

# Critique of Social Process Theories

## 8.4 What are the shortcomings of social process theories?

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Criticisms of social process theories are many and varied. Perhaps

that Sutherland's initial formulation of differential association is not applicable at the individual level because even people who experience an excess of definitions favorable to law violation may still not become criminal and those who rarely associate with recognized deviants may still turn to crime. Also, the theory is untestable because most people experience a multitude of definitions—both favorable and unfavorable to law violation—and it is up to them to interpret what those experiences mean, so classifying experiences as either favorable or unfavorable to crime commission is difficult at best.

Other critics suggest that differential association alone is not a sufficient explanation for crime. In effect, association theory does not seem to provide for free choice in individual circumstances, nor does it explain why some individuals, even when surrounded by associates committed to lives of crime, are still able to hold on to noncriminal values. Biosocial theorists John Paul Wright and Kevin M. Beaver, for example, suggest that there is a substantial genetic component to self-control and that impulsivity may be at least partially based in biology.<sup>837</sup> Expanding on that idea, it's clear that social process theories largely ignore individual differences, and mostly "assess outcomes averaged across all study participants," rather than examining whether the effectiveness of social interventions are based on individual differences within respondents. In other words, there may be some inherent differences in individuals—whether biological or not—that make some people more

# The Social Development Perspective

## 8.5 What are the various social development perspectives discussed in this chapter?

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Social Development Theories



Over the past 25 years, an appreciation for the process of human development (the relationship between the maturing individual and his or her changing environment and the social processes that relationship entails) has played an increasingly important role in understanding criminality.<sup>841</sup> Students of human development recognize that the process of development occurs through reciprocal dynamic interactions that take place between individuals and various aspects of their environment, and the social development perspective posits that development, which begins at birth (and perhaps even earlier), occurs primarily within a social context. Unlike social learning theory (discussed earlier in this chapter), social development sees socialization as only one feature of that context. If socialization were the primary determinant of criminality, then we might expect that all problem children would become criminals or

perhaps even earlier), occurs primarily within a social context. Unlike social learning theory (discussed earlier in this chapter), social development sees socialization as only one feature of that context. If socialization were the primary determinant of criminality, then we might expect that all problem children would become criminals as adults, but because that doesn't happen, there must be other aspects to the developmental process that social learning theories don't fully cover.

According to the social development perspective, human development simultaneously occurs on many levels—psychological, biological, familial, interpersonal, cultural, societal, and ecological—so social development theories tend to be integrated theories combining various points of view. The rest of this chapter describes life course criminology, the major social development perspective; various ideas contributing to the life course perspective, along with other perspectives on social development, are also described.

## Concepts in Social Development Theories

### 8.6 What are the central concepts of social development theories?

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Most sociological explanations for crime involve the study of groups and the identification of differences among groups of offenders, but social development theories focus more on individual rates of offending and seek to understand both increases and decreases in rates of offending over the individual's lifetime. Social development theories generally employ longitudinal (over time) measurements of delinquency and offending, and they pay special attention to the transitions that people face as they move through the life cycle

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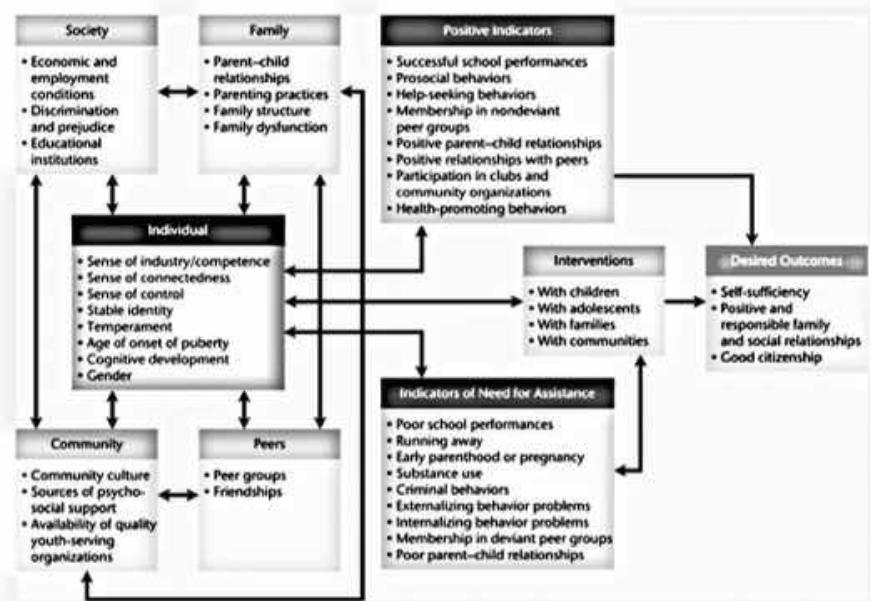


**A baby holds on to a spoon.** What concepts are key to the social development approach?  
Nomad\_Souli/Fotolia

Most theories of social development recognize that a critical transitional period occurs as a person moves from childhood to

Most theories of social development recognize that a critical transitional period occurs as a person moves from childhood to adulthood, and life course theorists have identified at least seven developmental tasks that American adolescents must confront: (1) establishing identity, (2) cultivating symbiotic relationships, (3) defining physical attractiveness, (4) investing in a value system, (5) obtaining an education, (6) separating from family and achieving independence, and (7) obtaining and maintaining gainful employment.<sup>842</sup> Youths are confronted with many obstacles or risks in their attempts to resolve these issues as they work to make a successful transition to adulthood. **Figure 8–6** provides a conceptual model of the developmental processes that a maturing youth experiences during adolescence. Learn more about the transitional process leading to adulthood at <https://www.egdstudy.org>.

**Figure 8-6**  
**A Conceptual Model of Adolescent Development**



Source: Family and Youth Services Bureau.

