

# Lecture 8: Life course theories

SOCIOL 3410: Criminology

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# Key life course concepts

- Picturing the life course
  - ▣ Onset
  - ▣ Duration/persistence
  - ▣ Incidence
  - ▣ Desistence
- Focus of theories: Continuity and/or change



# Key life course facts

- What happens during childhood is related to delinquency in adolescence (Wilson & Herrnstein; Gottfredson & Hirschi)
- Involvement in crime during early adolescence is related to criminal involvement during late adolescence and early adulthood (Wolfgang et al., Piquero et al.)



# Crime and age

- Most criminal offenders are teenagers
- Criminal offending rises steeply from ages 7 to 17 and declines thereafter
- By early 20s, 50% of delinquents desist
- By 28, 85% of delinquents desist (Caspi & Moffitt)
- Virtually all offenders eventually desist (Laub & Sampson)



# Back to self-control theory: continuity

- Those with conduct problems in childhood are those that are delinquent teenagers are those that are adult criminals
- This continuity implies that the origins lie largely in childhood
- Says other theories ignore continuity in problem behavior and stable underlying characteristics
- Questions nearly all major theories of crime

# Life Course Theories

- Interactional Theory (Thornberry)
- Moffitt's Developmental Theory
- Age-graded social control (Sampson & Laub)
- More ideas on desistence
  - Cognitive transformation: hooks for change (Giordano et al.)
  - Redemptive scripts (Maruna)

# Interactional Theory (Thornberry)

- Main premise: delinquent behavior is embedded in a set of reciprocal causal networks that change over time
- Borrowed from control theory and learning theories to develop 2 interrelated causal loops
  - 1. Attachment to parents, conventional beliefs, commitment to school (Later in early adulthood: commitment to employment, attachment to own family)
  - 2. Delinquent peers, delinquent values, delinquency
- Different variables matter at different points, including for desistence

# Moffitt's Developmental Theory

- All youth take one of two paths
- Life-course-persistent (LCP)
  - ▣ Who: 5 to 10% of male population
  - ▣ When: Starts in childhood and continues through adulthood
  - ▣ Why: neuropsychological deficits and difficult social environments
  - ▣ Effects: Cumulative continuity



# Moffitt's Developmental Theory

- Adolescent-limited antisocial behavior (AL)
  - Who: Everyone else
  - When: Starts in adolescence and ends in young adulthood
  - Why: Maturity gap
  - Effects: Do not persist because they are not subject to cumulative continuity and eventually demonstrate maturity other ways
- Critiques



# Sampson and Laub's Age-graded social control

- Main premise: the life course is dynamic, as social bonds vary throughout life and have a direct effect on offending
- Continued adult offending
- Changed adult offending
- Evidence
- Criticisms and contribution



# More ideas on desistance

- Hooks for change (Giordano et al.)
  - ▣ Life course events as hooks for change
  - ▣ 4 cognitive shifts must occur for hooks to work
- Redemptive scripts (Maruna)
  - ▣ Persisters: Condemnation script
  - ▣ Desisters: Redemptive script



# Policy implications

- Intervention programs to decrease risk of onset and divert youth from criminal trajectories
  - ▣ Parent training, improve cognitive development, reverse early conduct problems
  - ▣ Olds et al.'s Prenatal and Early Childhood Nurse Visitation Program
  - ▣ Patterson's Oregon Social Learning Center
- If Moffitt is right, incarceration may be appropriate for LCPs
- If Sampson & Laub's age-graded social control is right, incarceration inappropriate because severs bonds, but rather treatment and reentry programs to reestablish bonds and encourage desistence