

CHAPTER 7

CRIME IN THE LIFE COURSE

7.1 The Life Course Perspective Defined

The life course perspective is a somewhat new way of thinking about how an individual's life is determined through the occurrence of certain life events (Benson, 2001). The life course perspective can best be conceptualized as viewing life events in the context of life stages, turning points, and pathways, all of which are embedded in social institutions (Elder, 1985).

Integral to the life course perspective are two main concepts: trajectories and transitions. A trajectory is a pathway over the life course, which involves long-term patterns of events, such as employment or family history. A transition, in contrast, involves the short-term events, or turning points, that make up specific life changes, such as marriage, divorce, or parenthood (Elder, 1985; Thornberry, 1997). Transitions play a significant role in the direction of future trajectories (Elder, 1985; Sampson & Laub, 1990); a person's adaptation to a particular transition can lead to modifications and redirections in subsequent trajectories (Elder, 1985). Therefore, experiences in childhood affect events in adolescence and adulthood, just as events in adolescence or adulthood can modify future trajectories (Sampson & Laub, 1990). Given this, transitions or events at various times in the life course can have a lasting impact on numerous outcomes during the life course through the modification of one's larger pathways or trajectories (Thornberry, 1997).

This chapter will take a look at the life course perspective and how its emergence has affected criminological theory and the role of education as a preventative factor in juvenile delinquency. Section 7.2 discusses the criminological foundations of the life course perspective in addition to the variations of the life course perspective that can be found in criminological theory. Section 7.3 outlines the impact that social bonding has on an individual's life course according to Sampson and Laub. Section 7.4 discusses other theoretical constructs utilized in the theory. Section 7.5 summarizes the empirical support that can be found for the theory in the literature. Section 7.6 looks specifically at how local life circumstances impact an individual's life course, specifically desistance from crime. Section 7.7 focuses on the local life circumstance of education, and Section 7.8 outlines how education can be a turning point for adolescents, which could potentially reduce juvenile delinquency, as discussed in Section 7.9. Section 7.10 provides a summary discussion.

7.2 Life Course Criminology

The application of the life course perspective to criminology has been used to explain desistance of criminality (Sampson & Laub, 1990, 1993; Simons, Johnson, Conger, & Elder, 1998). Desistance is an area that historically has largely been ignored in criminology (Shover & Thompson, 1992; Born & Humblet, 1997). Both social causation and trait-based theories within the field have provided explanations for the causes or onset of criminal behavior but have failed to adequately address why individuals stop committing crime (Laub & Sampson, 2001).

Although life course criminologists all work from the same basic principles, their theoretical constructs vary. Researchers have built on various propositions of past non-developmental theories to advance their own life course arguments. Life course theory expands the notions of social control theory (Sampson & Laub, 1990, 1993), social learning theory (Elliott & Menard, 1996; Conger & Simons, 1997), strain theory (Agnew, 1997), symbolic interactionism (Matsueda & Heimer, 1997), and labeling theory (Laub & Sampson, 2001). In addition, recent interpretations of crime in the life course have allowed for reciprocal social interactions (Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1991; Jang, 1999) and multiple typologies of offenders (Moffitt, 1993; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). There clearly is not one theory that can be considered *the* life course theory of crime, nor is there any consensus on how the life course relates to crime. It is understood, however, that the exploration of change is important for the study of criminal behavior over the life course.

