Causes and Consequences of Delinquency

Findings from the Rochester Youth Development Study

Terence P. Thornberry, Alan J. Lizotte, Marvin D. Krohn, Carolyn A. Smith, and Pamela K. Porter

Introduction

The Rochester Youth Development Study began in 1986 as one of three projects in the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency. The purpose of the Rochester study is to investigate the causes and consequences of adolescent delinquency, with a particular focus on serious, chronic offenders.

While the initial aim was to study adolescent delinquency and drug use, over the years the project has expanded into a broader investigation of both prosocial and antisocial development across the life course. We have reported our findings in scores of publications, reports, dissertations, and presentations. We have investigated a number of interrelated analytic topics, and in this paper we try to “take stock” of at least some of what we have learned. We first summarize the theoretical and methodological approaches of the Rochester Youth Development Study and then discuss some of our key empirical findings.

Theoretical Framework

The overall design of the Rochester study is guided by two theoretical models—interactional theory and social network theory. Interactional theory, first presented by Thornberry in 1987 and extended by Thornberry and Krohn in 2001, provides the core conceptual framework for hypotheses concerning the causes and consequences of delinquency. Social network theory was developed by Krohn in 1986 and its complementary perspective has been used to expand the theoretical purview of interactional theory. While these conceptual models help to guide the research design and measurement space of the Rochester project, the results of the study also help us to revise, expand, and better integrate our conceptual models of delinquency (see especially, Thornberry & Krohn, 2001). In this section we provide brief overviews of these theoretical models.

Interactional Theory

There are three fundamental premises to an interactional theory of delinquency. First, the theory adopts a developmental or life-course perspective; second, it emphasizes bidirectional causality; and third, it incorporates social structural influences into the explanation of individual delinquent careers.

Based on this framework, interactional theory posits that the basic cause of delinquency is a weakening of social controls caused by an attenuation of the person's bond to conventional society. For adolescents in particular, the bond is formed by strong relationships to parents and family, by commitment to and success in school, and by aspirations for and belief in conventional success goals. Adolescents who are strongly attached to, monitored by, and involved with their families are unlikely candidates for prolonged involvement in delinquency. The affective and control elements of these family processes should place bounds on the behavioral freedom of the adolescent. Similar arguments can be made with regard to both school and belief variables (see Thornberry, 1987).

In contrast, adolescents who have brittle relationships with their parents, who are alienated from school, and who lack conventional success goals have fewer social constraints to channel their behavior toward prosocial arenas. They have greater behavioral freedom and are more likely to become involved in delinquency.

For these youth to become seriously and persistently involved in delinquency, however, they need a social environment in which their new-found freedom is channeled in that particular direction. That environment is epitomized by the delinquent peer group which provides delinquent models and reinforcements for both delinquent behavior and delinquent beliefs. As youth freed from the constraints of the conventional world gravitate together, they find a social environment that supports and encourages prolonged involvement in delinquency.