Life-Course Perspectives of Criminality

This section will discuss the development of the life-course perspective in the late 1970s and its influence on modern research on criminal trajectories. We will explain the various concepts in the life-course perspective, such as onset, desistance, and frequency as well as the arguments against this perspective. Finally, we will review the current state of research regarding this perspective.

This section will present one of the most current and progressive approaches to explaining why individuals engage in criminal activity—namely, developmental theories of criminal behavior. Developmental theories are explanatory models of criminal behavior that follow individuals throughout their life courses of offending, thus explaining the development of offending over time. Such developmental theories represent a break with traditional theoretical frameworks, which typically focused on the effects of constructs and variables on behavior at a given point in time. Virtually no theories attempted to explain the various stages (e.g., onset, desistance) of individuals' criminal careers, and certainly no models differentiated the varying factors that are important at each stage. Developmental theories have been prominent in modern times, and we believe that readers will agree that developmental theories have added a great deal to our understanding of and thinking about why people commit criminal behavior.

Developmental Theories

Developmental theories, which are also to some extent integrated, are distinguished by their emphasis on the evolution of individuals' criminality over time. Developmental theories tend to look at the individual as the unit of analysis, and such models focus on the onset, frequency, seriousness or intensity, duration, persistence or consistency, desistance, and other aspects of the individual's criminal career. The onset of offending is when the offender first begins offending, and desistance is when an individual stops committing crime. Frequency refers to how often the individual offends, whereas intensity is the degree of seriousness of the offenses he or she commits. Persistence is the concept of how consistent the individual's offending rate is over time. Finally, duration is the length of an individual's criminal career.

Experts have long debated and examined various aspects of the development of criminal behavior. For example, virtually all studies show an escalation from minor status offending (e.g., truancy, underage drinking, tobacco use) to petty crimes (e.g., shoplifting, smoking marijuana) to far more serious criminal activity, such as robbery and aggravated assault, and then murder and rape. This development of criminality is shown across every minor offending and progress toward more serious, violent offenses.

Although this trend is undisputed, other issues are not yet resolved. For example, studies have not yet determined when police contact or an arrest becomes early onset. Most empirical studies draw the line at age 14, so that any arrest or contact prior to this time is considered early onset. However, other experts would disagree and say that this line should be drawn earlier (say, 12 years old) or even later (such as 16 years old). Still, however, it is defined as the most important predictors of any of the measures we have in determining who is most at risk for developing serious, violent offending behavior.

Perhaps the most discussed and researched aspect of developmental theory is offender frequency, which has been referred to as lambda. Estimates of lambda (or λ), or average frequency of offending by criminals over a year's time, vary greatly. Some estimates of lambda are in the high single digits, and some are in the triple digits. Given frequency depends on many, many variables, such as what type of offenses the individual commits. Perhaps if we were studying only drug users or rapists, it would make sense to determine lambda, but given the general nature of most examinations of crime, such estimates are not useful. Even within the same crime type, the frequency of offending varies so widely across individuals that we question its use in understanding criminal careers.

Before we discuss the dominant models of developmental theory, it is important to discuss the opposing viewpoint, which is that of complete stability in offending. Such counterpoint views assume that the developmental approach is a waste of time because the same individuals who show antisocial behavior at early ages (before age 10) are those who will exhibit the most criminality in their teenage years, 20s, 30s, 40s, and so on. This framework is most notably represented by the theoretical perspective proposed by Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi in their model of low self-control.

Case Study: Henry Earl

Henry Earl is, according to all available sources, the most arrested individual on record, at least in recent times. Hailing from the area of Lexington, Kentucky (Fayette County), Earl was born in 1949 and has since done quite an impressive job of getting himself arrested, especially after he turned 21. Specifically, Earl is on record for being arrested well over 1,500 times since 1970. Although the actual number is disputed, and likely growing every month, recent official reports from the local jurisdictions show that Earl has been arrested for more than 1,352 offenses and has spent more than 15 years in jail. Despite being jailed for much of his life, Earl appears to make up for lost time when he is not incarcerated, as the data show.