7.3 Social Bonding Over the Life Course

Perhaps the most notable contemporary researchers to apply the life course perspective to criminal behavior are Sampson and Laub, with their examination of crime, deviance, and social control in the life course (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Their age-graded theory is based on social control theory (e.g., Hirschi, 1969), which argues that crime and delinquency occur as a result of weakened bonds to society. Individuals are assumed to be deviant unless social bonds exist to restrain these impulses. Therefore, those who have not developed important bonds to specific social institutions are more likely to participate in criminal behavior. Prior evidence of social bonds suggests that delinquency and social bonds are inversely related. Social bonds to particular institutions, including school, family, work, religious organizations and peers serve to restrict criminal behavior (Cullen & Agnew, 1999). These institutions create informal social control which, when strong, can produce conforming behavior and prevent crime, and when weak, can produce deviant behavior. Although social control theory has been an enduring theory in criminology, it does not explain informal social control at ages other than adolescence, nor does it account for the possibility of variation in controls over the life course (Simons et al., 1998). Sampson and Laub's age-graded theory of social control accounts for these shortcomings.

7.4 Theoretical Constructs

Sampson and Laub (1990, 1993) extend social control theory by suggesting that the ability of certain institutions to control criminal or conforming behavior is dependent on age-graded variability. This research provides an explanation of how the processes of informal social control and structural variables interact with individual propensities to affect behavior (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Sampson and Laub (1990; 1993) find strong evidence for the possibility of behavior changes at different points in the life course. Therefore, although delinquent behavior exists with much continuity, they assert that social bonds in adulthood (including school, family, peers, and community relations) can explain changes, such as desistance, in criminal behavior. Using Hirschi's proposition that crime and deviance are more likely to occur when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken, Sampson and Laub argue that institutions of formal or informal social control and their potential to enhance or deter criminal behavior can vary across the life span (Sampson & Laub, 1990; 1993). Sampson and Laub focus their work on social ties to institutions and other individuals in adulthood. They identify specific events or transitions that affect behavior trajectories due to changes in informal social control. These authors identify specific institutions of social control as age-linked; specifically, varying ties to particular institutions at different stages in the life course have the capacity to modify criminal trajectories.

Central to this thesis are two interrelated components that are crucial to understanding change in adulthood. The first is social capital (Coleman, 1988). Laub and Sampson (1993) argue that it is the social capital, or the resources gained from quality social relationships, rather than the mere occurrence of the bond, that determines the impact and strength of informal social controls. The greater the social capital the stronger the informal social control, which in turn increases an individual's potential to follow a non-criminal trajectory. Particular institutions of social control, such as school, employment, and family change throughout the life course in their ability to affect an individual's behavior due to the amount of social capital they provide.

The second key component is the turning point (Elder, 1985; Clausen, 1990). A turning point, or transition, can be precipitated by various events and can redirect paths, subsequently modifying future outcomes. Responses to life events will vary from individual to individual, leading to different trajectories (Elder, 1985). Researchers suggest that in order to understand crime in the life course, it is essential to learn more about turning points (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Local life circumstances, including marriage, meaningful work, and serving in the military, have been deemed positive turning points. Conversely, prolonged incarceration, heavy drinking, and subsequent job instability have been identified as negative turning points (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Researchers recognized that family, school, and peer groups are most influential in adolescence. Future research should focus on identifying what specific turning points in the adolescent years relate to these institutions (Benson, 2001). In turn, relating these identified turning points to their social capital potential will allow for a better understanding of how they can produce change in life trajectories in adolescence (Sampson & Laub 1993; 2001).

7.5 Empirical Support

Sampson and Laub's age-graded theory of social control has recently received attention in the areas of evaluation and empirical testing. Simons et al. (1998) found that weakened bonds to school or prosocial peers were important links between antisocial behavior in childhood and delinquent behavior in adolescence. Laub and Sampson (1993) claim that both gradual and abrupt changes in behavior trajectories are influenced by changes in adult social bonds. Uggen (2000) found that ex-offenders over the age of 26, who were employed, were more likely to desist from criminal activity than those who remained unemployed after release, leading to the conclusion that employment was a turning point toward a non-criminal trajectory. Warr (1998) found further support for social bonds and trajectory changes via the social institution of marriage. Rather than marriage being the direct cause of criminal desistance like employment, however, he found its influence to be indirect, mediated through decreased time spent with deviant friends.

