



Pergamon

International Journal of Law and Psychiatry
24 (2001) 447–467

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
**LAW AND
PSYCHIATRY**

Delinquency and health among adolescents: Multiple outcomes of a similar social and structural process

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1. Introduction

The majority of social scientific research today tends to be discipline specific, concentrating upon distinct phenomena of interest and how individual and structural determinants influence these phenomena. This is evident in research specializations as diverse as criminology and mental health. Each has progressed to theoretical positions that attempt to explain how underlying factors contribute to specific outcomes. Within criminology, one of the dominant paradigms used to explain childhood misconduct, juvenile delinquency, adult crime, and risk-taking behavior — the control perspective — hypothesizes a causal relationship between structural and social processes and the increased likelihood of antisocial consequences.

These disciplines have been successful at laying the groundwork for understanding the relationship between social and structural processes and the discipline-specific outcome of interest. However, are these phenomena — mental health problems and delinquency — mutually exclusive or might they be multiple outcomes of similar underlying social and structural processes? Recent epidemiological and clinical evidence reveals a tendency among adolescents to manifest a clustering of delinquency, substance abuse, and mental health problems indicating that they may be associated with one another (Kessler et al., 1996; Steinhausen, Meier, & Angst, 1998; cf. Milin, 1996). This implies that these internalizing and externalizing behaviors may be multiple outcomes of similar structural and social processes suggesting a need to move past a discipline-specific focus to investigate whether adolescents who experience social and structural disadvantage are at risk for a multitude of negative outcomes.

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1.1. Juvenile delinquency and social control theories

Structural dimensions including the socioeconomic standing and composition of the family as well as social dynamics among parents and children play a crucial role in the development of children (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986). In a review of over 30 studies, they find strong support for the relationship between socioeconomic disadvantage, poor parent–child relations, and children’s behavior problems and delinquency. The classic Glueck and Glueck (1950, 1968) study identified differences in the affection and hostility demonstrated by parents of delinquent children compared to nondelinquent children. Others argue that this lack of affection by parents is more likely within nontraditional family compositions such as families with step-parents (Burgess, 1980). Further research has also demonstrated a significant link between family composition, socioeconomic disadvantage, and substance use and delinquency (Miller, 1997; Smart, Adlaf, & Walsh, 1994).

Hirschi (1969), in his original social bond theory, argued that the developmental correlates of conformity — attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief — which are inculcated within the family domain produces law-abiding citizens in society. The failure of cohesion among children within the family institution due to parental unavailability or poor child–parent relations results in a deficit in the bonds between the child and his/her family and society. Children without these bonds were more likely to engage in risky activities and criminality because they lack a vested interest in their community. In subsequent work, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), in their *General Theory of Crime*, further spell out this personal disposition of self-control among children. They argue that effective parental nurturance, child-rearing, and parental discipline, which are related to structural background factors, are essential for the development of a strong internal self-control among children. The influence of the family is instrumental in the prevention of delinquency and criminality among adolescents and adults.

The trait of low self-control has four defining features: it is evident among children as early as grammar school (Wilson, 1993) and largely persistent throughout the life course; behaviors resulting from a deficit in self-control include both criminal and noncriminal acts characterized by an impulsive need for immediate gratification of desires coupled with a preference for risky activities; the various behaviors are not causally predictive of one another, but are multiple outcomes of this underlying trait; and, while an accumulation of these behaviors indicate a low level of self-control, there is an inability to predict which specific behaviors will manifest during the life course. While people possessing this trait have an increased likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviors, its engagement is not a necessary condition of low self-control. People possessing this characteristic are also more likely to engage in other noncriminal risky and impulsive behaviors.

Sampson and Laub (1993) extend the work of Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) by examining additional sources of social capital beyond the family that may temper or contribute to the development of delinquency and criminogenic behaviors. While acknowledging the importance of the family as the central institution, especially in the early years of a child’s life, they suggest that other institutions can be a resource to compensate for negative parental relations and bonds. Social capital, in this context, are the personal

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