

Causes and Consequences of Delinquency

Findings from the Rochester Youth Development Study

Terence P. Thornberry, Alan J. Lizotte, Marvin D. Krohn,
Carolyn A. Smith, and Pamela K. Porter

Introduction

The Rochester Youth Development Study began in 1986 as one of three projects in the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency. The purpose of the Rochester study is to investigate the causes and consequences of adolescent delinquency, with a particular focus on serious, chronic offenders.

While the initial aim was to study adolescent delinquency and drug use, over the years the project has expanded into a broader investigation of both prosocial and antisocial development across the life course. We have reported our findings in scores of publications, reports, dissertations, and presentations. We have investigated a number of interrelated analytic topics, and in this paper we try to "take stock" of at least some of what we have learned. We first summarize the theoretical and methodological approaches of the Rochester Youth Development Study and then discuss some of our key empirical findings.

Taking Stock of Delinquency: An Overview of Findings from Contemporary Longitudinal Studies, edited by Thornberry and Krohn. Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York, 2003.

Theoretical Framework

The overall design of the Rochester study is guided by two theoretical models—interactional theory and social network theory. Interactional theory, first presented by Thornberry in 1987 and extended by Thornberry and Krohn in 2001, provides the core conceptual framework for hypotheses concerning the causes and consequences of delinquency. Social network theory was developed by Krohn in 1986 and its complementary perspective has been used to expand the theoretical purview of interactional theory. While these conceptual models help to guide the research design and measurement space of the Rochester project, the results of the study also help us to revise, expand, and better integrate our conceptual models of delinquency (see especially, Thornberry & Krohn, 2001). In this section we provide brief overviews of these theoretical models.

Interactional Theory

There are three fundamental premises to an interactional theory of delinquency. First, the theory adopts a developmental or life-course perspective; second, it emphasizes bidirectional causality; and third, it incorporates social structural influences into the explanation of individual delinquent careers.

Based on this framework, interactional theory posits that the basic cause of delinquency is a weakening of social controls caused by an attenuation of the person's bond to conventional society. For adolescents in particular, the bond is formed by strong relationships to parents and family, by commitment to and success in school, and by aspirations for and belief in conventional success goals. Adolescents who are strongly attached to, monitored by, and involved with their families are unlikely candidates for prolonged involvement in delinquency. The affective and control elements of these family processes should place bounds on the behavioral freedom of the adolescent. Similar arguments can be made with regard to both school and belief variables (see Thornberry, 1987).

In contrast, adolescents who have brittle relationships with their parents, who are alienated from school, and who lack conventional success goals have fewer social constraints to channel their behavior toward prosocial arenas. They have greater behavioral freedom and are more likely to become involved in delinquency.

For these youth to become seriously and persistently involved in delinquency, however, they need a social environment in which their new-found freedom is channeled in that particular direction. That environment is epitomized by the delinquent peer group which provides delinquent models and reinforcements for both delinquent behavior and delinquent beliefs. As youth freed from the constraints of the conventional world gravitate together, they find a social environment that supports and encourages prolonged involvement in delinquency.

At a very general level, therefore, interactional theory offers a two-stage explanation of delinquency. The causally prior stage is a weakening of social bonds which then leads to involvement in delinquent networks.

While the theoretical model begins here, it is more complex than this, as suggested by the earlier discussion of interactional theory's basic premises. First, interactional theory does not view these causal influences as static or unidirectional. Indeed, a core argument is that delinquent behavior feeds back upon and produces changes in both bonding and associations. The more the individual engages in delinquency, the more that involvement is likely to increase alienation from parents, reduce commitment to school, and render conventional success goals moot. To illustrate, interactional theory does not assume, as many static theoretical models do, that extensive drug use has no causal impact on school performance. Quite the contrary, interactional theory explicitly argues that prolonged drug use has profound effects on school performance and other sources of social control. Interactional theory also says that involvement in deviance will increase both associations with deviant peers and the formation of deviant belief systems.

Second, interactional theory argues that these causal influences vary developmentally. For example, during childhood, family influences are predicted to be more powerful than school or peer influences in shaping behavior. As the individual moves through adolescence, the burgeoning search for and attainment of autonomy increases the impact of school and peer influences, while the impact of the family fades.

These developmental stages are not discrete realms but are themselves causally interrelated. The more successful the individual is in meeting the developmental challenges of earlier stages, the more likely they are to succeed as they reach later stages. For example, children who form strong family attachments during childhood are better positioned to successfully negotiate autonomy during adolescence without resorting to extensive involvement in delinquency. Similarly, the more successful the person is at forming prosocial competencies and avoiding strong antisocial influences during adolescence, the easier the transition to adulthood should be and the easier it should be for the person to escape any involvement in delinquency.