Thornberry (1987) builds on the age-graded theory of social control, but provides a more elaborate variation of the life course perspective. He determines that delinquency and social bonds share a reciprocal relationship, concluding, "delinquency is not solely an outcome of a social process, but instead is an integral part of that process" (Thornberry, 1987, p. 867). Thornberry found that social control varies for youths in different stages of their adolescent life course (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996). During early adolescence, family has the most influence on the youth's behavior. As the children move into middle adolescence, their peers and school appear become more influential factors. Consistent with these assertions, Jang (1999) found that the negative effects, both direct and indirect, of lack of commitment to school increased from early to middle adolescence, peaking at 15 and declining thereafter. Additionally, the effects of family on delinquency were significant throughout the adolescent life course.

Sampson and Laub's original study focused on changes in trajectories, or long-term changes in behavior over time, as have most empirical studies that have followed. Few researchers have noted, however, the importance of exploring short-term changes in the life course (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall, 1995; Piquero, Brame, Mazerolle, & Haapanen, 2002). Horney et al. (1995) examined month-to-month changes in a retrospective study of incarcerated adult offenders. Using Sampson and Laub's social control theory as a framework, these authors attempted to determine whether short-term changes strengthen or weaken the social bonds that influence behavior. Findings suggest that variations in local life circumstances that are related to particular institutions, specifically family, work, and education, strongly impact participation in, or desistance from, crime. What is most promising about these findings is that it is likely that the same processes that contribute to short-term changes also play a part in altering life course trajectories. Short-term changes may produce enough social capital to encourage the individual to remain strongly bonded to conventional institutions, thereby reducing subsequent deviance over a period of time (Horney et al., 1995).

7.6 Local Life Circumstance and Desistance from Crime

“The distinguishing feature of Sampson and Laub’s theoretical work is their claim that social processes can cause even seriously delinquent individuals to desist from crime” (Benson, 2001, p. 91). At least half of all children considered antisocial do not become delinquent during adolescence, nor do all juvenile delinquents continue to commit crimes in adulthood (Loeber & LeBlanc, 1990). Given this fact, it is important to determine the processes involved with an individual desisting from criminal behavior. The importance of understanding the processes that contribute to desistance lies with the potential to identify effective interventions for those already involved in crime (Laub & Sampson, 2001).

One of the primary difficulties with studying desistance is defining the concept. Various definitions can be found in the literature, ranging from gradual reductions in offending behavior (Laub & Sampson, 1993) to crimes committed being less serious over time (Loeber & LeBlanc, 1990). The most useful definition in the study of the life course is one that describes the causal process of desistance, which eventually leads to the ultimate outcome of termination from offending behavior (Laub & Sampson, 2001). Desistance can be initiated by a triggering event, which may or may not lead to a turning point (Laub & Sampson, 2001, p.27). Prior literature has indicated that particular institutions of social control can be “triggering events” and lead to desistance. Piquero et al. (2002) found that local life circumstances, such as family, marriage, and military service, and increased social bonds can change trajectories for certain populations. Farrington, (1986) found that juvenile delinquents participated in more crime when they were unemployed than when they were employed. Mischkowitz (1994) suggested that desistance between ages 20 and 30 occurred most frequently when there was a change in a conventional activity, such as work or family, in an individual’s life. Rand (as cited in Wolfgang, Thornberry, and Figlio, 1987) found that marriage, completing high school, and receiving vocational training in the military were associated with reduced criminality. Farrington and Hawkins (1991) found that parental involvement and commitment to school were related to desistance from crime. Additionally, Labouvie (1996) identified that social institutions, such as parenthood and marriage, were the strongest predictors of reduced substance abuse. This was most effective for those aged 28 to 31, suggesting that the timing of events is important (Piquero et al., 2002).