Although many of his arrests were for public intoxication, he also had a number of more serious charges, including third-degree trespassing and various charges of disorderly conduct. Readers are probably wondering how this man could still be on the streets, but the most likely explanation is that virtually all his arrests were for nonviolent, nonheinous, and nondrug (except alcohol) violations, which tend not to get much jail time. However, one would think that after the first hundred arrests, not to mention the first thousand, the judges would try to put this public nuisance away for a long time. Apparently, that is not the case. Earl's last publicly documented arrest was in November 2013, so he is seemingly still active and perhaps trying to achieve a record of arrests that may be hard for anyone to beat. According to developmental theory, he clearly is the "poster child" for the definition of persistent or consistency in offending.

This goes to show a couple of things that relate to this section. First, if someone is highly motivated to commit crime, he or she can easily find ways to do so. After all, anyone can simply leave the house and commit numerous felonies against neighbors, people driving by on the street, and so forth—not to mention what that person is capable of outside of his or her neighborhood. Second, there is virtually no way to deter or stop a person from committing a crime he or she is highly motivated to commit, especially if that person has nothing to lose. Obviously, Earl has nothing at stake in terms of conventional society.

This case is notable in the context of developmental/life-course criminology. Although a highly extreme case study, it reveals that normal development, such as key transitions in life, as noted by Robert Sampson and John Laub's life, is not necessarily followed. Some individuals have an extremely high predisposition to offend, an even higher predisposition than Gottfredson and Hirschi's theory of low self-control may have imagined. Regardless, this incredibly strong predisposition toward such antisocial behavior is likely due to major failures in all areas of development throughout Earl's life course, beginning with his genetics, early development, and adolescence.

Think About It

1. Can you apply the life-course persistent label from Terrie Moffit's theory to Henry Earl?
2. Can you think of any intervention or policy that would help Mr. Earl reduce his consistent arrests?

SOURCES: "Henry Earl: The Record Straight," SmokingGun.com, September 25, 2008, http://www.thesmokinggun.com/doclib/08/crime/henry-earl-setting-record-straight Millions of Americans have been arrested, many for violations of laws that are now regarded as being at odds with popular opinion. In this section, we examine the lives of a few individuals who have been arrested more than once and who have become the subjects of public interest.

...If someone is highly motivated to commit crime, he or she can easily find ways to do so.

Image 11.1 Henry Earl, arrested more than 1,300 times, is widely considered the most arrested individual in U.S. history. SOURCE: Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government Community Corrections United States Department of Justice.
Antidevelopmental Theory: Low Self-Control Theory

In 1990, Hirschi, along with his colleague Gottfredson, proposed a general theory of low self-control as the primary cause of all crime and deviance (see prior discussion in Section VIII); this is often referred to as the general theory of crime. This theory has led to a significant amount of debate and research in the field since its appearance, more than any other contemporary theory of crime.

Like other control theories of crime, this theory (see Figure 11.1) assumes that individuals are born predisposed toward selfish, self-centered activities and that only effective child rearing and socialization can create self-control. Without such adequate socialization (i.e., social controls) and reduction of criminal opportunities, individuals will follow their natural tendencies to become selfish predators. The general theory of crime assumes that self-control must be established by age 10. If it has not formed by that time, then according to the theory, individuals will forever exhibit low self-control. The assumption that self-control must be formed by age 10 is the feature of this theory that opposes the developmental perspective. The authors assert that once low self-control is set by age 10, there is no way to develop it afterward. In contrast, developmental theory assumes that people can indeed change over time.

Like others, Gottfredson and Hirschi attribute the formation of controls to socialization processes in the first years of life, the distinguishing characteristic of this theory is its emphasis on the individual's ability to control himself or herself. That is, the general theory of crime assumes that people can take a degree of control over their own decisions and, within certain limitations, control themselves. The general theory of crime is accepted as one of the most valid theories of crime. This is probably due to the parsimony, or simplicity, of the theory, as it identifies only one primary cause of criminality—low self-control. However, low self-control may actually consist of a series of personality traits, including risk-taking, impulsiveness, self-centeredness, short-term orientation, and quick temper. Recent research has supported the idea that inadequate child-rearing practices tend to result in lower levels of self-control among children and that these low levels produce various risky behaviors, including criminal activity.

It is important to note that this theory has a developmental component in the sense that it proposes that self-control develops during early years from parenting practices; thus, even this most notable antidevelopmental theory actually includes a strong developmental aspect.

In contrast to Gottfredson and Hirschi's model, one of the most dominant and researched frameworks of the past 20 years, another sound theoretical model shows that individuals can change their life trajectories in terms of crime. Research shows that events or realizations can occur that lead people to alter their frequency or incidence of offending, sometimes to zero. To account for such extreme transitions, we must turn to the dominant life-course model of offending, which is Sampson and Laub's developmental model.


