would be delayed (Zhou and Hou 1999). For a generation of urban youth, the send-down policy radically changed the life course. For a more recent example that is closer to home, consider the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although it is probably too early to tell just yet exactly how the future lives of the men and women who have served or are serving now in those campaigns will be affected, it seems undeniable that there will be profound effects. Marriages will be delayed or foregone. Life-changing physical and psychological injuries will be sustained. The soldiers who went through these wars will undoubtedly be different than they would have been if September 11, 2001 had never happened.

The Cultural Revolution and the send-down policy are dramatic examples of rapid social change. Wars and economic depressions are other examples. The Great Depression of the 1930s had profound effects on children raised during that period, and the nature of the effects varied, depending upon how old a child was when the depression began (Elder 1974). The current economic downturn, depending on how long and deep it is, may have similar