It is quite possible that dissimilar processes of change are operating during adolescence and adulthood. For example, Uggen (2000) found that employment programs worked for adults but had little effect on youths. One possible explanation for this finding is that adolescents are socially trained in such a manner that their main responsibility is to be attending school during this life course period, and therefore, a position in the work force might not constitute a turning point. If this is true, just as employment potentially lowers risk for adults, educational attainment could potentially lower risk for adolescents.

Finally, a largely neglected population in studies of the life course, as in many other theoretical areas of criminology, is the female offender. There are few studies that focus on the process of desistance across age, gender, and race (Bushway, Brame, & Paternoster, 1999). It is an undisputed fact that there are more male offenders than female (Budnick & Shields-Fletcher, 1998). Some theorists have used this fact as a justification to exclude

females from their studies (see McDermott & Nagin, 2001). The female offender population has been rising at a much higher rate than its' male counterpart (Budnick & Shields-Fletcher, 1998). Therefore, it is crucial to identify processes that produce the onset, persistence, and desistance of delinquency for girls specifically, as they could potentially differ from those for boys (Gove, 1985; Graham & Bowling, 1995). At present, it is unclear whether the processes for girls are more unique than the progression that has been linked to delinquency for boys (Simons et al., 1998), or whether the factors of desistance are the same among both males and females (Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998). Born, Chevalier, and Humblet (1997) suggest that girls are more resilient and amenable to change than boys. As such, particular interventions may be more or less successful depending on the gender of the offender.

7.7 Education and Crime

Many studies have suggested that juveniles who are academically deficient are more likely to be involved in delinquent activities (Anderson, 1992; Batiuk, Moke, & Wilcox-Roundtree, 1997; Farrington, 1992; Jarjoura, 1993; Ross & Ross, 1989; Short, 1990). Specifically, current criminological literature indicates that youths who are not committed to school (Cernovich & Giordano, 1992; Jenkins, 1995), demonstrate low academic achievement (Cohill, 1991; Farrington, 1992; Jarjoura, 1993; Junger-Tas, 1992; Katsiyannis & Archwamety, 1999; Maguin & Loeber, 1996; Monk-Turner, 1989; Short, 1990; Tracy, Wolfgang, & Figlio, 1990; Vazonyi & Flannery, 1997), have poor school attendance (Elliott & Voss, 1974; Katsiyannis & Archwamety, 1999; Thornberry, Moore, & Christenson, 1985), exhibit negative attitudes towards school (Kelly & Balch, 1971; Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, Van Kammen, & Farrington, 1991; Farrington & Hawkins, 1991; Mak, 1991; Sederstrom & Weis, 1981), demonstrate school disciplinary problems (Flannery, Vazonyi, Rowe, 1996; Flannery & Rowe, 1994), and are truant or drop out of school (Farnworth & Lieber, 1989) are consistently more likely to engage in delinquent behavior. Moreover, the correlation between academic difficulties and juvenile delinquency is consistent across gender in that both males and females with deficient academic skills offend more frequently, commit more violent and serious offenses, and persist longer in their delinquent behavior than juveniles who are academically on grade level (Maguin & Loeber, 1996). Further, these academic deficiencies often translate into limited life opportunities in later adolescence and adulthood, which, in turn, possibly promote and perpetuate criminal behavior (Monk-Turner, 1989).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (1994), 82% of prison inmates in the United States did not graduate from high school. Youths who perform below grade level in basic skills and drop out of school are three and a half times more likely to be arrested than high-school graduates (Brier, 1995; Fine, 1990; Joseph, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). As educational levels increase, individuals tend to commit fewer criminal or delinquent acts, presumably as a result of their increased employability and social integration (Anderson, 1982; Batiuk et al., 1997; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi & Hindelang, 1977; Ross & Ross, 1989; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). Further, higher grade point average and more positive student attitude toward school also have been linked to decreased likelihood of delinquency (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Wiatrowski, Griswold, & Roberts, 1981). Therefore, it is quite possible that increasing educational achievement among juvenile

offenders could increase social capital and produce positive outcomes in school, work, and social relationships upon release, thereby reducing subsequent criminality.