# The Life Course Perspective

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Traditional explanations for crime and delinquency often lack a developmental perspective because they generally ignore developmental changes throughout the life course and frequently fail to distinguish between different phases of criminal careers.<sup>843</sup> By contrast, developmental theories draw attention to the fact that criminal behavior tends to follow a distinct pattern across the life cycle: Criminality is relatively uncommon during childhood, tends to begin as sporadic instances of delinquency during late adolescence and early adulthood, and then diminishes and sometimes completely disappears from a person's behavioral repertoire by age 30 or 40. Of course, some people never commit crimes or do so only rarely, whereas others become career criminals and persist in lives of crime.

## Watch

Life Course Criminology



The life course perspective (also called *life course criminology*) shifted the traditional focus away from the reasons why people begin offending to questions about what the dimensions of criminal offending are over the entire life course.<sup>844</sup> It has its roots in a 1986 National Academy of Sciences (NAS) panel report prepared by Alfred Blumstein, Jacqueline Cohen, Jeffrey Roth, and Christy Visher that

National Academy of Sciences (NAS) panel report prepared by Alfred Blumstein, Jacqueline Cohen, Jeffrey Roth, and Christy Visher that emphasized the importance of the study of criminal careers and of crime over the life course.<sup>845</sup> The NAS panel defined a criminal career as “the longitudinal sequence of crimes committed by an individual offender.”<sup>846</sup> The report was especially important for its analysis of “offending development,” a concept that underlies the life course perspective (see the **Theory in Perspective** box in this chapter).

The panel noted (**Figure 8–7**) that criminal careers can be described in terms of four dimensions: participation, frequency, duration, and seriousness. *Participation*, which refers to the fraction of a population that is criminally active, depends on the scope of criminal acts considered and the length of the observation period.<sup>847</sup> *Frequency* refers to the number of crimes committed by an individual offender per unit of time. Hence, a burglar who commits one burglary a year has a much lower frequency than one who is active monthly or weekly. Frequency is generally not constant and varies over the life course—even for habitual offenders. *Duration* refers to the length of the criminal career. A criminal career can be very short, consisting of only one offense, or it can be quite long, as in the case of habitual or chronic criminals. *Seriousness* is relatively self-explanatory, although it is worthwhile to note that some offenders with long criminal careers commit only petty crimes, whereas others are serious habitual offenders, and still others commit offenses with a mixed degree of seriousness.

**Figure 8-7**  
**Aspects of Criminal Careers**



Source: Schmallegger, Frank, *Criminology*. Printed and electronically reproduced by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, New Jersey.

Life course criminology was given its name in a seminal book written by **Robert J. Sampson** and **John H. Laub** in 1993, entitled *Crime in the Making*.<sup>848</sup> Earlier, the concept of life course had been defined as “pathways through the life span involving a sequence of culturally defined, age-graded roles and social transitions enacted over time.”

defined, age-graded roles and social transitions enacted over time."

<sup>849</sup> Life course theories, which build on social learning and social control principles, recognize that criminal careers may develop as the result of various criminogenic influences that affect individuals over the course of their lives.

Researchers who focus on the life course as it leads to delinquency, crime, and criminal identities are interested both in evaluating the prevalence, frequency, and onset of offending and in identifying different developmental pathways to delinquency. Life course researchers ask a variety of questions: How do early-childhood characteristics (e.g., antisocial behavior) lead to adult behavioral processes and outcomes? How do life transitions (e.g., shifts in relationships from parents to peers, transitions from same-sex peers to opposite-sex peers, moves from school to work, marriage, divorce) influence behavior and behavioral choices? How do offending and victimization interact over the life cycle?<sup>850</sup>

Life course researchers examine "trajectories and transitions through the age-differentiated life span."<sup>851</sup> According to Sampson and Laub, "Trajectories refer to longer-term patterns and sequences of behavior, whereas transitions are marked by specific life events (e.g., first job or the onset of crime) that are embedded in trajectories and evolve over shorter time spans."<sup>852</sup> The concept of age differentiation (or age grading) recognizes the fact that certain forms of behavior and some experiences are more appropriate (in terms of their social consequences) in certain parts of the life cycle than in others. Life course theorists search for evidence of continuity between childhood or adolescent experiences and adult outcomes or lifestyles.

Three sets of dynamic concepts are important to the life course perspective: (1) activation, (2) aggravation, and (3) desistance.<sup>853</sup>

*Activation*, the way that delinquent behaviors are stimulated and the processes by which the continuity, frequency, and diversity of delinquency are shaped, comes in three types: (1) acceleration (increased frequency of offending over time), (2) stabilization (increased continuity over time), and (3) diversification (propensity of individuals to become involved in more diverse delinquent activities).

*Aggravation*, the second dynamic process, refers to the existence of

a developmental sequence of activities that escalates or increases in seriousness over time. *Desistance*, the third process, which is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, describes a slowing down in the frequency of offending (deceleration), a reduction in its variety (specialization), or a reduction in its seriousness (de-escalation).<sup>854</sup>

## Five Life Course Principles

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Glen H. Elder, Jr., has identified five important life course principles (Figure 8–8) that provide a concise summary of life course theory:<sup>855</sup>

**1. The principle of historical time and place.** The life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime. Hence, children born in the United States during the Great Depression or in Nazi Germany during World War II were no doubt strongly influenced by the conditions around them. Similarly, surviving children whose parents were lost in the Holocaust experienced trajectories in their life course that probably would have been far different had they been born in a different place or at a different time.

**2. The principle of timing in lives.** The developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events is contingent on when they occur in a person's life. Early marriage, for example, or childbearing at an early age can significantly influence the course of people's lives through the long-term consequences of such events. People who start families early may find themselves excluded from further schooling by the demands of parenthood, and those who leave home and marry at an early age may find that parental financial support is not as readily

available to them as it might have been if they had continued to live at home.

