



It's not the time they spend, it's what they do: The interaction between delinquent friends and unstructured routine activity on delinquency[☆]

Findings from two countries

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether having delinquent friends interacts with other peer-related variables in the explanation of adolescent offending. We hypothesise that the relationship between delinquent friends and offending might be conditioned by the effect of (1) how much time they spend with their friends, (2) how much time they spend in unstructured routine activities and (3) their emotional relationship with their friends. To test these three hypotheses we use data from two independent samples of young adolescents in Halmstad, Sweden ($N=1,003$) and in Cologne and Freiburg, Germany ($N=955$). The results found strong support that the effect of delinquent friends on adolescent offending is conditional on the level of time they spend in unstructured routine activities. This indicates that delinquent friends have a stronger effect on offending for adolescents who often spend their free time in unstructured routine activities.

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Introduction

One of the best-known findings in delinquency research is that adolescents with delinquent friends are more likely to engage in delinquency themselves (e.g. Warr, 2002; Haynie & Osgood, 2005; Svensson, 2003; Elliott et al., 1985; Weerman, 2004). One point of discussion has been whether the association should be seen as a mere selection effect (Glueck & Glueck, 1950; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 1969) or as a 'true' causal effect of social influence (Akers, 1998; Sutherland & Cressey, 1955; Burgess & Akers, 1966). Empirical evidence from longitudinal studies increasingly support the view that the association reflects both a selection effect and a causal effect (e.g. Erickson et al., 2000; Espelage et al., 2003; Haynie, 2001; Jaccard et al., 2005; Kandel, 1996; Matsueda & Anderson, 1998; Thornberry et al., 1994; Weerman, 2004; but see Knecht et al., 2010).

Another point of discussion concerns the consequences of this general insight. Since we know that delinquent friends increases the risk of delinquency it is relevant to better understand *why* delinquent friends are important, for *whom* delinquent friends are important and *how* delinquent friends matter. However, as of today, very little

attention has been paid to these questions of mechanisms and conditions of peer effects (Haynie, 2001). In particular, the question whether delinquent friends interact with other peer related variables in the explanation of offending remains largely unsolved. It has however been suggested that the relationship between delinquent friends and offending is conditioned by the level of *how much time* adolescents spend with their friends, *where they are* when they spend their time and the character (positive or negative) of their *emotional relations* to their friends (Sutherland & Cressey, 1955; Agnew, 1991; Haynie, 2001; Haynie & Osgood, 2005). This study follows this reasoning by examining whether the effect of delinquent friends is conditioned by the effect of how much time they spend with their friends, how much time they spend in unstructured routine activities, and by their emotional relationship with their friends.

Delinquent friends in social learning and routine activity theories

The relationship between offending and delinquent friends is mostly seen in the framework of social learning theory which assumes that delinquent friends influence adolescents by transmitting and reinforcing deviant norms condoning and encouraging norm-breaking behavior (Akers, 1998; Sutherland & Cressey, 1955; Warr, 2002). Whether the effect of delinquent friends on offending is conditioned by other peer-related variables – i.e. the emotional bond they have with them and how much time they spend with them in which environments – will be discussed below.

Adolescents who often spend their free time with friends have an increased risk of offending by rendering offending easier and more

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rewarding by their friends (Osgood et al., 1996). In addition, it has been argued that the more time adolescent spend with delinquent friends the more these friends will act as role models, transmitting delinquent values and rewarding their behaviour (Agnew, 1991; Haynie & Osgood, 2005). Agnew (1991) found, amongst other things, that the effect of delinquent friends on offending is stronger if adolescents spend a large amount of time with their friends. Using data from the 'Add Health' Study, Haynie and Osgood (2005) found, on the other hand, no empirical evidence for the assumption that delinquent friends interact with the amount of time they spend with friends.

In addition, routine activity theory stresses that spending time in unstructured routine activities with friends in the absence of authority figures increases the risk of offending because adolescents find themselves more often in situations that increase the risk of offending (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Haynie & Osgood, 2005). The absence of authority figures reduces the level of social control (Birkbeck & LaFree, 1993; Osgood et al., 1996; Osgood & Anderson, 2004). Accordingly, it can be assumed that the more time adolescents spend with delinquent friends in unstructured routine activities, the higher the risk of offending, both because delinquent friends act as role models and because of the lack of social control. In a study among Icelandic youth, Thorlindsson and Bernburg (2006) found that the effect of drug using friends on drug use decreases with higher levels of involvement in structured activities (sports and social clubs) and that the effect increases with higher levels of involvement in unstructured activities (party).