Beyond the literature linking education and crime, there has been strong support that suggests a consistent age distribution for juvenile delinquency (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visser, 1986; Elliott & Huizinga, 1983; Farrington, 1986; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Wolfgang, Thornberry & Figlio, 1987). Participation in deviant behavior begins around the age of 12, peaks in middle adolescence, and declines thereafter (Sampson & Laub, 1993). One proposed reason for this pattern is the differential influence of social institutions, including school, family, peers and the community, as social control agents for youths at different stages of the adolescent life course (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Consequently, as the importance of school as a socializing agent differs across age, gender, or offense types, the influence of juvenile justice education may vary depending on these same characteristics. This suggests that educational intervention is a more salient strategy for particular groups of youths. Therefore, it is important to identify the intervention strategies that are most effective in changing trajectories for diverse types of youths.

Given the established relationship between poor school performance and juvenile delinquency, it is clear that providing quality education services to incarcerated youths could promote positive modifications to life course trajectories. In general, academic improvement while in confinement appears to enhance adjustment into the community upon release (Foley, 2001; Katsiyannis & Archwamety, 1999). Moreover, educational achievement could potentially have long lasting positive effects on broader social contexts, which in turn affects the lives of these youths throughout later adolescence and adulthood, including continued education, employment, involvement in community activities, family and peer relationships, and decreased criminal activity (Garrett, 1985).

7.8 Education as a Triggering Event in the Life Course

It is possible that increased educational attainment during teenage years, even for youths already labeled as delinquent, can trigger positive outcomes later in adolescence and adulthood. Arum and Beattie (1999) found that a high school education serves as a defining moment in an individual's life course. In a retrospective study examining the educational backgrounds of inmates, Arum and Beattie found that educational experience has a lasting effect on an individual's later risk of incarceration. Furthermore, Sampson and Laub (1990; 1993; 1997) previously demonstrated that high school could be a turning point in an individual's life course and could affect adult behavior. Building on this notion, it is likely that high school educational experience not only affects the risk of incarceration in adulthood, but also affects risk of participation in criminal behavior during adolescence. Therefore, one way to decrease subsequent criminality is to provide positive intervention, thus affording greater opportunities for incarcerated adolescents to attach themselves to conventional institutions, such as school (Arum & Beattie, 1999).

Sampson and Laub conclude that marriage, stable work, and military service are positive turning points in the adult life course (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Triggering events for

adolescents may be quite distinct from those of adults (Laub & Sampson, 2001). In fact, previous research has suggested that increased employment can reduce criminal activity for adults; conversely, employment negatively affects juvenile behavior (Uggen, 2000; Paternoster & Bushway, 2001). Further, marriage, much like employment, is not an age-appropriate institution for the vast majority of juveniles. Lack of social control from family, peers, and school institutions can provide causal explanation of adolescent delinquent behavior (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Attending school for adolescents can be considered the age-appropriate equivalent of employment for adults. It would seem that adolescents who obtain social capital through improved academic performance and commitment to school while incarcerated should be more likely to redirect behavior trajectories in a positive direction upon release. Therefore, it is quite possible that juvenile justice education can be a triggering event in reducing involvement in crime and increasing involvement in conventional activities after release, thereby affecting short-term outcomes in adolescence and long-term outcomes in adulthood.

7.9 Education to Reduce Juvenile Delinquency

A separate system for juvenile offenders was established due to the belief that adolescent behavior is more amenable to change, and therefore, the potential of rehabilitative interventions to change delinquent trajectories is more likely (Lipsey, 1999). It is well documented that offenders who are incarcerated during adolescence consistently suffer from poor employment, education, and parenting outcomes during adulthood (Todis, Bullis, Waintrup, Schultz, & D'Ambrosio, 2001). As a result, it is the responsibility of the correctional program to increase life opportunities and social capital for these youths during incarceration so that they will be more successful upon release. As such, correctional education programs have been identified as a central component of the rehabilitation process for incarcerated youths (Katsiyannis & Archwamety, 1999; OJJDP, 1994).