Sampson and Laub's Developmental Model

Perhaps the best-known and best-researched developmental theoretical model to date is that of Sampson and Laub. Sampson and Laub have proposed a developmental framework that is largely based on a reanalysis of original data collected by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck in the 1940s. As a prototypical developmental model, this theoretical perspective focuses primarily on individual stability and change.

Most significantly, Sampson and Laub emphasized the importance of certain events and life changes, which can alter an individual's decisions to commit (or not commit) criminal activity. Although based on a social control framework, this model contains elements of other theoretical perspectives. First, Sampson and Laub's model assumes, like other developmental perspectives, that early antisocial tendencies among individuals, regardless of social variables, are often linked to later adult criminal offending. Furthermore, some social structure factors (e.g., family structure, poverty) also tend to lead to problems in social and educational development, which then lead to crime. Another key factor in this development of criminality is the influence of delinquent peers or siblings, which further increases an individual's likelihood for delinquency.

However, Sampson and Laub also strongly emphasized the importance of transitions, or events that are important in altering life trajectories, such as marriage, employment, or military service, drastically changing a person's criminal career. Sampson and Laub showed sound evidence that many individuals who were once on a path toward a consistent form of behavior—in this case, serious, violent crime—suddenly (or gradually) halted due to such a transition or series of transitions. In some ways, this model is a more specified form of David Matz's theory of drift, which we discussed in Section VIII, in which individuals tend to grow out of crime and deviance due to the social controls imposed by marriage, employment, and so on. Still, Sampson and Laub's framework contributed much to the knowledge of criminal offending by providing a more specified and grounded framework that identified the ability of individuals to change their criminal trajectories via life-altering transitions. In fact, recent research has consistently shown that marriage and full-time employment significantly reduce the recidivism of California parolees, and other recent studies have shown similar results from employment in later years.9

The Teen Burglar

A news story from the spring of 2012 reported that a 14-year-old boy had been arrested in Tennessee in connection with nearly 100 burglaries in the north Nashville area of Tennessee.10 Officers said the teen was linked to these burglaries over the previous 2 years (making him 12 when he started offending). According to police, he had a specific and consistent modus operandi, or method of operation (MO). Specifically, he would kick in back doors, enter, and steal whatever he could grab quickly, such as flat-screen TVs or video games. Officers noted his creativity and innovation, which included using a go-kart as his getaway vehicle, driving from house to house through back alleys. The police also mentioned that he had lost both parents and likely didn't have much guidance or anyone looking out for him. They had evidence tying him to the burglaries, such as fingerprints and items found inside his home, which likely is the reason he admitted to many of the break-ins. It is unfortunate that this boy had such a poor family life and so little parental supervision, but one must wonder what inspired him to commit more than 100 residential burglaries, starting when he was 12 years old! We will revisit this case in our conclusion, with additional insight into why he may have committed these crimes.

Think About It

1. Have you ever met or known about a child this young in your neighborhood doing so many crimes before the age of 14? If so, what do you think were the causes?
2. How much do you think having poor parental supervision contributed to his crimes? Do you think he would have been prevented, or do you think he was driven to commit these crimes regardless of family supervision?
3. What do you think of his MO in how he committed his burglaries? Do you see some intellectual skill in how he did it, given that he wasn't caught for 2 years?

Moffitt's Developmental Taxonomy

Another primary developmental model that has had a profound effect on the current state of criminological thought and theorizing is Moffitt's developmental theory (taxonomy), proposed in 1993.11 Moffitt's framework distinguishes two types of offenders: adolescence-limited offenders and life-course-persistent offenders. Adolescence-limited offenders make up most of the general public and include all persons who committed offenses when they were teenagers or young adults. Their offending is largely caused by association with peers and a desire to engage in activities exhibited by the adults that they are trying to be. Such activities are a type of rite of passage and quite normal among all people who have normal social interactions with their peers in their teenage or early adulthood years.