Finally, interactional theory posits that all of these processes vary by structural position. Youth growing up in socially disadvantaged families and neighborhoods, especially if they are people of color, are apt to have more difficult life-course trajectories in which the previous processes leading to delinquent careers are exacerbated. Their environment diminishes the chances that strong prosocial bonds and opportunities will be available and heightens the chances that deviant opportunities—such as delinquent peers, street gangs, and drug markets—will be available as they reach adolescence. Given that, the bidirectional causal effects and their developmental consequences described earlier have fertile ground in which to unfold, and these youngsters are more likely to have serious and persistent delinquent careers.

Recently, Thornberry and Krohn (2001) presented a life-course extension of interactional theory stemming from the work of Glen Elder (1985, 1997). One of the great challenges to criminological theory is to account for both the continuity and change that is observed in criminal careers. While some offenders begin early and persist in offending over long portions of the life course, other careers are marked by change, either from offending to desistance or from prosocial behavior patterns to an onset of antisocial behavior patterns at a later age.

Unlike early starter/late starter typological models of delinquency (e.g., Moffitt, 1993, 1997; Patterson, Capaldi, & Bank, 1991), interactional theory starts from the assumption that the onset of delinquent careers is *continuously* distributed and that the correlation between onset and the duration of careers is moderate (see Krohn, Thornberry, Rivera, & LeBlanc, 2001). The model attempts to account for both of these observations rather than assuming that there are different etiological theories for two different types of offenders.

At one extreme are offenders who have an onset of aggressive, antisocial behavior sometime during early childhood *and* who persist in offending over long portions of the life course. This precocious and persistent offending is caused by the confluence of severe structural disadvantage, ineffective parenting, and individual deficits. These children have multiple risk factors to generate, and very few protective factors to ward off, an early onset of antisocial behavior. They also have few resources to ward off the reciprocal consequences of their early antisocial behavior, e.g., school failure, peer rejection, and embeddedness in deviant social networks. As a result, they are more likely to become entrapped in delinquent careers, in part because of continuity in the underlying causes and in part because of the adverse consequences of their own behavior. Escape becomes increasingly difficult as more and more avenues to prosocial careers become closed and long-term careers in criminal behavior become more likely.

Relatively few children are exposed to the potent mix of extreme structural disadvantage, ineffective parenting, and individual deficits, however. As these causal influences weaken in strength and as they become uncoupled, the impetus for a very early onset of delinquency diminishes and the onset of offending starts later and later. The severity of offending also diminishes as the potency of the causal factors diminishes. Given the uncoupling of these causal factors, these youth are also more likely to have protective factors to buffer them from whatever adverse consequences their antisocial behavior generates. As a result, escape from or desistance from their antisocial careers becomes more likely in light of the greater human and social capital available to these youth, as compared to the truly early onset offenders.

Thornberry and Krohn (2001) also discuss youth who begin offending even later, during adolescence. Their relatively mild and short-lived involvement in delinquency is in large part generated by the search for autonomy that typifies adolescence. Their movement away from parental control and their engrossment

in adolescent social networks is a fertile field for minor forms of deviance—drinking, precocious sexual behavior, disorderly conduct, and the like. Unlike serious aggressive and covert forms of antisocial behavior, however, these manifestations are relatively nonconsequential in terms of formal reactions (e.g., labeling) or informal reactions (e.g., peer rejection). For these reasons, as well as the abundant human and social capital that delayed their onset of delinquency in the first place, they are unlikely to persist in their delinquent involvement.

Social Network Theory

To complement interactional theory's focus on the importance of the relationships between adolescents and both their peers and parents, the Rochester Youth Development Study has employed social network theory (Krohn, 1986) to better understand the structure and dynamics of those relationships. A social network is defined as a "specified set of links among social actors" (Fischer et al., 1977, p. 33). Thus, the focus of network analysis is on the structure and content of those links, rather than on the individual characteristics of the actors. How a network is structured and where a particular individual lies within that set of relationships are considered important in determining the behaviors of the individual actors involved in the network.

The social network perspective assumes that all social networks constrain the behavior of their participants to some extent. However, the degree of constraint depends on the structure of the social network. The type of behavior in which network members participate affects the type of behavior to which any member is constrained.

The structural characteristics of the social networks include homophily, density, intimacy, multiplexity, and stability. Homophily refers to the similarity of friends in terms of a number of attributes, including both personal characteristics, such as race, and attitudes and behaviors, such as drug use. Density is the degree to which each member of a social network knows or likes all other members of the network. Social networks can also be characterized by how intimate or supportive the relationships are among members. Multiplexity refers to the number of different role relations any two people have with one another or the number of contexts in a relationship. Stability of friendship networks is the degree to which individuals report having the same friends over time. All of these structural characteristics can be used to describe peer social networks while only homophily, intimacy, and multiplexity can be used to describe the family network.

Delinquent behavior is expected when the individual is enmeshed in some, and especially many, networks that allow or encourage such behavior. This is particularly the case if the networks are interlocking (multiplex), dense, intimate, stable, and have members who exhibit similar behaviors and attitudes.

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