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Friends' influence on adolescent theft and minor delinquency: A developmental test of peer-reported effects [☆]

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Abstract

Most theories about adolescent involvement in delinquent behaviors afford a prominent role to peers or friends and their behaviors. In this article I explore the age-graded role that *actual* friends' behavior plays in explaining respondents' theft and minor delinquency during middle and later adolescence, paying special attention to the potentially mitigating effects of social control measures. Results suggest that

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the influence of friends' own reported theft and minor delinquency in explaining respondents' behavior is relatively modest despite employing several different measures of friends' behaviors. Family influences proved weaker than expected during middle adolescence. The influence of friends' behavior was only modestly influential, and slightly more noticeable during later adolescence. The sheer amount of time spent with friends, on the other hand, was influential throughout adolescence. The results reinforce skepticism concerning the accuracy of self-reports about peer behavior, and suggest that perceptions of peers' behavior may be more influential than the behaviors themselves.

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1. Introduction

It is well documented that peers and friends are an important influence on adolescent behavior. Peer attitudes and behaviors are often considered the most important external predictors of adolescent delinquency (Akers et al., 1979; Aseltine, 1995; Elliott et al., 1985; Matsueda, 1982). However, most studies to date have involved surveys in which the respondent self-reports their own and their friends' delinquent activity. Correlations between behaviors of one's own and one's peer group are often high (Kandel, 1996; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Warr, 1993a). Too high for several researchers (e.g., Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Kandel, 1996), who suggest that method overlap in asking an adolescent about their own behavior and then about the number of their friends who act similarly invites a likely imputation of one's own behavior to others. This problem would artificially inflate regression estimates, causing researchers to credit peers with too much influence on delinquency (Kandel, 1996; Zhang and Messner, 2000). Additionally, peers and friends are conceptually distinct: friends enjoy proximity and interaction with each other, whereas peers need not have a personal relationship at all (Moffitt, 1993). With a few exceptions, most research about peer influence appears to actually focus on friends, persons with whom an adolescent is thought to share an amicable, perhaps reciprocated, relationship. Survey questions typically ask a respondent about the behaviors in which they think their friends are involved. An adolescents' peers, on the other hand, may not be considered their friends, yet may still influence their behavior (Moffitt, 1993).

This study examines actual friends' reports of participation in delinquency and evaluates this influence on respondents' self-reports of two types of delinquency over the course of adolescence, using data from a nationally representative, longitudinal survey of adolescents. The research questions this paper addresses are these: First, Are *actual* friendship group traits

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