**3. The principle of linked lives.** Lives are lived interdependently, and social and historical influences are expressed through a network of shared relationships across the life span. If a child or a spouse develops a serious illness, for example, the lives of other family members are likely to be affected. Caring for an ill family member is emotionally and financially costly, and it takes time. Because of such costs, opportunities that might have been otherwise available are likely to be lost.

**4. The principle of human agency.** Human agency refers to the fact that individuals construct their own life course through the choices they make and the actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances. The example that Elder gives is of hard-pressed Depression-era parents who "moved their residence to cheaper quarters and sought alternative forms of income." In making such choices, they were involved in the process of building a new life course.

**5. The principle of life-long learning development.** Learning is not limited to youth, and individuals continue to acquire knowledge from the experiences they have at every stage in the life course.

### Check Your Understanding

Figure 8-8: Five Important Life Course Principles



Life course theories are supported by research dating back over three-quarters of a century. During the 1920s and 1930s, **Sheldon Glueck** and **Eleanor Glueck** studied the life cycles and careers of 500 nondelinquent and 500 known delinquent boys and another 500 girls in an effort to identify the causes of delinquency.<sup>856</sup> Study group participants were matched on age, intelligence, ethnicity, and neighborhood residence. Data were collected through psychiatric interviews with subjects, parent and teacher reports, and official records obtained from police, court, and correctional files, and surviving subjects were interviewed again between 1949 and 1965.

Significantly, the Gluecks investigated possible contributions to crime causation on four levels: sociocultural (socioeconomic), somatic (physical), intellectual, and emotional-temperamental and concluded that family dynamics played an especially significant role in the development of criminality—"the deeper the roots of childhood maladjustment, the smaller the chance of adult adjustment."<sup>857</sup> Delinquent careers, said the Gluecks, tend to carry over into adulthood and frequently lead to criminal careers.

In 2012, in an interesting test of life course theory and turning points, David S. Kirk at the University of Texas at Austin showed that former prisoners returning home to New Orleans were far less likely to continue lives of crimes if they moved to new neighborhoods. Kirk found that the displacement produced by Hurricane Katrina generally led to lower rates of recidivism among those former prisoners because it resulted in a reduction of criminal opportunities and a loss of association with former criminal peers.<sup>858</sup>

Read more about the life course perspective at [https://www.westerncriminology.org/documents/WCR/v04n1/article\\_pdfs/wrightarticle.pdf](https://www.westerncriminology.org/documents/WCR/v04n1/article_pdfs/wrightarticle.pdf).

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## Theory in Perspective

### Social Development Theories

# Social Development Theories

Social development theories are integrated theories of human development that simultaneously examine many different levels of development—psychological, biological, familial, interpersonal, cultural, societal, and ecological.

## Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective highlights the development of criminal careers, which are seen as the result of various criminogenic influences that affect individuals throughout the course of their lives.

**Period:** 1980s–present

**Theorists:** Alfred Blumstein, John H. Laub, Robert J. Sampson, David P. Farrington, Donald J. West, Lawrence E. Cohen, Richard Machalek, Terence Thornberry

**Concepts:** Criminal career, life course, trajectory, turning points, age grading, social capital, human agency, developmental pathways, life course persists, persistence, desistance, resilience, cohort, cohort analysis, longitudinal research, evolutionary ecology

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# Laub and Sampson's Age-Graded Theory

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John H. Laub and Robert J. Sampson dusted off 60 cartons of nearly forgotten data that had been collected by the Gluecks and stored in the basement of the Harvard Law School.<sup>859</sup> Upon reanalysis of the data, Laub and Sampson found that children who turned to delinquency were frequently those who had trouble at school and at home and who had friends who were already involved in delinquency. They also discovered that two events in the life course—marriage and job stability—seemed to be especially important in reducing the frequency of offending in later life.

Using a sophisticated cyberanalysis of the Gluecks' original data, Laub and Sampson developed an "age-graded theory of informal social control."<sup>860</sup> Like Hirschi (discussed earlier), Laub and Sampson suggested that delinquency is more likely to occur when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken, but they also recognized that "social ties embedded in adult transitions (e.g., marital attachment, job stability) explain variations in crime unaccounted for by childhood deviance."<sup>861</sup> Hence, although it incorporated the concept of social bonds, Laub and Sampson's perspective also emphasized the significance of continuity and change over the life course.

Central to Laub and Sampson's approach is the idea of turning points in a criminal career—"the interlocking nature of trajectories and transitions may generate turning points or a change in the life course."<sup>862</sup> Turning points were first identified by G. B. Trasler in 1980 when he wrote, "As they grow older, most young men gain access to other sources of achievement and social satisfaction—a job, a girlfriend, a wife, a home and eventually children—and in doing so become gradually less dependent upon peer-group support."<sup>863</sup> Given the importance ~~of turning points, which may~~ turn a person

toward or away from criminality and delinquency—a clear-cut relationship between early delinquency and criminality later in life cannot be assumed. Sampson and Laub also identified two significant turning points: employment and marriage. Other important turning points can occur in association with leaving home, having children, getting divorced, graduating from school, and receiving a financial windfall. According to Laub and Sampson, even chronic offenders can be reformed when they experience the requisite turning points, whereas individuals with histories of conventionality can begin offending in response to events and circumstances that undermine previously restraining social bonds.<sup>864</sup>

Because transitions in the life course are typically associated with age and because transitional events either enhance or weaken the social bond, Sampson and Laub contended that “age-graded changes in social bonds explain changes in crime”; because these events are not the result of “purposeful efforts to control,” they are dubbed “informal social controls.”<sup>865</sup>

In 2001, an examination of data from the Dunedin Study (referred to in **Chapter 5**) suggested the idea of life course interdependence, in which “the effects of social ties on crime vary as a function of criminal propensity.”<sup>866</sup> In other words, prosocial ties that deter crime (education, marriage, steady employment) are more likely to discourage criminality among those who are already predisposed to avoid it than among those who are not; researchers dubbed this the “social-protection effect.” Conversely, a “social-amplification effect” could be identified in antisocial ties (delinquent friends) that promote crime among individuals predisposed to criminality. The researchers concluded that certain features of the social environment could serve as positive turning points in the lives of antisocial individuals, but the social-amplification effect could produce negative turning points in the lives of the same people.