Youths in juvenile correctional facilities are among the most educationally disadvantaged in our society (Pfannenstiel, 1993) and have long histories of academic failure (Foley, 2001). Further, it is evident that delinquency reduces educational achievement and life opportunities, which negatively impacts adult outcomes and potentially increases criminal behavior (Monk-Turner, 1989; Tanner, Davies, & O'Grady, 1999). Historically, interventions have suffered from conflicting evidence of which types of interventions work to modify delinquent trajectories after release. As suggested by recent reviews of the literature, however, some interventions do work for some offenders (Garrett, 1985; Lipsey, 1999; Matthews & Pitts, 2000). Additionally, correctional education programs have been shown to produce positive outcomes in behavior, future education, and employment after release (Elliott, 1994; Foley, 2001; Jenson & Howard, 1990). Research has suggested that academic improvement in confinement is associated with reduced recidivism and greater employment rates (Foley, 2001; Jenson & Howard, 1990; Katsiyannis & Archwamety, 1997, 1999; Patterson et al., 1989).

Further, antisocial children subjected to informal social controls, such as positive parenting, non-delinquent peers, and increased school commitment, were less likely to participate in

delinquency (Elliott, 1994; Simons et al., 1998). Similarly, Tolan (1987) found that academic and family interventions were most appropriate in promoting prosocial behavior patterns and limiting the impact of criminal activity on the community after release. Farrington and Hawkins (1991) conducted a study to determine what predicts persistence in early onset versus late onset offenders and found that low paternal interaction and low commitment to school were most indicative of persistence in criminal behavior. Therefore, they suggest that efforts to strengthen delinquent youths' ties to conventional activities, such as paternal family involvement, school success, and commitment, would likely reduce recidivism among offenders. Although many of the aforementioned studies resulted in positive outcomes among incarcerated youths, Cernkovich and Giordano (2001) found that the bonding levels and antisocial behavior of institutionalized offenders are more resistant to change than are those of more typical, non-institutionalized offenders. Comparing institutionalized youths against a household sample, these researchers found that the influence of prior delinquency on adult outcomes is not mediated by social bonding variables among the institutional respondents (Cernkovich & Giordano, 2001).

It is clear that juvenile justice education can produce positive modifications to delinquent trajectories. Many juveniles' last contact with formal education will be in a juvenile facility. Therefore, in many cases, correctional education is the last meaningful opportunity to reverse a student's history of poor academic proficiency, employment preparation, and social relationships by equipping adolescent offenders with the skills necessary to succeed in the community after release (Monk-Turner, 1989). Providing adolescent offenders with these skills could quite possibly redirect youths into a more successful trajectory upon release.

7.10 Summary Discussion

The life course perspective combines the impact of both long term and short-term events on an individual's life. This perspective has been buttressed by a number of long standing criminological theories, yet there is no true consensus within the field as to the connection between life course and crime. Sampson and Laub (1990, 1993) make the argument that crime is mediated through the existence of social bonds throughout an individual's life course. Sampson and Laub extend the scope of traditional social control theory, which provided the theoretical link between crime and social bonds, by including age-linked institutions of both formal and informal social control as potential influencing agents of criminal behavior. The quality of the social relationships, via informal social control, determines the strength and direction of a transition, or turning point, in one's life course. This theory of age-graded social control has garnered empirical support in the literature. The literature suggests that local life circumstances can lead to desistance from crime. For juveniles, education is an important local life circumstance. Given that particular institutions of social control can impact an individual differently give their age and current trajectory, education can affect juveniles delinquents by increasing social bonds thereby building social capital potentially resulting in a desistance from criminal behavior.