Illegal Behavior: A Presentation to the Committee on the Science of Adolescence of the National Academies

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Overview

• General Background
  – Nature
  – Prevalence
  – Historical Trends
  – Developmental Course
  – Demographic Variations
  – Established Correlates

• Osgood’s Additional Interests
  – Generality of Deviance
  – Peer Influence
  – Time Use
The Nature of Illegal Behavior

• Definition of crime or delinquency:
  – Behavior violating criminal or juvenile code.

• Range of phenomena
  – Enormous variety of seriousness
  – Overlaps other risk behaviors
    • Will mainly limit to non-overlapping behaviors

• Context of Societal Reaction
  – Legal code versus response
    • Consequences for measurement & statistics
  – Two legal systems
• Uniform Crime Reports Index Offenses
  – Homicide
  – Forcible rape
  – Fobbery
  – Aggravated assault
  – Burglary
  – Larceny-theft
  – Motor vehicle theft
  – Arson

• Typical Self-Report Delinquency Items:
  How many times in the past year have you:
  – Gotten into a serious fight at school or work
  – Taken something not belonging to you worth <$50
  – Gone into a building when you weren’t supposed to
  – Damaged school property on purpose
Prevalence of Illegal Behavior

• Juvenile Arrests (2006, UCR, Ages 10-17)
  Total = 6.6%, Violent Index = .3%,
  Murder = .004%, Aggr Assault = .18%,
  Property Index = 1.2%,
  Burglary = .25%, Larceny Theft = .8%

• Self Report Offending (MtF, 2007, Age 18)
  Any = 55.3%, Serious assault = 12.7%,
  Robbery = 3.6%, Shoplift = 27.4%,
  Trespass = 24.9%, School vandalism = 10.9%
Prevalence of Illegal Behavior

• Most serious & frequent crime concentrated in a select few:
  – Wolfgang: 6% of males with 5+ arrests account for > 50% of arrests
Prevalence of Justice System Involvement

- Of 6.6% of youth arrested (2006),
  - 8% to adult court, 68% to juvenile court
- Of juvenile court cases (1998)
  - 63% of cases adjudicated = 2.8% of juveniles
    - 58% formal probation = 1.6% of juveniles
    - 26% incarcerated = .7% of juveniles
- Incarcerated at a given time (1999)
  - 117,000 = ~.35% of juveniles
    - 25% detained, 75% committed
  - Of these, 3900 in adult state prisons
Historical Trends: Violent Arrests

Arrests per 100,000 juveniles ages 10-17

Violent Crime Index

Year

80 82 84 86 88 90 92 94 96 98 00 02 04 06
Historical Trends: Property Arrests

Arrests per 100,000 juveniles ages 10–17

Property Crime Index

Year

80 82 84 86 88 90 92 94 96 98 00 02 04 06
Historical Trends Can Vary Greatly by Offense

Arrests per 100,000 juveniles ages 10–17

Year

Burglary
A Little Longer Time Frame

**Figure 3-9** Robbery, 1960–1993 (Rates per 100,000 population)
Developmental Course: Age & Arrest

FIGURE 4-5  Age-specific Arrests Rates, 1992 (Rates per 100,000 persons)
Age & Serious Self Report

National Youth Survey, Serious self-reported violence
Developmental Course

• Peak age dependent on social definition
  – Behaviors first observed in toddlers and decline rapidly thereafter (Tremblay)

• Considerable stability in individual differences over life course
  – But considerable change as well
  – Robins dictum . . .

• Early onset correlated with serious & long term offending
  – As is extreme involvement at any age
Demographic Variations

• Sex differences
  – Males engage in more illegal behavior
  – Difference largest for most serious offenses
    • 60% of larceny arrests, 76% aggr assault, 91% robbery

• Race/Ethnicity
  – African Americans’ rates higher
    • Difference largest for arrest and violence, e.g., 10:1 robbery arrests, 2.2:1 for property arrests, < 2:1 for self reported serious violence
  – White, Asian, and Native American rates lower
  – Latino rates not well documented
Demographic Variations

• Socio-Economic Status
  – Only weakly related to self report
  – Strongly related to justice system dispositions

• Urban/Rural
  – Population size positively correlated with delinquency rates
  – Considerable variation among places with small populations
Established Correlates

• Personality
  – Impulsiveness, self control, sensation seeking, conscientiousness
  – Agreeableness, negative emotionality
  – Neuropsychological deficits, esp. verbal

• Family
  – Coercive parenting, abuse
  – Parental monitoring
  – Affective relations, attachment
Established Correlates (cont.)

- **School**
  - Bonding, commitment, effort
  - Grades, performance
- **Peers**
  - Delinquent friends
  - Unsupervised, unstructured socializing
- **Community**
  - Economic disadvantage, residential instability
  - Collective efficacy
The Generality of Deviance

• Strongest correlates are other problem behaviors

• What behaviors?
  – Violence, property, subs use, sex, driving . . .

• Shared versus unique variation
  – Need both types of theory

• Implications
  – Shared causes or directional influence?
  – What do they share?
    • Norm violation, risk & excitement, what else?
Peer Influence

• Prominence in theory and findings
  – Often portrayed as strongest influence

• Methodological issues
  – Reliance on perceptions about friends
  – Selection; reciprocal influence
  – Implications: Peer influence more limited

• Promising directions
  – Social network approaches
Time Use & Illegal Behavior

• Opportunity explanation & 3 elements of time use
• Breadth of evidence
• Developmental course
• Consistency of relationship
• An explanatory bridge
What Activities Bring Opportunities for Trouble?

• Spending time with peers
  – Can provide assistance
  – An appreciative audience

• In the absence of authority figures
  – People obligated to respond to trouble
  – Leisure activities away from adult family members

• Engaged in unstructured activities
  – That leave time available for deviance
Relationship of Activities & Problem Behavior

- Ride for Fun
- Visit with Friends
- Go to Parties
- Evenings Out
- Go on Dates
- Go to Movies
- Community Affairs
- Active Sports

- Delinquency
- Heavy Drinking
Unstructured Socializing & Problem Behavior

• Found by at least 17 studies

• Holds for:
  – Ages 9 to 26
  – Males and females
  – Majority and minority ethnicity
  – Varieties of illegal and problem behaviors
    Crime & delinquency  Illicit Drugs
    Alcohol Use  Dangerous Driving
Kinds of Evidence

- Qualitative and quantitative methods
- High and low risk populations
- International: many Western nations
- Cross-cultural
  - Variation across 50 pre-literate cultures
- Holds with strong controls
  - Many covariates; within-person/fixed effects
Developmental Course of Unstructured Socializing

• Increases through adolescence
  – Response to growth in skills and judgment
  – Less concern for safety and guidance
  – Anticipation of independence

• Decreases with transition to adulthood
  – Growing responsibilities leave less time available
  – Shifting leisure preferences
Parent’s Limits on Unsupervised Socializing

- How Far from Home
- How Long Away from Parents

Age

5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18
From Teen to Adult

Proportion
At least Once a Week

Visit Friends Informally
Ride for Fun
Evenings Out
Go to Parties

Age
Unstructured Socializing: Additional Findings

- Relationship not due to friends’ delinquency
- Holds for high & low risk kids
- Explanatory bridge to other factors
  - Gender
  - Teen employment
  - Marriage
  - School/Neighborhood differences
    - Both individual and context effect