



## A test of the validity of delinquency syndrome construct in a homogeneous sample

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This was a study of 387 adolescents who regularly attended churches affiliated with a primary Protestant denomination in a Midwestern state. The purpose was twofold: (1) to determine if the delinquency syndrome argument has validity in a sample of religious youths, by testing whether the same basic theoretical models explained crime and drug use; and (2) to examine the relative utility of sociodemographic, social control and social learning factors in explaining these two forms of delinquency. The study finds that all theoretical factors investigated are correlated significantly with both crime and use of drugs; however, some of these factors are differentially related to those two forms of delinquency. Also, social control elements did account for more additional variance in crime than did social learning or sociodemographic factors. Implications for future research are discussed in the context of limitations of the present study. © 2000 The Association for Professionals in Services for Adolescents

### Introduction

The present study focuses on use of drugs and criminal behavior among adolescents. Whereas a clear empirical relationship between drug use and criminal behavior has been well-documented over the past half-century, the precise nature or sequence of the relationship remains uncertain and elusive (Harrison and Gfroerer, 1992; Walters, 1994). The etiological uncertainty is reflected in the differing forms and intensities of interventions devised over the past decade (Byrne *et al.*, 1992). Whether drug use is antecedent to or the consequence of crime, or there is a reciprocal relationship between these forms of delinquency, has not been empirically established (Walters, 1994). Since these constituent delinquent behaviors are so closely associated, many researchers and theoreticians argue that drug use and crime are behavioral manifestations of an interrelated constellation or syndrome of delinquency (Elliot *et al.*, 1985; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Huizinga *et al.*, 1991; Jessor, *et al.*, 1991). Proponents of the delinquency syndrome perspective argue that these behaviors are so interrelated that they result from the same basic underlying problem or trait (see McCord, 1990; White, 1992) and that a single theoretical model will suffice to explain use of drugs and crime (e.g. Elliott *et al.*, 1985; Blumstein *et al.*, 1988; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990).

However, whereas some researchers find empirical support for delinquency syndrome (Huizinga *et al.*, 1991; Jessor *et al.*, 1991; Dembo *et al.*, 1992), others find that various combinations of theoretical factors explain different forms of delinquent behavior (Baumrind, 1991; Benda and Corwyn, 1997a, 1998). Moreover, evidence indicates that there is less overlap in which adolescents engage in the various forms of delinquency studied than would be expected if these forms represent one underlying problem or trait (White, 1992; Benda and Corwyn, 1998). Hence the validity of the delinquency syndrome remains

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uncertain (McCord, 1990; White, 1992; Newcomb, 1995; Benda, 1997; Benda and Corwyn, 1997a; Corwyn and Benda, in press).

A plausible explanation for the lack of consistent empirical support for a delinquency syndrome is that this construct has been overextended in scope by applying it to a diversity of adolescents who have significant variation in personal attributes, familial relationships, and experiences with ecological environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Baumrind, 1991, 1996). Indeed, logical deduction from adolescent development perspectives (e.g. Elder, 1985; Feldman and Elliott, 1990) and recent research based on developmental theories of delinquency (Thornberry, 1997) indicated that inclusion of drug addicts and abusers, chronic property offenders, and violent gang members with adolescents who are passing through a relatively brief period of experimentation with varying degrees of these delinquent behaviors will heighten the differential effects of psychosocial factors on various forms of unlawful activity. For example, it has been theorized that continued criminal behavior primarily arises early in life from personal and social deficits (e.g. impulsivity, insensitivity, antisocial), resulting from dysfunctional and coercive familial interactional patterns (Patterson, 1982; Baumrind, 1991), that provide little control over natural delinquent impulses (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990), whereas brief experimentation with delinquency during adolescence is largely due to peer influences (Simons *et al.*, 1994; Bartusch *et al.*, 1997). Whether or not this particular theoretical perspective on developmental differences in delinquent behavior is valid remains to be empirically established (Thornberry, 1997). However, emerging evidence clearly indicates differential patterns of, and associated influences on, delinquency in the general population of adolescents. In summary, the heterogeneity in personal characteristics and in involvement in unlawful behavior is likely to be responsible for the lack of consistent support for a delinquency syndrome.

### *Present study*

Based on prior research, the primary assumption underlying the present study is that the delinquency syndrome perspective is limited in application and is more likely to be valid in a relatively homogenous population of youth. The population selected for study is adolescents who regularly attend a Methodist church in a Midwestern state. The Christian doctrine (Buswell, 1962) of the Methodist church adheres to Biblical injunctions against unlawful behavior and use of substances leading to addiction or physical and mental deterioration. Additionally, the churches selected have congregations that are relatively homogenous in terms of race, socio-economic status, education, and religious beliefs. Hence, the variability in prevalence, incidence and types of delinquency in the study population is very likely to be constrained in comparison to the general population, or even adolescent populations from churches where more liberal doctrines are taught (Smith, 1990). Indeed, adolescents in the study population are taught unambiguous proscriptions against the use of illicit drugs and other unlawful behavior.

At the same time, almost all adolescents, to varying degrees, experiment with different forms of delinquency in the process of formulating their own unique identity, independent of the one bequeathed to them by parents (Erikson, 1968; Feldman and Elliott, 1990). Based on previous findings (Burkett, 1993; Benda and Corwyn, 1997a, b) and on assumptions about the religious socialization of the study population, it is surmised that those studied are most likely to be persons who only experiment with delinquency for a relatively brief period during adolescence. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that the delinquency syndrome will be supported in the present study: the assumption is that the delinquency syndrome construct is

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