

**HOWARD B. KAPLAN**

# **Patterns of Juvenile Delinquency**



**Volume 2. Law and Criminal  
Justice Series**

# **Patterns of Juvenile Delinquency**

# **LAW AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE SERIES**

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# **Patterns of Juvenile Delinquency**

**HOWARD B. KAPLAN**

**Volume 2.**  
**Law and Criminal Justice Series**



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*This book is dedicated with love  
to my wife, Diane Susan, and  
to my children, Samuel Charles and Rachel Esther.*

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## PREFACE

**The sociological study** of juvenile delinquency has matured to a point where it is generally recognized that there are many social factors that account for juvenile delinquency. In the past, theories that emphasized one or another factor were pitted against each other. And often one was favored over another when in fact the several theories were addressing different questions and, in providing answers to those questions, were making separate contributions to the overall explanation of juvenile delinquency. Part of the answer to why juvenile delinquency exists rests in the factors that lead to the definition of behavior as delinquent; part of the answer lies in the factors that motivate youths to perform acts that have been defined as delinquent; and part of the answer is provided by identifying the situational cues, opportunities, and alternative motives that either facilitate or impede the acting out of dispositions to perform acts defined as delinquent by the formal institutions of the society.

Toward the goal of providing an inclusive explanation of the social basis of juvenile delinquency, this book addresses a limited number of questions. First, what factors influence the social definition of certain kinds of behavior when performed by specified categories of people in specified circumstances as delinquent? Second, what factors motivate youths to perform behaviors that are socially defined as delinquent? Third, when a person is motivated to perform delinquent acts, what factors influence whether or not the youths

will actually perform the delinquent acts and what kinds of delinquent acts are performed? Fourth, once youths have performed delinquent acts, what factors determine whether they will increase or continue rather than decrease or discontinue their level of involvement in delinquency? Fifth, and finally, what are the consequences of juvenile delinquency for society? The state of our understanding of the sociology of juvenile delinquency is defined by the state of our understanding of the answers to these five questions.

As a prologue to addressing these questions, Chapter 1 considers the conceptualization and measurement of juvenile delinquency and the research strategies that are used to collect and analyze data relating to the social definition, onset, continuity, and consequences of juvenile delinquency. Chapter 2 discusses the social processes by which specific categories of behavior come to be defined as juvenile delinquency. Chapters 3 and 4 address the question of how youths develop motivations to behave in ways that are defined as delinquent by the wider society. In Chapter 3 the focus is upon the social processes that influence youths to become motivated to behave in ways that are contrary to the normative expectations that they learned in the course of socialization in their membership groups. Motivation to delinquent responses is viewed as the consequence of personal distress generated by the failure to acquire valued attributes, to perform valued behaviors, and otherwise to have positively valued experiences. Delinquent responses offer promise of reducing the youth's distress by avoiding or attacking the standards by which the youth failed and by offering new (although deviant) standards by which the youth may experience positive self-evaluation. In Chapter 4 I consider the motivation to perform delinquent acts (so defined by the more inclusive society) that stem from membership and socialization in social groups that prescribe the acts or define the behavior as acceptable. The motivation to perform delinquent acts here is to conform to the group's standards whether or not the youth also feels alienated from the social rules that the standards violate.

Since not all *motives* to perform delinquent acts result in delinquent behavior, Chapter 5 considers the social processes that hinder or facilitate the acting out of deviant dispositions. Motives that may counteract deviant dispositions (such as emotional commitment to conventional standards or fear of social rejection) and opportunities to learn and perform delinquent behaviors are considered among the influences upon the acting out of delinquent dispositions. Once youths have performed delinquent acts, however, the continuity of delinquent behavior is problematic. Whether or not the youth continues to perform delinquent acts will depend on the consequences of the initial performance and normally occurring maturational sequences. The processes that influence continuity or change in level or delinquent involvement are considered in Chapter 6.

In Chapter 7, the consequences of juvenile delinquency both with regard to the social responses that arise to contain such behavior and the unanticipated functions of such behavior are considered.

The foregoing chapters present a sample that I believe is representative of the theoretical orientations and empirical findings that social scientists have offered in trying to understand the origins and consequences of juvenile delinquency. In Chapter 8, by way of summarizing this material, I offer a general model of the social antecedents and consequences of juvenile delinquency. The model reflects my own synthesis of the social science literature on the subject. It is a tentative formulation that is intended to serve only as an introductory framework for the organization and evaluation of present and future theoretical statements and research findings relating to the social basis of the onset and continuity of delinquent patterns and the consequences of such patterns for the social system.

—Howard B. Kaplan  
Houston, Texas



## THE STUDY OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

**The proper study** of the social antecedents and consequences of juvenile delinquency requires first, that we have a common understanding of the term “juvenile delinquency”; second, that we understand and evaluate the sources of the observations or data upon which we draw in order to make generalizations about the social antecedents and consequences of juvenile delinquency; and third, that we make explicit the processes by which we draw generalizations about the social antecedents and consequences of juvenile delinquency.