Similarly, in 2014, a combined research effort examined the importance of jobs and employment on desistance from crime. The study found that transition to employment is largely a consequence of desistance rather than its cause but that the most critical issue has to do with the timing of employment transitions in the life

trajectory.<sup>867</sup> In other words, employment can be seen as the cement that holds together and finalizes positive changes that have already led to important turning points in offenders' lives.

Also in 2014, researchers examining the role that changes in personal identity have on desistance learned that people are more likely to refrain from crime commission as they move from a deviant to pro-social conception of self. They found that increases in "pro-social identity over time ... is a robust predictor of criminal behavior over the life course."<sup>868</sup>

Another important concept in Laub and Sampson's theory is social capital, which refers to the degree of positive relationships with other people and with social institutions that individuals build up over the course of their lives.<sup>869</sup> Social capital directly impacts life course trajectories: The greater a person's social capital, the less chance there is of criminal activity.<sup>870</sup>

A study of how two primary constituents of social capital—marriage and full-time employment—impact life course trajectories was reported by Matthew G. Yeager in 2003. He examined the lives of 773 adult male prisoners released from the Canadian federal prison system between 1983 and 1984, following them for a period of three years.<sup>871</sup> He found that being married reduced the likelihood of return to prison, but an even stronger indicator of postprison success was full-time employment, which Yeager described as having "a strong suppression effect on general criminal recidivism." Because employment is something for which prisoners can be prepared and because it can be offered by the state or federal government, Yeager suggested that it provides a rare opportunity for successful intervention in the lives of released prisoners.

In 2006, Sampson and Laub reported on the application of sophisticated data-analysis techniques to subjects from the Gluecks' original study group who were reinterviewed at age 70. The 2006 study supported the conclusion that "being married is associated with an average reduction of approximately 35 percent in the odds of crime compared to nonmarried status for the same man."<sup>872</sup> A 2017 study of parenthood as a potential turning point in the life course of

study of parenthood as a potential turning point in the life course of gang members found that motherhood is "associated with enduring reductions" in rate of offending and identification with gangs, while fatherhood produces a similar but only temporary change in male gang members. Fatherhood was found to have a beneficial impact only on men who continued to reside with their children.<sup>873</sup>

An interesting evaluation of social capital—commitment to a romantic partner, strong job attachment, and nature of close friends among adult subjects—was reported by a group of criminologists in 2002.<sup>874</sup> They found that adolescent delinquency tended to result in involvement with an antisocial romantic partner for both males and females and that such a relationship tended to influence the nature of adult relationships and to increase the likelihood of later criminality. Conventional romantic partners and friends, along with strong job attachment, were found to be especially likely to reduce the chance of criminality among young adult women, but only conventional adult friends had the same effect among males.

Finally, in 2006, Lisa M. Broidy and Elizabeth E. Cauffman reexamined the Glueck's early data on girls in order to determine how social capital contributed to desistance from crime among women.<sup>875</sup> Using data on 500 female offenders originally collected by the Gluecks, the researchers found that social capital in the form of marriage, motherhood, and positive work experiences led to desistance from crime "in a manner that transcends both gender and historical content." Because much of the data gathered by the Gluecks came from the 1920s, Broidy and Cauffman concluded that marriage, because it was regarded as a universal goal for women during that period of time and because it signified a commitment to conventional norms, represented a significant turning point in the life of young women that marked the start of the desistance process. Learn more about the concept of social capital via [https://psychology.wikia.org/wiki/Social\\_capital](https://psychology.wikia.org/wiki/Social_capital).

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## Check Your Understanding: Turning Points

Select a button below to learn more about the concept of

Why are turning points such an important concept in the life course approach?

**Reveal Answer** ▼

Are marriage, employment, and military service always turning points?

**Reveal Answer** ▼

How does human agency affect turning points?

**Reveal Answer** ▼

Are there gender differences in turning points?

**Reveal Answer** ▼

## Moffitt's Dual Taxonomic Theory

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Criminologists have long noted that although adult criminality is usually preceded by antisocial behavior during adolescence, most antisocial children do not become adult criminals. Psychologist **Terrie E. Moffitt** developed a two-path (dual taxonomic) theory of criminality that helps to explain this observation.<sup>876</sup> Moffitt's theory contends that as a result of neuropsychological deficits (specifically, early brain damage or chemical imbalances) combined with poverty and family dysfunction, some people come to display more or less constant patterns of misbehavior throughout life.<sup>877</sup> These people are called life course-persistent offenders or *life course persisters*. Life course persisters tend to fail in school and become involved in delinquency at an early age. As a consequence, their opportunities for legitimate success become increasingly limited with the passage of time.