Considering attachment to friends, however, the picture is less clear. Some scholars found empirical evidence for a positive relationship between attachment to friends and offending, other scholars for a negative relationship, while still others did not find any direct effect on offending (Elliott et al., 1985; Haynie & Osgood, 2005; Giordano et al., 1986; Agnew, 1991; Ring, 1999; Hirschi, 1969). Agnew (1991) has argued that if the emotional relationship is well developed, delinquent friends will be more attractive as role models resulting in an increased risk that an individual will imitate the group. He also found that attachment to friends interacts with the delinquency of friends in the explanation of offending, indicating that delinquent friends have a stronger effect on offending if the bonds are well-developed (Agnew, 1991). Yet, again, Haynie and Osgood (2005) found no empirical evidence that delinquent friends interact with the level of bonds to their friends.

Summing up previous research, there are good theoretical reasons for examining whether the effect of delinquent friends on adolescent offending is conditioned by the amount of time they spend with their friends, where they spend this time, and the quality of their emotional relationship. Only a few empirical studies have focused on these questions and contradictory findings have been reported. Against this background, we will build on previous research by further examining the conditional effects of delinquent friends on offending. Three hypotheses will be addressed in this study.

Hypothesis 1. Delinquent friends will have a stronger effect on offending if the bonds to their friends are well-developed.

Hypothesis 2. Delinquent friends will have a stronger effect on offending if adolescents spend a high amount of time with their friends.

Hypothesis 3. Delinquent friends will have a stronger effect on offending if adolescents spend a high amount of time in unstructured routine activities.

These three hypotheses will be tested using Swedish and German data. This article is not based on a cross-national comparative study in the true sense of the term. Instead the study is a test of theoretical arguments in two independent samples from two different European countries. The questionnaires are not identical across sites and use different wordings on almost all items. Yet, the relevant questions and

constructs for the analyses that follow have been addressed in similar ways in the two questionnaires. If results are concurrent across both samples, this will provide a better and stronger empirical basis for drawing conclusions than would have been the case, had the study been based on only one sample.

Data and method

Participants

Halmstad School Survey. The Halmstad data are from the *Halmstad school survey* (e.g. Pauwels & Svensson, 2008, 2009; Svensson & Pauwels, 2008; Svensson, et al., 2010). Halmstad is a medium sized city on the south-west coast of Sweden with approximately 90,000 inhabitants. With regard to levels of income, unemployment, and educational achievement the sample is comparable to the Swedish average. The Halmstad school survey includes all students in their final year of compulsory education (on average fifteen years of age). The study constitutes a census of 1,003 adolescents in thirteen schools. The study was conducted between February and March of 2005. In Halmstad, the headmaster of each school distributed the questionnaires with information about the study to teachers, and the students completed the questionnaires during lesson time in the presence of the teacher. The non-response rate for the population was 15.2%. Following list wise deletion of missing values, the analyses below are based on 880 respondents. The Halmstad survey consists of 48.9% boys and 51.1% girls. 75.3% of the respondents have a fully native background (both parents from Sweden), 11.2% of the respondents have one parent with an immigrant background and 13.5% of the respondents have two immigrant parents. 82.4% of the respondents live with two parents and 17.6% live in a single parent family.

MPI Youth Survey. The German data is from a school survey which took place in two German cities, Cologne and Freiburg, and in suburban and rural communities in the vicinity of Freiburg, in 1999 and 2000 (Oberwittler, 2004a, 2004b, 2007). With a population of one million, Cologne is Germany's fourth largest city and has a large immigrant population with residents of Turkish descent as the major ethnic minority. Cologne's economic and social structure is very diverse, and includes traditional manufacturing industries as well as electronic media firms and the country's second largest university. Freiburg, on the other hand, is a rather small city by German standards of 200,000 inhabitants dominated by administration and the university. 79 schools in Cologne, Freiburg and the vicinity of Freiburg participated in the study, resulting in a sample of ca. 3400 respondents. However, in order to make the samples comparable also in terms of statistical power, we drew a random sub-sample of about the same size as in Halmstad ($N = 955$).¹ As the Halmstad School Survey, the MPI Youth Survey was conducted as a self-administered paper-and-pencil survey during school lessons, yet under the supervision of external interviewers. Non-response within school classes was 14% in Freiburg and 15% in Cologne. The sample included students from year 8 to year 10 (the final year for intermediate level students), with a typical age range of 13 to 16 years. Following list wise deletion of missing values, the analyses below are based on 879 respondents. The resulting sample from the MPI Youth Survey consists of 46.1% boys and 53.9% girls. 37.5% of the respondents have one or both parents with an immigrant background and 26.8% live in a single parent family.

Measures

Overall offending is measured by a mean scale of the respondents' offending frequencies during the last year across fourteen different criminal behaviors in Halmstad (mean = .20; sd = .37) and twelve different criminal behaviors matching those in the Halmstad survey in

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