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Policy Implications

There are many policy implications that can be derived from the theories of criminal behavior discussed in this text. One of the most important implications is that the lack of effective programs and policies to address the root causes of criminal behavior can lead to a cycle of crime and delinquency. This cycle can be broken by implementing effective programs that address the underlying causes of criminal behavior, such as poverty, lack of education, and lack of job opportunities. Additionally, programs that focus on social and emotional well-being, such as those that provide support to victims of crime and those that offer counseling and therapy, can also be effective in reducing the incidence of criminal behavior. Overall, the prevention of criminal behavior is a complex issue that requires a multi-faceted approach that includes education, job training, and social support services.

Conclusion

This section presented a brief discussion of the importance of development and life course theories of criminal behavior. The perspective taken in this text is that early childhood experiences are critical in shaping an individual's behavior and that intervention programs should focus on providing support and resources to children at a young age. Additionally, the section discussed the role of policy and the need for policy makers to take an active role in addressing the root causes of criminal behavior. Overall, the prevention of criminal behavior is a complex issue that requires a multi-faceted approach that includes education, job training, and social support services.
and life-course theories are likely to be the most important frameworks in the future of the field of criminological theory.

We discussed the various concepts of developmental theory, including those of offending onset, frequency, seriousness, duration, and desistance. We also examined the importance of early onset and how it is considered one of the most important predictors of any of the measures we have in determining who is most at risk for developing serious, violent offending behavior. Yet, issues regarding whether researchers draw the line in what constitutes "early" onset versus normal or late onset. Additionally, we discussed the frequency of offending, often presented as an estimate called lambda (or $\lambda$), and the problematic issue of making such estimates—especially for different types of offenders.

Then, we examined the policy implications of this developmental approach, emphasizing the need to provide universal care for pregnant mothers as well as their newborn children. Other policy implications include legally mandated interventions for mothers who are addicted to toxic substances (e.g., alcohol, drugs) and assignment of caseworkers to high-risk infants and children, such as those with a history of complications at birth. Such interventions would go a long way toward saving society the many problems (e.g., financial difficulties, victimization) that will persist without such interventions. Ultimately, a focus on the earliest stages of intervention will provide "the biggest bang for the buck."

SECTION SUMMARY

- Developmental or life-course theory focuses on the individual, following people throughout life to examine their offending careers. In-depth consideration of changes during the life course are of highest concern, especially regarding general conclusions that can be made about the factors that tend to increase or decrease the risk that individuals will continue offending.

- Life-course perspectives emphasize onset of offending, frequency of offending, duration of offending, seriousness of offending, persistence or consistency in offending rate, desistance of offending, and other factors that play key roles in when individuals offend and why they do so—or don’t do so—at certain times of their lives.

- Early onset is one of the most important predictors of any of the measures we have in determining who is most at risk for developing serious, violent offending behavior.

- The criteria of determining what early onset is varies much based on the researchers making the decision, the type of offense(s) being studied, and the type of data being used in the study (e.g., self-reports vs. official police data).

- Lambda (or $\lambda$) is used to represent the average rate of offending by offenders in a given period of time, typically a year.

- Problems exist with using estimates of lambda, given how drastically different the estimates are across studies of various types of offenses as well as across different types of measures (e.g., official arrest data as compared to self-report data [SRO]).

- There are many critics of the developmental or life-course perspective, particularly those who buy into the low self-control model, which is antidevelopmental in the sense that it assumes that propensities for crime do not change over time but rather remain unchanged across life.

KEY TERMS

- adolescence-limited offenders 489
- life-course-persistent offenders 489
- Sampson and Laub's developmental theories 483
- trajectory 490
- Moffitt's developmental theory 489
- (taxonomy) 489
- transitions 486
- early onset 484
- lambda (offender frequency) 484

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What characteristic distinguishes developmental theories from traditional theoretical frameworks?
2. What aspects of a criminal career do experts consider important in such a model? Describe all of the aspects they look at in a person's criminal career.
3. Discuss the primary criticisms of the developmental perspective, particularly as it was presented by Gottfredson and Hirschi. Which theoretical paradigm do you consider most valid? Why?
4. What transitions or trajectories have you seen in your life or your friends' lives that support Sampson and Laub's developmental model? What events encouraged offending or inhibited it?
5. Given Moffitt's dichotomy of life-course-persistent offenders and adolescence-limited offenders, which of these should be given more attention by researchers? Why do you feel this way?
6. Do you think the use of lambda as an estimate of offending rates is useful for comparison across studies, given the large range and differences in the estimates that have been reported for different types of offenses and different types of measures?

WEB RESOURCES

Developmental Theories of Crime

https://quizlet.com/15249226/flashcards