Other teenagers, says Moffitt, go through limited periods where they exhibit high probabilities of offending. Probabilities of offending are generally highest for these people, says Moffitt, during the mid-teen years. This second group, called adolescence-limited offenders, is led to offending primarily by structural disadvantages, according to two-path theory. The most significant of these disadvantages is the status anxiety of teenagers that stems from modern society's inadequacy at easing the transition from adolescence to adulthood for significant numbers of young people. Moffitt hypothesizes that a significant source of adolescent strain arises from the fact that biological maturity occurs at a relatively early age (perhaps as early as 12) and brings with it the desire for sexual and emotional relationships as well as personal autonomy.<sup>878</sup> Society, however, does not permit the assumption of autonomous adult roles until far later (around age 18). As adolescents begin to want autonomy, they are prevented from achieving it because of preexisting societal expectations and societally limited opportunities, resulting in what Farrington's Delinquent Development Theory

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does not permit the assumption of autonomous adult roles until far later (around age 18). As adolescents begin to want autonomy, they are prevented from achieving it because of preexisting societal expectations and societally limited opportunities, resulting in what Moffitt calls a "maturity gap." They might be told, "You're too young for that," or "Wait until you grow up." Lacking the resources to achieve autonomy on their own, they are drawn into delinquent roles by lifelong deviants who have already achieved autonomy and serve as role models for others seeking early independence. At least an appearance of autonomy is achievable for adolescence-limited offenders by engaging in actions that mimic those routinely undertaken by life course-persistent offenders. Once adolescence-limited offenders realize the substantial costs of continuing misbehavior, however, they abandon such social mimicry and the participation in delinquent acts that characterizes it. As they mature, they begin to aspire toward achieving legitimate autonomy. Those who fail to make the transition successfully add to the ranks of the life course-persistent population.

Moffitt notes that adolescence-limited offenders display inconsistencies in antisocial behavior from one place to another. They might, for example, participate in illicit drug use with friends or shoplift in stores. They might also experiment sexually. Still, their school behavior is likely to remain within socially acceptable bounds, and they will probably act with respect toward teachers, employers, and adults. Life course-persistent offenders, on the other hand, consistently engage in antisocial behavior across a wide spectrum of social situations.

Research findings indicate that positive developmental pathways are fostered when adolescents are able to develop (1) a sense of industry and competency, (2) a feeling of connectedness to others and to society, (3) a belief in their ability to control their future, and (4) a stable identity.<sup>879</sup> Adolescents who develop these characteristics appear more likely than others to engage in prosocial behaviors, exhibit positive school performances, and be members of nondeviant peer groups. Competency, connectedness, control, and identity are outcomes of the developmental process. They develop through a person's interactions with his or her community, family, school, and peers. The following kinds of interactions appear to promote

development of these characteristics:

- Interactions in which children engage in productive activities and win recognition for their productivity
- Interactions in which parents and other adults control and monitor adolescents' behaviors in a consistent and caring manner while allowing them a substantial degree of psychological and emotional independence
- Interactions in which parents and other adults provide emotional support, encouragement, and practical advice to adolescents
- Interactions in which adolescents are accepted as individuals with unique experiences based on their temperament; gender; biosocial development; and family, cultural, and societal factors

## Farrington's Delinquent Development Theory

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Life course theorists use the term persistence to describe continuity in crime or continual involvement in offending; desistance refers to the cessation of criminal activity or the termination of a period of involvement in offending behavior. Desistance (mentioned briefly earlier in this chapter) can be unaided or aided: Unaided desistance refers to desistance that occurs without the formal intervention or assistance of criminal justice agencies like probation or parole agencies, the courts, or prison or jail, and aided desistance, involving agencies of the justice system, is generally referred to as rehabilitation. Delinquents often mature successfully and grow out of offending; even older persistent offenders may tire of justice system interventions, lose the personal energy required for continued offending, and "burn out."

A number of early criminologists noted the desistance phenomenon. Marvin Wolfgang described the process as one of "spontaneous remission,"<sup>880</sup> although it was recognized far earlier—in 1833, Adolphe Quetelet argued that the penchant for crime diminished with age "due to the enfeeblement of physical vitality and the passions."<sup>881</sup> The Gluecks later developed the concept of maturational reform to explain the phenomenon and suggested that the "sheer passage of time" caused delinquents to "grow out" of this transitory phase and to "burn out" physiologically, concluding, "Ageing is the only factor which emerges as significant in the reformatory process."<sup>882</sup>

In 1985, Walter R. Grove proposed a maturational theory of biopsychosocial desistance that sees the desistance phenomenon as a natural or normal consequence of the aging process.<sup>883</sup> "As persons move through the life cycle, (1) they will shift from self-absorption to concern for others; (2) they will increasingly accept societal values and behave in socially appropriate ways; (3) they will

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In 1985, Walter R. Grove proposed a maturational theory of biopsychosocial desistance that sees the desistance phenomenon as a natural or normal consequence of the aging process.<sup>883</sup> "As persons move through the life cycle, (1) they will shift from self-absorption to concern for others; (2) they will increasingly accept societal values and behave in socially appropriate ways; (3) they will become more comfortable with social relations; (4) their activities will increasingly reflect a concern for others in their community; and (5) they will become increasingly concerned with the issue of the meaning of life."<sup>884</sup> Some criminologists argued, however, that the claim that aging causes desistance is meaningless because it doesn't explain the actual mechanisms involved.

Longitudinal studies of crime over the life course conducted by **David P. Farrington** and **Donald J. West** have shown far greater diversity in the ages of desistance than in the ages of onset of criminal behavior.<sup>885</sup> In 1982, in an effort to explain the considerable heterogeneity of developmental pathways, Farrington and West began tracking a cohort of 411 boys born in London in 1953 in an ongoing study known as the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, which uses self-reports of delinquency as well as psychological tests and in-depth interviews. To date, participants have been interviewed nine times, with the earliest interviews being conducted at age eight.

The Cambridge study reveals that life course patterns found in the United States are also characteristic of English delinquents.