### JUVENILE DELINQUENCY DEFINED

The study of juvenile delinquency will be made easier if three elements of the definition are clarified. Juvenile delinquency refers to any of a number of (1) behaviors (2) performed by young people (3) that are violations of laws applicable to young people's behavior.

#### **Behavior**

The definition specifies that juvenile delinquency refers to a subclass of behaviors (those performed by juveniles that are in violation of the legal norms of society). Among the behaviors that fall within the subcategory are personal assault,

vandalism, and theft. This specification is an important one from the point of view of explaining the onset, continuity, and consequences of juvenile delinquency for three reasons.

First, since we are dealing with a subclass of behaviors, we are directed to explain these behaviors in the same general way that we explain other behaviors. If we wanted to explain why people behave in a certain way, then we might talk about motivation to conform to or deviate from group standards, about learning ways to adapt to situational demands, or about the opportunities for and limitations upon such behavior that are provided by the social and physical environment.

Second, since we are directed to explain behaviors, in effect we are instructed to differentiate between the behaviors and phenomena that are often confused with the behavior. These phenomena are to be explained in ways that differ from those that are appropriate for explaining the behavior. Behavior is frequently confused with the *evaluation* of the behavior in social science research. However, the explanation for the evaluation of specified behaviors may be in different terms than those appropriate for explaining the occurrence of the behavior itself. If we wanted to explain why people or groups have certain attitudes toward the behavior, we might need to consider such factors as the heterogeneity of values in a society, the conflict between groups that endorse different values, the differential power possessed by the various groups that permit the enforcement of one rather than another set of standards, and social change processes that lead to the displacement of one set of standards by another.

Third, by permitting the clear differentiation between related constructs, the specification that juvenile delinquency is behavior enhances our ability to explain the behavior in terms of the related construct and to explain the related construct (evaluation of the behavior) in terms of the behavior itself. Part of the explanation of why people behave or do not behave in certain

ways concerns the expressions of social attitudes toward those behaviors. The explanations of why people express certain social attitudes, then, indirectly explain (in part) the behaviors. Conversely, part of the explanation of social attitudes toward behaviors is the *prevalence of behaviors* (the more people do something, the more acceptable the behavior becomes). Hence, the explanation of the patterns of behavior contributes indirectly to the explanation of the nature of social attitudes toward the behavior.

When considering the explanation of the social origins and consequences of juvenile delinquency in particular, a parallel distinction must be drawn between the behavior that is labelled as juvenile delinquency and the process of labeling juvenile delinquency. Again, the direct influences upon one may be quite different than the direct influences upon the other. The direct explanations of the *behavior* might be in terms of the person's needs to conform to the expectations of his membership groups or to behave in ways that reject the validity of those expectations or in such terms as fear of punishment and the opportunities to perform the behaviors. On the other hand, the direct explanations of the expression of the *social evaluation* of the behaviors as juvenile delinquency might be in terms of the differential political power of groups that endorse divergent value systems or in terms of the process of social change whereby the locus of political power and evaluative standards change. Once again, however, the direct influences upon the *performances* of the behaviors that conventional society defines as delinquent are different from the direct influences upon the process whereby particular behaviors are *evaluated* as delinquent. Since the performance of delinquent behaviors and the social evaluation of the behaviors influence each other, the determinants of the one will influence indirectly the determinants of the other. The processes influencing the social definition of certain behaviors as delinquent will be considered in Chapter 2. The mutual



influences of the social definition of behavior as delinquent and the delinquent behavior itself will be considered at various points throughout the remainder of the book.

### **Age-Related Deviance**

The definition of juvenile delinquency specifies that only violations of legal rules that are applicable to youths may be classified as part of that subcategory of behaviors. Legal rules do not necessarily apply uniformly to all segments of the population although certain behaviors may apply to all members of the society. Members of a society whether young or adult violate the law when they steal from or assault other members of a society. However, other behaviors may be forbidden solely to people who have not yet reached adult status. Juveniles violate the normative expectations of society when they purchase and consume alcoholic beverages, leave their parental home without permission, do not attend school, engage in certain patterns of sexual behavior, or consistently disobey their parents or legal guardians. Adults who engage in like activities are not regarded necessarily as in violation of formal social rules.

In short this book addresses questions relating to the social antecedents and consequences of illicit acts that are performed by youths. It ignores the question of whether or not similar acts would be illegal if performed by adults as well as questions relating to the social antecedents and consequences of illicit adult activity (which may or may not be similar to those of illicit youth activity).

### **Legal Definition**

Quite arbitrarily, juvenile delinquency is defined for the purposes of this book as illegal behavior by youths. This definition is adopted in the face of recognition that the formal rules that are reflected in the operation of the legal system