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Development of Adolescence-Limited, Late-Onset, and Persistent Offenders From Age 8 to Age 48

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This article investigates the life success at ages 32 and 48 of four categories of males: nonoffenders, adolescence-limited offenders (convicted only at ages 10–20), late-onset offenders (convicted only at ages 21–50), and persistent offenders (convicted at both ages 10–20 and 21–50). In the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, 411 South London males have been followed up from age 8 to 48 in repeated personal interviews. There was considerable continuity in offending over time. Persistent offenders had the longest criminal careers (averaging 18.4 years), and most of them had convictions for violence. Persistent offenders were leading the most unsuccessful lives at ages 32 and 48, although all categories of males became more successful with age. By age 48, the life success of adolescence-limited offenders was similar to that of nonoffenders. The most important risk factors at ages 8–18 that predicted which offenders would persist after age 21 were heavy drinking at age 18, hyperactivity at ages 12–14, and low popularity and harsh discipline at ages 8–10. The most important risk factors that predicted which nonoffenders would onset after age 21 were poor housing and low nonverbal IQ at ages 8–10, high neuroticism at age 16, and anti-establishment attitudes and motoring convictions at age 18. It was suggested that nervousness and neuroticism may have protected children at risk from offending in adolescence and the teenage years. Aggr. Behav. 35:150–163, 2009. © 2009 Wiley-Liss, Inc.

Keywords: longitudinal study; persistent offenders; adolescence-limited; late-onset offenders; risk factors; life success

INTRODUCTION

The concept of adolescence-limited offenders, who begin and end their short criminal careers in adolescence and the teenage years, was popularized by Moffitt [1993]. She argued that their offending was caused by peer influence and by the gap between what they wanted (e.g. money or status) and what they could obtain in the teenage years. They stopped offending in their 20s because peer influence decreased and because they could now obtain what they wanted by legal means. Moffitt contrasted adolescence-limited offenders with life-course-persistent offenders who had an earlier age of onset and long criminal careers. Their offending was caused by cognitive deficits, an undercontrolled temperament, hyperactivity, poor parenting, disrupted families, teenage parents, poverty, low socioeconomic status, and biological factors such as a low heart rate.

Moffitt [2006] argued that it was not necessary to propose a category of adult onset offenders because those who were first convicted in adulthood had in reality begun their (undetected) offending before. However, Thornberry and Krohn [2005] proposed that adult onset offenders had cognitive deficits such as low intelligence and poor school performance but were protected ("cocooned") from antisocial behavior at earlier ages by a supportive family and school environment. They began offending as adults because they had difficulty in making a successful transition to adult roles such as employment and marriage.

The key construct in Sampson and Laub's [2005] theory is age-graded informal social control, which means the strength of bonding to family, peers, schools, and later adult social institutions such as marriages and jobs. They suggested that offending increased or decreased according to changes in social influence. They emphasized change over time rather than consistency and the poor ability of early childhood risk factors to predict later life outcomes. They focused on the importance of later life events

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