



JUSTICE RESEARCH

National Institute of Justice
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

MAY 2014

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EXPLANATIONS FOR OFFENDING

The transition from adolescence to adulthood involves major life course trajectories, including education, work, residence, family formation and parenthood. It is a time of opportunity and vulnerability, a time of positive turnaround and redirection as well as a criminological crossroads. For some who began their criminal careers during adolescence, offending continues and escalates; for others, crime involvement wanes; and yet others only become seriously involved in crime later in their transition to adulthood.

This bulletin describes five broad theoretical perspectives that explain these patterns of offending: (1) static theories, (2) dynamic or life-course developmental models, (3) social psychological theories, (4) the developmental psychopathological perspective, and (5) the biopsychosocial perspective.

1. Static theories hold that behavior emerges in a predictable sequence and unfolds at roughly the same age for all individuals. According to these theories, the causes of criminal behavior are established early in life and are relatively stable and unaffected by events. Youth who experience poor parenting and have harsh, brittle relationships with their parents, for

This publication summarizes Bulletin 3: Explanations for Offending by Terence P. Thornberry, Peggy C. Giordano, Christopher Uggen, Mauri Matsuda, Ann S. Masten, Erik Bulten, Andrea G. Donker and David Petechuk, NCJ 242933, available at NCJRS.gov. Bulletin 3 is one in a series of bulletins prepared for Transitions From Juvenile to Adult: Papers From the Study Group on Transitions From Juvenile Delinquency to Adult Crime. The study group was led by David Farrington and Rolf Loeber under award number 2008-IJ-CX-K402; to learn more, visit NIJ.gov, keyword "Transitions to Adulthood." This summary was written by Carrie Mulford, a Social Science Analyst at NIJ. See full bulletin for source citations.

example, are likely to have low self-control and therefore relatively high levels of offending at all ages. According to static theories, individuals tend to maintain their general position relative to others with respect to their levels of offending. The peak of adolescent offending is assumed to be the result of normative developmental changes.

2. Dynamic or life-course developmental models assume a plasticity to human behavior that persists throughout life, acknowledge the importance of early individual and parenting differences, and contend that changing social environments are the primary drivers of offending behavior. According to dynamic models, continuing to offend into adulthood is the outcome of processes that were set in motion by earlier developmental issues. Young offenders who stop committing crimes are those who re-establish bonds to conventional society and who engage in prosocial activities, such as school, work and marriage.

3. Social psychological theories of criminal behavior emphasize subjective life experiences, such as the development of one's identity, cognitive and emotional processes, and the capacity to make choices. One social psychological explanation for continuing criminal behavior into adulthood is hostile attribution bias — the tendency to

attribute negative intentions to others. It is widely recognized that motivation to change is the first step in behavioral change. Desistance from crime occurs when young offenders who are motivated to change redefine themselves so that criminal behavior is no longer compatible with their new identity.

4. The developmental psychopathological perspective brings together ideas from several disciplines. In this perspective, development is a series of dynamic interactions among an individual's genetic makeup, life experiences and social relationships. Early experiences can be carried forward, while the possibility of change continues throughout life. Early negative experiences can have negative biological influences, such as altered brain development or inappropriate reactions to stress. These are carried forward and can result in a cascade of subsequent problems. Developmental psychopathology underscores the possibility of both opportunity and vulnerability during times of change in an individual's life (e.g., puberty, entering or leaving school, leaving home). The transition to adulthood, for example, is a period of concentrated change, which provides possible explanations for either stopping or reducing involvement in crime or becoming more involved in it later in life.

5. The biopsychosocial perspective regards behavior as a complex interaction among biological, psychological, interpersonal and environmental processes. This perspective argues that a single explanatory framework is insufficient. For example, self-regulation, sensitivity to reward and punishment, and fear conditioning, which

are associated with aggression, are related to brain development but also are influenced by factors such as the family environment and peer relationships.

A strong theme emerges in all five theories: Disorderly transitions, such as teen parenthood and failing to complete high school, have long-term negative consequences. It is vital to develop effective prevention and early intervention programs to reduce the occurrence of these disorderly transitions. Doing so not only improves transitions in general but is also likely to reduce the prevalence and frequency of criminal offending during early adulthood. Additional research that continues to test these theories will create a better understanding of other scientific factors that are associated with the development of criminal behavior.

The malleability and changes in criminal behavior observed among youth and young adults in their teens and 20s make it difficult to justify applying permanent or long-term sanctions to young offenders. Policies such as life sentences without the possibility of parole or the lifelong application of civil disabilities, such as disenfranchisement, assume that criminality is a fixed trait that crystallizes early in the life course and is immutable thereafter. Criminological theory and the available empirical evidence call into question such assumptions, suggesting instead that change is common.

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