Farrington found that the study's persistent offenders suffered from

United States are also characteristic of English delinquents. Farrington found that the study's persistent offenders suffered from "hyperactivity, poor concentration, low achievement, an antisocial father, large family size, low family income, a broken family, poor parental supervision, and parental disharmony."<sup>886</sup> Other risk factors for delinquency included harsh discipline, negative peer influences, and parents with offense histories of their own. Chronic offenders were found to have friends and peers who were also offenders, and offending was found to begin with early antisocial behavior, including aggressiveness, dishonesty, problems in school, truancy, hyperactivity, impulsiveness, and restlessness. Consistent with other desistance studies, Farrington found that offending tends to peak around the age of 17 or 18 and then declines. By age 35, many subjects were found to have conforming lifestyles, although they were often separated or divorced and had poor employment records and patterns of residential instability. Many former offenders were also substance abusers and consequently served as very poor role models for their children.

Although studies of desistance are becoming increasingly common, one of the main methodological problems for researchers is determining when desistance has occurred. Some theorists conceptualize desistance as the complete or absolute stopping of criminal behavior of any kind, whereas others see it as the gradual cessation of criminal involvement.<sup>887</sup> In 1990, Rolf Loeber and Marc LeBlanc identified four components of desistance:<sup>888</sup> (1) deceleration—a slowing down in the frequency of offending, (2) specialization—a reduction in the variety of offenses, (3) de-escalation—a reduction in the seriousness of offending, and (4) reaching a ceiling—remaining at a certain level of offending and not committing more serious offenses.

Resilience, another important concept in life course research, refers to the psychological ability to successfully cope with severe stress and negative events and has important implications for the development of delinquency and criminal offending.<sup>889</sup> One recent study of resilience among teenage girls exposed to a number of risk factors associated with delinquency development (physical and sexual assault, neglect, poverty, unemployed parents, female-headed households) found a number of protective factors that could

sexual assault, neglect, poverty, unemployed parents, female-headed households) found a number of protective factors that could enhance resilience among girls. Included were things like religiosity, school connectedness and success, and presence of a caring adult; the latter offered the most protection against delinquency. "The most consistent protective effect ... was the extent to which a girl felt she had caring adults in her life."<sup>890</sup>

## Evolutionary Ecology

### Audio

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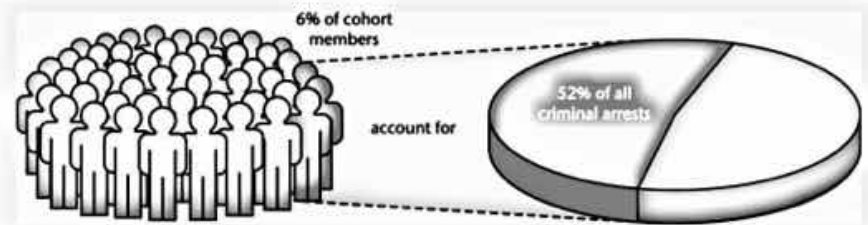
Because life course theory uses a developmental perspective in the study of criminal careers, life course researchers typically use longitudinal research designs involving cohort analysis, which usually begins at birth and traces the development of a population whose members share common characteristics until they reach a certain age. One well-known analysis of a birth cohort, undertaken by **Marvin Wolfgang** during the 1960s, found that a small nucleus of chronic juvenile offenders accounted for a disproportionately large share of all juvenile arrests.<sup>891</sup> Wolfgang studied male individuals born in Philadelphia in 1945 until they reached age 18 and concluded that a small number of violent offenders were responsible for most of the crimes committed by the cohort—6% of cohort members accounted for 52% of all arrests (**Figure 8–9**). A follow-up study found that the seriousness of the offenses among the cohort increased in adulthood but that the actual number of offenses decreased as the cohort aged.<sup>892</sup> Wolfgang's analysis has since been criticized for its lack of a second cohort, or control group, against which the experiences of the cohort under study could be compared.<sup>893</sup>

**Figure 8-9**

The Nucleus of Chronic Offenders

Figure 8-9

### The Nucleus of Chronic Offenders



Source: Schmallegger, Frank, *Criminology*. Printed and Electronically reproduced by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, New Jersey.

The ecological perspective on crime control, pioneered by **Lawrence E. Cohen** and **Richard Machalek**, provides a more contemporary example of a life course approach.<sup>894</sup> Evolutionary ecology builds on the approach of social ecology while emphasizing developmental pathways encountered early in life. Criminologist Bryan Vila stated that “the evolutionary ecological approach draws attention to the ways people develop over the course of their lives. Experiences and environment early in life, especially those that affect child development and the transmission of biological traits and family management practices across generations, seem particularly important.”<sup>895</sup> According to Vila, evolutionary ecology “attempts to explain how people acquire criminality—a predisposition that disproportionately favors criminal behavior—when and why they express it as crime, how individuals and groups respond to those crimes, and how all these phenomena interact as a dynamic self-reinforcing system that evolves over time.”<sup>896</sup>

## Thornberry’s Interactional Theory

Audio

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**Terence Thornberry** proposed what he calls an interactional theory regarding crime, which integrates social control and social learning explanations of delinquency.<sup>897</sup> In constructing his approach,

explanations of delinquency.<sup>897</sup> In constructing his approach, Thornberry was attentive to the impact of social structure on behavior and noted how delinquency and crime seem to develop within the context of reciprocal social arrangements. Reciprocity was especially important to Thornberry because he believed that too many other theories were overly simplistic in their dependence on simple unidirectional causal relationships (see the Theory versus Reality box).

