



Crime and Turning Points across the Life Course

John H. Laub, University of Maryland-College Park

Robert J. Sampson, Harvard University

Are children and adolescents who break the law fated to become lifelong offenders? To answer this important question, we started in the 1980s to track the lives of 1000 disadvantaged males born in Boston during the Great Depression era. We were able to build on data collected during offenders' boyhoods for a classic mid-twentieth-century study, *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency*, conducted by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck at Harvard Law School. We used early waves of data from this study, and then tracked down males included in it to collect further information on their histories of criminal offending through old age. Over the last 25 years, we have used this rich, long-term trove of information for two books and dozens of journal articles and chapters. This brief summarizes our core ideas and major findings.

The Importance of Tracking and Explaining Lives

The idea that adult criminality is the inexorable result of childhood traits and troubles is a dominant theme in the science of criminology and media coverage of crime. Connections between childhood and adult behavior certainly do exist, but our research has been premised on the realization that findings about crime can be distorted when scholars start with adult offenders and then ask about their childhoods. In this retrospective approach, adult criminals regularly turn out to have been troubled children with early histories of delinquency. It is easy to jump to the simple, seductive conclusion that "bad boys grow up to become bad men."

But if we start with children and follow lives forward for many years, we find considerable heterogeneity in adult outcomes. For example, although it is easy to presume that most antisocial children will become involved in delinquency as adolescents and then graduate to adult offending, in fact most antisocial children cease offending by adulthood. Although long-term research is challenging to carry out, only what scholars call "longitudinal prospective data" – that is, information repeatedly collected as particular children become adolescents and then younger and older adults – can allow researchers to shed full light on complex causal processes playing out over many years in people's lives. Yet even repeatedly collected data are not sufficient. Also needed is a life-course theory of crime to make sense of the underlying patterns.

Making Sense of Crime across the Life Course

In this first part of our project, we reconstructed data from archives containing detailed records from the Gluecks' three-wave prospective study of juvenile and adult criminal behavior. Their data started in 1940 with a sample of 500 delinquent boys ages 10-17 plus data on 500 additional boys of the same age who were not delinquents. The two groups were matched case-by-case on their age, race and ethnicity, IQ intelligence test scores, and low-income residence locations in Boston, Massachusetts. Data were collected about the 1,000 boys at three points in time – at ages 14, 25, and 32.

For our 1993 book, *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points through Life*, we analyzed these data and developed a theory to explain childhood antisocial behavior, adolescent delinquency, and early adult criminal infractions. We took off from the basic insight that crime is more likely to occur when an individual's ties to society are weak – and we theorized that the most important social ties change as individuals grow from childhood to adulthood. Parental supervision, consistent discipline, and warmth between children and parents matter most to keep children on course, whereas adolescents are also guided by ties to peers and school. For young adults, the ties that matter most include stable marriages, military service, and employment.

In *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70*, our second book published in 2003, we traced as many of the same men as we could find into their final years. For this very long-term research, we pulled together narrative life-histories and quantitatively analyzed data about life pathways across seven decades for men who had, in their Boston adolescence, committed infractions that got them sent to jail. From one of the longest longitudinal studies of crime in the world, we learned important things:

- Family and school ties are crucial: people tend to stay out of trouble when they are strong, but engage in delinquent or criminal acts when these ties are weak or nonexistent.
- Children and adolescents who commit early offenses are, indeed, more likely than others to keep offending across the life span; but whereas trajectories of crime are influenced by childhood experiences and activities, they are not rigidly determined by early experiences.
- Lives can get back on course in adulthood – early offenders can stop committing offenses – because of military service, stable marriages and jobs, and neighborhood changes.

Can Public Policies Help Offenders Turn Lives Around?

Our findings show that stable social ties and institutional connections make a difference. Yes, delinquent children sometimes become life-long repeat offenders. But experiences in adolescence and adulthood can redirect life trajectories in either positive or negative ways.

Constructive turning points life tend to have several features – they cut off negative past experiences and thrust people into new situations where they experience stronger supervision and positive social pressures along with new opportunities for social support and growth. Constructive turning points also involve changes in routine activities toward greater stability and structure – and they provide opportunities for identity transformation, allowing people to think of themselves in new, more constructive ways, such as taking on the identity of “father providing for his family.”

For decades, the United States has shipped masses of delinquents and criminal offenders off to lengthy confinements in jails and prisons. With such mass incarceration now tapering off, states and communities not only need ways to reintegrate ex-convicts, but would also benefit from alternative forms of punishment and supervision for some offenders, particularly youths. Our findings offer hope – and suggest that a key challenge is to pinpoint life course turning points when reinforced ties to families, jobs, and structured military or community service can lead offenders to desist from further infractions. Life course corrections can happen, and everyone benefits when they do.

Read more in John H. Laub and Robert J. Sampson, *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points*

through Life* (Harvard University Press, 1993), and *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to
June 26, 2014 <https://scholars.org>

Age 70 (Harvard University Press, 2003).