Young people certainly do seek to inhabit worlds (the pub, the club, the disco floor) in which they are in control. But so do adults, who also indulge in leisure, use it as a source of fantasy, a place to act out ‘subterranean values’. The distinctive nature of youth culture must be explained, then, not by reference to leisure itself, but to young people’s position in work and family, to the ‘reality’ from which leisure is, on occasion, an escape (Frith, 1985: 360).

What Young (1971) described as the ambivalent position of youth was largely a product of the changing patterns of employment associated with industrialisation. Child labour was essential to the early phase of the industrial revolution, as it had been to the preceding family based economy, but became less important as the factory reform movement gained ground and technological innovations yielded more efficient forms of production (Evans, 1983). By the time compulsory education was introduced towards the end of the nineteenth century, children were no longer so central to the working of the economy and demand for their labour had already declined (Musgrove, 1964). The expansion of the education and apprenticeship system absorbed the potential labour surplus and regulated entry into the labour market, hiving young people off from the rest of society and committing them to a state of ‘limbo’ between childhood and adulthood (Young, 1971: 141). Subsequent developments, rooted in changing patterns of production and employment, have further magnified the ambivalent position of youth and have resulted in longer, more fragmented journeys into adulthood. What implications this has had for drug use will be considered below. Whereas the previous chapter concentrated on the agential processes
associated with leisure and consumption, the analysis presented here examines how the choices young adults make about drug use vary with age, work status and domestic circumstances. The results are discussed in light of recent developments in life-course criminology, which, it will be shown, not only help to explain why drug use is distributed in the way that it is, but also serve to clarify the social meaning of such behaviour.

**Life-course criminology**

The observation that crime is mostly committed by young people has prompted suggestions that any theory of criminal offending should seek to explain how such behaviour fits with the course of individual development from infancy to old age (Smith, 2002). That offending behaviour is closely related to the course of individual development is not in doubt, but the nature of this relationship is a matter of debate. Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) famously claimed that the age distribution of crime – its onset and desistance – is invariant across time, space and historical context. They subsequently went onto argue that age has a direct effect on crime, so that desistance is something that ‘just happens’ due to ‘the inexorable aging of the organism’ (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 141). Critics have rejected the claim that the relationship between age and crime is invariant and have challenged the notion that age causes desistance (see Farrall and Bowling, 1999; Laub and Sampson, 2003). Age, they note, is not a personal characteristic, but an index of the likely stage of development that someone has reached and of their social standing. Such objections have been reinforced by evidence that desistance is related to changes in a range of sociological and psychological variables, including life-course events such as marriage, employment and education.

In what is arguably the most significant contribution to life-course criminology in recent years, Robert Sampson and John Laub (1993, 2005; see also Laub and Sampson, 2003) developed an ‘age-graded theory of informal social control’. As this description implies, their approach rests on a sympathetic critique of control theory. Rather than trying to explain deviant impulses, control theory assumes that individuals are subject to many temptations to engage in rewarding criminal behaviour and will do so unless they are held in check (Reiss, 1951; Reckless, 1967). As one of the leading advocates of this perspective, Hirschi (1969) argued that the key to delinquency control is provided by the social bond, which is made up of the emotional connections that individuals