The fundamental cause of delinquency according to interactional theory is a weakening of a person's bond to conventional society.<sup>898</sup> Thornberry pointed out that adolescents who are strongly attached to their parents and family and who strive to achieve within the context of approved social arrangements, such as education, rarely turn to serious delinquency. It takes more than weak conventional bonds, however, for delinquency to develop; it requires the presence of an environment in which delinquency can be learned and in which rule-violating behavior can be positively rewarded. Delinquent peers are especially important in providing the kind of environment necessary for criminal behavior to develop, and gang membership can play a highly significant role in the development and continuation of such behavior. Associating with delinquent peers, said Thornberry, leads to delinquent acts but also involves a causal loop such that those who commit delinquent acts are likely to continue associating with others like themselves—creating a mechanism of social reinforcement and resulting in ever-escalating levels of criminal behavior. Thornberry also predicted that delinquents will seek out association with ever-more delinquent groups if their delinquency continues to be rewarded, so delinquency is seen as a process that unfolds over the life course.

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# Developmental Pathways

## Audio

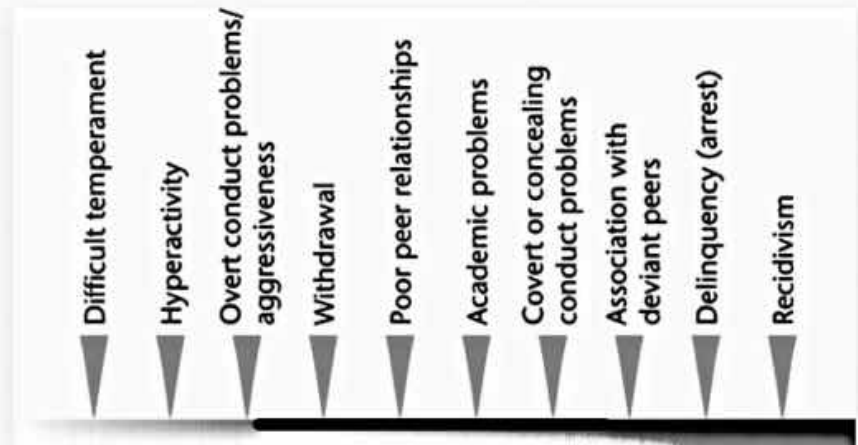
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Researchers have found that manifestations of disruptive behaviors in childhood and adolescence are often age dependent, reflecting a developing capability to display different behaviors with age.<sup>902</sup> Budding behavioral problems can often be detected at an early age. In 1994, Rolf Loeber and Dale F. Hay described the emergence of opposition to parents and aggression toward siblings and peers as a natural developmental occurrence during the first two years of life.<sup>903</sup> As toddlers develop the ability to speak, they become increasingly likely to use words to resolve conflicts, with oppositional behaviors declining between ages three and six as children acquire greater verbal skills for expressing their needs and for dealing with conflict, but children who are unable to develop adequate verbal coping skills commit acts of intense aggression, initiate hostile conflict, and are characterized by parents as having a difficult temperament.<sup>904</sup>

**Figure 8–10** shows the order in which disruptive and antisocial childhood behaviors tend to manifest between birth and late adolescence, and **Figure 8–11** shows the order of learning of skills and attitudes deemed necessary for successful prosocial development during childhood and adolescence.

**Figure 8-10**  
**Manifestations of Disruptive and Antisocial Behaviors in Childhood and Adolescence**



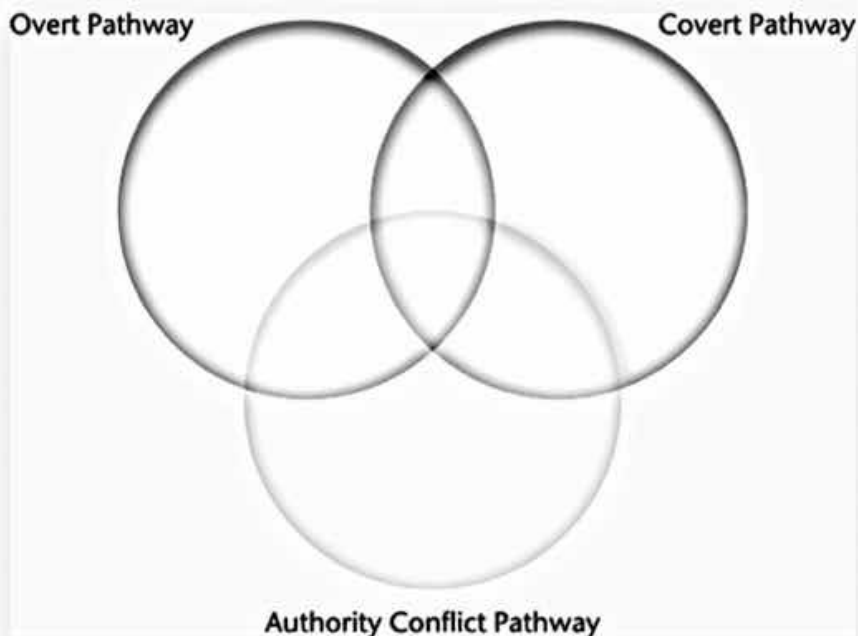


Source: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Researchers have found that these three different pathways are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can at times converge (see **Figure 8–13**). Self-report data have shown that simultaneous progression along two or more pathways leads to higher rates of delinquency.<sup>911</sup> Learn more about the Causes and Correlates study and view results from each study site at <https://justicestudies.com/pubs/ccdp.pdf>. Read more about the Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency at <https://justicestudies.com/pubs/rccd.pdf>, and review literature on developmental pathways at <https://justicestudies.com/pubs/pathways.pdf>.

**Figure 8-13**

### Single or Multiple Disruptive Pathways



Source: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

# Pathways to Desistance

## Audio

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The Pathways to Desistance study is the largest longitudinal study of serious adolescent offenders ever conducted. The study, which involved multiple sites, gathered data on serious adolescent offenders as they transitioned from adolescence into early adulthood.

