



## An investigation into the empirical relationship between time with peers, friendship, and delinquency



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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Much of the research on peer influence has examined the relationship between peer associations and delinquency. Relatively little empirical research has addressed the effects of delinquent behavior on peer intimacy and time spent with peers. Our research attempts to fill these gaps in the literature as we hypothesize that, net of peer delinquency, delinquents spend more time with their peers but are less closely attached to their peers.

**Methods:** Using data from two waves of the National Youth Survey (NYS), we present two sets of regression models to account for selection bias resulting from whether respondents reported having friends. To assess the stability of our findings, we supplement our presented findings with extensive use of alternate estimation strategies.

**Results:** Conclusions regarding our hypotheses do not vary by estimation strategy. Delinquents spend more time with their peers, but delinquents and non-delinquents do not report differences in closeness to their peers.

**Conclusions:** Given our control variables, our finding introduces complexity in the causal priority between time spent with peers and delinquency. Prior delinquency may be a predictor of more time with peers, but partly as an avenue for opportunities for crime, not for the sake of friendship.

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### Introduction

Scholars have repeatedly demonstrated that delinquency is an inherently social activity involving associates (e.g., Breckenridge & Abbott, 1912, p. 11; Thrasher, 1927; see also Felson, 2003; Reiss, 1986; Warr, 2002). In fact, early research showed that over 90% of juvenile court cases involves two or more youths (Shaw & Myers, 1929, p. 662). The social nature of delinquency and the well-established finding that peer delinquency affects delinquency has led researchers to study different dimensions of the peer bond. Two particularly consequential dimensions of the peer bond are time spent with peers and peer intimacy, or friendship quality.

Research has found that more time spent with peers, regardless of the behavior of the peers, has a positive effect on delinquency (Haynie & Osgood, 2005; Meldrum, Young, & Weerman, 2009; Regnerus, 2002, pp. 692–695). This relationship is especially salient when the time spent with peers is in unstructured activities (e.g., Haynie & Osgood, 2005; Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996; Wallace & Bachman, 1991, pp. 344–348). Evidence has also shown that attachment to peers has a positive effect on delinquency, independent of

time spent with peers and the level of peer delinquency (Agnew, 1991, p. 62). Moreover, research has demonstrated that the effect of peer delinquency on delinquency is moderated by the quality of the friendship bond and time spent with peers (Agnew, 1991; Elliott, Huizinga, & Menard, 1989, pp. 142–160; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Pugh, 1986; Vásquez, 2010).

However, relatively little research has addressed either the causes of time spent with peers and peer intimacy or the effect of delinquent behavior on these aspects of the peer bond. In other words, friendship and peer interaction measures have generally been modeled as causes rather than as effects of crime. We hypothesize that delinquency will have a positive effect on time spent with peers but a negative effect on closeness to peers. That is, since delinquency is an inherently social activity, we expect delinquents to spend more time with their peers. On the other hand, we do not expect delinquents to be more attached to their peers or to have more meaningful friendships simply because criminal behavior tends to involve associates. We discuss elements of the peer bond below and then discuss the rationale for our hypotheses. Finally, we test our hypotheses using longitudinal data from the National Youth Survey (NYS). We estimate two sets of regression models to account for selection bias originating from whether respondents reported having friends prior to answering questions about peer bonding.

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## Characterizing elements of the peer bond

Many theories of crime stress the importance of peer influence (e.g., Cohen, 1955; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Thornberry, 1987), but differential association theory (Sutherland, 1947) and social learning theory (Burgess & Akers, 1966) present a widely tested rationale for why delinquent peer associations matter. They posit that individuals learn definitions favorable to crime and techniques necessary for committing crime from delinquent peer groups (Sutherland, 1947, p. 7). Delinquent peer groups also tend to perpetuate criminal behavior by providing a rewarding and reinforcing environment for antisocial behavior.

Empirical research has consistently documented the relationship between peer delinquency and delinquency (Akers, 2009, p. 116; Battin-Pearson, Thornberry, Hawkins, & Krohn, 1998, p. 1; Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985, p. 71; Jaccard, Blanton, & Dodge, 2005, p. 135; Pratt et al., 2010; Reiss, 1986; Thornberry & Krohn, 1997, p. 218; Warr, 2002, p. 42; Warr & Stafford, 1991, p. 851). Theoretical treatments in criminology and sociology have also provided a number of nuanced ways of examining peers (e.g., onset, priority, intensity), suggesting that peer relationships are more complicated than is suggested by simply adding up the number of delinquent peers (see Sutherland, 1947; Warr, 2002). For example, differential association theory and social learning theory emphasize that peer influence depends on the nature of peer interactions. That is, the frequency (i.e., the amount of time spent with peers) and intensity (i.e., the level of closeness to peers) of friendship bonds ultimately determine the strength of the peer effect (Akers, 2000, p. 76; Sutherland, 1947, p. 7). In addition, a voluminous body of work in psychology on peer relationships has examined the role of propinquity and homophily in friendship formation (see Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1978), the effect of physical attractiveness on friendship and romantic partner selection (see Cavior & Boblett, 1972; Feingold, 1988), the use of friends and friendships for personal gain (see Homans, 1958), and the influence that normative peer rejection and marginalization play in delinquent peer associations (see Moffitt, 1993).

