



Socioeconomic disadvantage and psychological deficits: Pathways from early cumulative risk to late-adolescent criminal conviction

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ABSTRACT

Early exposure to multiple risk factors has been shown to predict criminal offending, but the mechanisms responsible for this association are poorly understood. Integrating social-environmental and dispositional theories of crime this research investigated the capacity of family socioeconomic disadvantage and individual psychological deficits to mediate the association between childhood cumulative risk and late adolescent criminal convictions. Male participants in the 1986 Northern Finland Birth Cohort Study (n = 3414) were followed from the prenatal period through age 19–20. The data were analyzed by estimating a structural equation model of the hypothesized pathways. The results found support for both processes of influence, and the model sustained a statistically significant direct effect of cumulative risk on crime. Socioeconomic disadvantage and psychological deficits contribute to criminal offending independently and with roughly equal magnitude. The results point to the utility of both environmental and psychological interventions to prevent criminality among children at risk.

1. Introduction

This research applied the cumulative risk framework (CRF) to examine pathways from prenatal development to criminal offending in mid-to-late adolescence. The core assumption of the CRF is that exposure to multiple risk factors predicts negative outcomes over and above the effects of singular factors (Evans, Li, & Whipple, 2013). Prior research has found consistent support for this basic assumption. In a foundational study, Rutter (1979) observed that children exposed to environmental risk factors (such as marital discord and low social status) were four times more likely to develop psychological disorders than those exposed to only one such factor, and that the presence of four risk factors was associated with a tenfold increase in the prevalence of disorders. Additional studies have linked cumulative risk to internalizing problems, externalizing problems, juvenile delinquency, drug use, and gang membership (Adelmann, 2005; Dekovic, 1999; Gerard and Buehler, 2004a, 2004b; January et al., 2017; Jessor, Van Den Boss, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995; Mason et al., 2016; Morales & Guerra, 2006; Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, Wei, Farrington, & Wikström, 2002; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003).

In order to interrupt criminal trajectories, it is not sufficient to merely identify those at greatest risk. Effective prevention requires

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knowledge about the *mechanisms* responsible for the empirical association (Evans et al., 2013). For example, although educational failure is a well-established risk factor for criminal offending (Maguin & Loeber, 1996; Thornberry, Moore, & Christenson, 1985), the literature disagrees on whether this risk factor exerts causal influence on criminal behavior (Felson & Staff, 2006; Savolainen et al., 2012; Sweeten, Bushway, & Paternoster, 2009). If educational failure is merely a marker of truly criminogenic factors, efforts to prevent crime should focus on modifying those factors, which could include substance misuse, antisocial peer associations, and cognitive deficits.

Criminological literature is inundated with causal theories offering competing accounts of the factors that should be understood as causal vs. merely predictive (Bruinsma, 2016). Strain theory views criminality as an adaptation to negative life circumstances (Agnew, 1992). Social bonding theory views criminal behavior as a consequence of insufficient attachment or commitment to conventional others or institutions (Hirschi, 1969). Labeling theory argues that criminal careers are socially constructed through stigmatizing or ensnaring reactions to common acts of delinquency (Liska, 1981). These three theories are examples of *social-environmental explanations* of criminal offending. Additional theories of this general variety include social learning theory (Akers, 2011) and social support theory (Cullen, 1994). Although they offer differing accounts of the mechanisms producing the environmental effect, these theories share basic assumptions as to what kinds of environments are criminogenic. In particular, most social-environmental theories of crime assume that *concentrated disadvantage* exerts causal influence on crime (Savolainen, 2010). Social bonding theory would argue this occurs because exposure to concentrated disadvantage erodes commitment to conventional goals (e.g., Elliott et al., 1996), whereas social learning theory suggests that, for example, disadvantaged children are at increased risk of associating with older delinquent peers (Harding, 2009).

In contrast to the social-environmental paradigm, *dispositional theories* emphasize the role early emerging psychological factors in the etiology of criminal behavior. Well-known examples include Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control theory and Moffitt's (1993) account of the life course persistent (LCP) offending type. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) have argued that criminal behavior is caused by low self-control, presumed to be a relatively stable individual characteristic acquired in the process of early childhood socialization. In Moffitt (1993) LCP theory, the intersection between neuropsychological deficits (low cognitive ability, aggressiveness, inattention, etc.) and family adversity constitutes the “perfect storm” for career criminality.¹ Despite their differences, both theories expect differences in psychological constitution to explain why children exposed to multiple risk factors are more likely to become criminal offenders (Staff, Whichard, Siennick, & Maggs, 2015).

Note that both of these dispositional theories have an environmental component – ineffective parenting and family adversity – but those are understood as factors in the etiology of criminal dispositions during early development. In other words, the environmental factors are not understood as “causes” but, rather, “causes of causes” of criminal behavior (Schepers, 2017), and, as such, they are assumed to be captured in the cumulative risk construct. Note also, that some social-environmental theories, such as general strain theory (Agnew, 1992) recognize the role of individual differences in the actualization of criminal behavior. However, these considerations are, for the most part, auxiliary assumptions of the *ceteris paribus* variety, the purpose of which is to specify the scope conditions for the empirical tests of the theory (Walker & Cohen, 1985); they are not part of the theoretical “hard core” (Lakatos, 1970).

The present study seeks to advance the CRF by investigating the mechanisms responsible for the association between cumulative risk at birth and criminal offending in late adolescence. Instead of focusing on particular theoretical formulations, such as general strain theory, the current study makes a *meta-theoretical* distinction between two “orienting strategies” (Berger & Zelditch, 1993) of criminology: the social-environmental and the individual-dispositional paradigms. We used *socioeconomic disadvantage* as the construct to capture the social-environmental pathway. As noted, most, if not all, social-environmental theories are consistent with such a pathway; they only disagree with respect to the processes responsible for the expected effect. The dispositional pathway is captured by the *psychological deficits* construct which refers to such criminogenic individual characteristics as low cognitive ability and behavior regulation.

In addition, this research makes a methodological contribution to the measurement of cumulative risk. By summing across identified risk factors, most prior studies assume that all indicators of risk contribute *equally* to the construct. Stated differently, the traditional approach equates more prevalent sources of risk with less commonly occurring factors that are potentially more severe. The current study addresses this limitation by using a well-known scaling technique – Rasch modeling – which applies item weights to distinguish between sources of risk that are more vs. less common in the population (Osgood, McMorris, & Potenza, 2002).

In sum, we examined the capacity of socioeconomic disadvantage and psychological deficits to mediate the influence of early exposure to cumulative risk on criminal behavior. In light of prior literature, both processes are expected to matter, but the two paradigms disagree about the relative importance of these paths of influence. If early exposure to cumulative risk is understood as a marker of heritable individual traits and antisocial parent characteristics, as dispositional theories would expect, much of the association between cumulative risk and criminal offending will be mediated by such psychological risk factors as hyperactivity, aggression, and cognitive deficits. By contrast, if the causal effect of cumulative risk stems from environmental adversity, its effect on crime will be mediated by such factors as material deprivation and low socioeconomic status of the family (Sampson & Laub, 1994).

In what follows, we will examine the hypothesized fundamental processes using data from the 1986 Northern Finland Birth Cohort Study. The analysis is limited to the male members of the birth cohort given the low incidence of criminal convictions among adolescent females in these data.

¹ Although family adversity is an environmental factor, the LCP theory assumes that the interaction between family adversity and psychological liability in early development produces a *life-stable propensity* to antisocial behavior.

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