Between November 2000 and January 2003, 1,354 adjudicated youths from the juvenile and adult court systems in Maricopa County (Phoenix), Arizona, and Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania, were enrolled into the study. The youth were at least 14 years old and under 18 years old at the time of offense.

Each study participant was followed for a period of seven years past enrollment, and interviews were conducted regularly with the adolescents as well as with family members and friends, providing a comprehensive picture of life changes in a wide array of areas over the course of the study. Overall, more than 20,000 interviews were conducted. The study attempted to identify factors that lead youth who commit serious offenses to continue or desist from offending, including individual maturation, life changes, and involvement with the criminal justice system.

The primary findings of the study include (1) a decrease in self-reported offending over time by the most serious adolescent offenders, (2) the relative inefficacy of longer juvenile incarcerations and its lack of impact on decreasing recidivism, (3) the effectiveness of community-based supervision as a component of aftercare for incarcerated youth, and (4) the positive impact of substance abuse treatment in reducing both substance use and crime commission by serious adolescent offenders. Significantly, the study also found that most youth who commit felonies greatly reduce their offending over time—regardless of intervention, preventative efforts, earlier experiences, or the expectations of others. Longer stays in juvenile

experiences, or the expectations of others. Longer stays in juvenile confinement facilities were not found to reduce recidivism.<sup>912</sup> Learn more about the Pathways to Desistance study at [www.justicestudies.com/pubs/pathways2015.pdf](http://www.justicestudies.com/pubs/pathways2015.pdf).

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## Theory versus Reality

### Social Influences on Developmental Pathways

A report by the Family and Youth Services Bureau (an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) identified five "aspects of the social context" that can either promote or block the development of prosocial behavior among adolescents:

1. **Biophysical aspects of the individual.** Biophysical characteristics found to influence developmental pathways during adolescence include temperament, gender, cognitive development, and age of onset of puberty. The influence of these factors on development depends to a large extent on how others in the social context react to them. Individuals bring these aspects of self to the interactions in which they are engaged, and the reaction of the social context to these aspects determines the quality and nature of the interactions.

2. **Aspects of society.** Society may be understood as the economic and institutional structures, values, and mores that constitute a national identity. Some of the aspects of society that influence the development of a sense of competency, connectedness, control, and identity are current economic and employment conditions, discrimination and prejudice, and educational institutions. Societal factors influence adolescent development directly and indirectly through their effects on communities and families. The societal factors of prejudice and discrimination often present barriers to positive developmental pathways for minority and economically disadvantaged youths, so for these youths, community and family contexts are particularly important for moderating the potentially negative influences of societal factors.

3. **Aspects of the community.** The community context (neighborhood or town) incorporates where individuals spend their time and with whom they spend it. The aspects of the community context that have been studied with respect to their effects on

context that have been studied with respect to their effects on adolescent development include community culture, availability of sources of support to parents and youths, and availability of quality community institutional or organizational resources for children and youths. As with societal factors, community factors have both direct and indirect influences on developmental pathways during adolescence. Formal and informal broad-based community institutions and organizations, in particular, influence adolescent development directly by teaching and encouraging prosocial behaviors and indirectly by supporting parents in their parenting efforts.

**4. Aspects of the family.** The following aspects of the family context have received considerable research attention with respect to their influences on developmental pathways: quality of the parent–child relationship, parenting styles or practices, family structure, and family dysfunction. In general, family practices that serve to monitor and control adolescents' behaviors in a caring and consistent manner, provide support and encouragement to adolescents, and allow them psychological and emotional independence appear to be most effective in fostering the development of a sense of competency, connectedness, control over one's fate in life, and identity.

**5. Aspects of peer relationships.** Research findings do not support the popular notion that adolescent problem behaviors are the result of peer pressure; instead, it has been shown that peers do not direct adolescents to new behaviors as much as they reinforce existing dispositions that helped direct the adolescent to a particular peer group in the first place. Close friendships with peers during adolescence have been found to promote positive growth because they foster the development of conceptions of fairness, mutual respect, empathy, and intimacy, through which youths are able to develop a sense of connectedness to others and a stable sense of identity.

The information in the Family and Youth Services Bureau report suggested that interventions designed to assist youths in making successful transitions to adulthood will need to provide adolescents, either directly or through parents and community resources, with opportunities to engage in interactions that foster the development of a sense of competency, connectedness, control, and identity and that interventions must address children, families, and communities as a unit if they are to be effective for large numbers of children and their families.

## Discussion Questions

# Critique of Social Development Theories

## 8.8 What are the shortcomings of social development theories of criminality?

Audio

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Social development theories have been criticized for definitional issues. What, for example, do life course concepts like turning point, pathway, risk factor, persistence, desistance, and criminal career really mean? Precise definitions of such concepts are necessary if hypotheses derived from life course theories are to be tested. Some writers have identified “associated problems of how to develop risk/needs assessment devices and how to use these both in fundamental research (to maximize the yield of serious offenders while still making it possible to draw conclusions about the general population) and in applied research (to decide which populations should be targeted by interventions).”<sup>921</sup>

Like the social structural approaches discussed in **Chapter 7**, social development theories are intimately associated with the first prong of this text theme—the social problems approach (described in **Chapter 1**). For policy makers, important questions include: What role (if any) does individual choice play in human development? Do people actively select components of the life course? Do they influence their own trajectories? Because so many important life course determinants are set in motion in early childhood and during adolescence, should those who make wrong choices be held accountable?

Finally, as is the case with social learning theories, social development theories tend to ignore differences between people—even though there may be some important personal characteristics that make some individuals more responsive to changes in the life

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Finally, as is the case with social learning theories, social development theories tend to ignore differences between people—even though there may be some important personal characteristics that make some individuals more responsive to changes in the life course, or that cause some people to respond to risk factors differently than do others—and which may even influence responses to certain features of crime control programs.