As a result, researchers have moved away from debating whether peers affect behavior and towards incorporating elements of the peer bond in order to understand the ways in which peer influence operates empirically (e.g., Agnew, 1991, p. 69; Berndt & Murphy, 2002, p. 306; Carson, 2013; Marcos, Bahr, & Johnson, 1986, p. 157; Sampson, 1999, p. 443; Meldrum, Miller, & Flexon, 2013; Meldrum, Young, & Weerman, 2012; Orcutt, 1987; Short, 1960pp. 23–24; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994, pp. 53–54; Walters & DeLisi, 2013; Warr & Stafford, 1991; Zimmerman & Vásquez, 2011). Research has also begun to devote considerable attention to measurement issues surrounding peer delinquency and the role that the perception of peers plays in the process (Meldrum & Boman, 2013; Meldrum et al., 2009). Yet, few studies have examined all of the dimensions of peer relationships in a systematic manner. Moreover, scholars tend to combine peer interaction measures in an overly inclusive way such that dimensions of the peer bond are not allowed to operate distinctly (e.g., Vásquez, 2010). Consistent with theory, we treat time spent with peers and closeness to peers as meaningful and *distinct* dimensions of the peer bond, and briefly discuss current knowledge about each.

### Time spent with peers

Time spent with peers and its potential explanatory power on behavior has garnered attention across disciplines and generations (see Giordano, 2003). Many studies have focused on peer interactions in general, regardless of the nature or behavior of these peers, rather than exclusively on delinquent peer associations. It is these general peer interactions in which we are interested, particularly because “in terms of sheer amount of time, peers are by far the greatest presence in an adolescent’s life” (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984, p. 71). The evidence has substantiated that time spent with peers has a positive effect on delinquent behavior. Wallace and Bachman (1991), for example,

used a general measure of peer association – the frequency with which the youth goes out for fun and recreates with friends – and reported that delinquency increases as individuals spend more evenings with their friends. However, measures that combine evenings, fun, and recreation potentially obscure whether delinquency is associated with time spent with peers in general or time spent with peers in activities likely to encourage delinquent behavior. To address this concern, Osgood et al. (1996, p. 653) used a more direct measure of time spent with peers and demonstrated that simple associations with peers (i.e., “get together with friends, informally”) have a positive effect on deviant behavior. While other measures of associations used in their study (e.g., going to parties) also had positive effects on deviance, such measures involved associating with peers in situations likely to encourage delinquency. What is relevant here is that while holding constant these other measures of peer associations, simple associations with peers had a positive effect on delinquency (Osgood et al., 1996, p. 648; see also Agnew & Peterson, 1989; Haynie & Osgood, 2005).

Regnerus (2002) also offered evidence of the importance of time spent with peers by controlling for peer delinquency and concluding that a pure time-spent-with-peers measure, regardless of the nature of the peers, increases delinquency. Furthermore, Osgood and Anderson (2004) found that spending time with youths in unstructured activities, that is, peer socialization in the absence of responsible authority figures without an agenda for how time is to be spent (Osgood et al., 1996), increases delinquent behavior, regardless of the level of delinquency of those peers.

These studies highlight two points that are crucial for the present study. First, time spent with peers, regardless of the nature of these peers, is a significant predictor of delinquency.<sup>1</sup> And second, most studies have investigated the effect of time spent with peers on delinquency rather than the effect of being delinquent on time spent with peers. This paper is concerned with the effects of delinquency and the possibility that delinquency itself might lead to an increase in time spent with peers, thereby implying a bidirectional relationship between the two variables over time.

### Closeness to peers

Scholars have also investigated if the quality of the friendship bond (i.e., intensity) plays a role in explaining delinquent behavior (e.g., Elliott et al., 1989; Haynie & Osgood, 2005). Evidence surrounding the relationship between friendship quality and delinquency is mixed, perhaps because friendship quality is inherently more difficult to measure than time spent with peers. Some research has found that the effect of peer delinquency on delinquency is a function of friendship quality such that closer peers have a more pronounced effect on behavior, consistent with a learning process (e.g., Agnew, 1991; Elliott et al., 1989; Zimmerman & Messner, 2010). For example, psychologists using experimental methods have demonstrated that high-status peers are more influential agents of socialization (Cohen & Prinstein, 2006). In addition, Agnew (1991) found that peer delinquency has a strong effect on serious delinquency at high levels of peer intimacy, but no effect at low to moderate levels of peer intimacy.<sup>2</sup>

Other studies have found that delinquent peers are more influential when friendship quality is *lower* (e.g., Berndt & Keefe, 1995). For example, Poulin, Dishion, and Haas (1999, p. 56) demonstrated that delinquent boys with low quality friendships are more likely to engage in delinquency than delinquent boys with high quality friendships. This finding suggests that peer intensity attenuates the effect of delinquent peers on delinquency, consistent with a selection explanation under which delinquents are loosely attached to their peers.

Thus, the role of friendship quality in peer delinquency research is unclear (cf. Berndt, 2002), despite evidence clearly indicating that peer friendship quality plays a meaningful role in understanding delinquent behavior. Yet, with rare exception (e.g., Boman, Krohn, Gibson, & Stogner, 2012; Young, 2011), few studies have investigated friendship

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