# Homeless Youth And Delinquency

Youth who commit deviant and criminal acts may do so for a plethora of reasons. In researching the implications for juvenile delinquency, there are multiple factors to consider when analyzing each specific case. Some elements which must be considered include; the youths upbringing, their current living situation, and their current life-course pattern. Youth who grow up or live in foster care are more likely to become homeless and delinquent than those who did not, and are a higher risk population for victimization. Examining the reasons for juvenile delinquency occurrences can be done through applying theories. Two theories which are helpful in attempting to understand youth crime are; symbolic interactionism and life-course theory. Through understanding the theories and their extensions, it is possible to integrate them into a better-rounded explanation for juvenile delinquency in homeless youth.

## Literature Review

Reviewing the existing literature proves that juvenile delinquency has a correlation to living in foster or group homes, and negative transitions out of foster care. Homeless youth are more vulnerable and at greater risk for victimization compared to individuals who become homeless after adulthood (Saddichha et al., 2013). An increased risk of victimization creates a higher likelihood for street youth to engage in violence and delinquency. Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney (2013) found that one in three foster care youth will become homeless after being aged out of the foster care system. Being forced to leave a stable home environment is a noteworthy precursor for criminality to occur, and this is the case for many foster care youth when they turn eighteen. In concordance with the statistic that one in three foster care youth will become homeless when they leave, they also “make up to one-third of Canada’s homeless population” (Saddichha et al., 2013, p 201). Young individuals make up a significant portion of the homeless demographic, and this can help explain why youth may resort to criminal behaviors and deviance through interaction, need, or under stress.

Negative past incidents are a significant contributor as to why an individual becomes homeless. Research has shown that traumatic events during childhood can significantly increase chances of homelessness. Patterson et al. (2015) found that many of the challenges faced by homeless youth begin in foster care. The average age that a youth enters foster care is 13.3 years old (Fowler, Torro & Miles, 2009). Especially at a young age, the surroundings an individual is exposed to have a significant impact on their well-being. Adverse experiences in foster care are conducive to deviance and delinquency both while living in care and after. These negative experiences when paired with mental illnesses and a lack of support when youth are aged out, create a predisposition to homelessness. A study conducted in Vancouver, Columbia by Patterson, Moniruzzaman, & Somers (2015) analyzed the correlation between mentally ill homeless individuals, and their history of foster care. Both this study, along with Saddichha et al.’s (2013) article on homeless youth, agree that homelessness at a younger age is significantly more destructive. Becoming homeless at a young age increases susceptibility of engaging in deviant behaviors such as substance abuse, prostitution, and crime, which can also create and exacerbate mental illness (Patterson et al., 2015).

## Theories

## Social Control Theory

In attempting to understand juvenile delinquency in homeless youth, social control theory can be used. All control theories seek to understand the way human behavior is controlled, and seeks to find explanations from a variety of disciplines. Social control theories take this exact principle and correlate delinquency to sociological variables such as education, familial ties, and social status (Williams & McShane, 2018). Unlike other criminological theories, social control theory seeks to explain why people conform to rules and value systems and how social cohesion maintains order. Through understanding why individuals conform, the differences in social status, cohesion and order can be noted in cases where delinquency occurs. Gaining popularity in the 1970's, social control theory began to move away from the traditional theories which focused on "the criminal". The emergence of self-reporting surveys for understanding crime was another driving factor for social control theory and its applications. The theory holds origins from multiple criminological perspectives, and was developed from strain, subculture, and anomie theories. It has a strong Chicago school influence and is positivist in nature because it seeks to explain micro-level issues including the effect of control on individual behavior (Williams & McShane, 2018).

The first extension of social control theory was developed by Emile Durkheim who argued that deviants will always be present in society, and that they serve a specific purpose. This extension of SCT is derivative of a functionalist perspective. His take on SCT states that the social reactions to deviant behavior are important in establishing what one should or should not do. Durkheim also connected anomie theory with controls, and stated that an anomic condition in society breaks down the existing social controls (Williams & McShane, 2018).

After Durkheim, the social control theory underwent multiple adaptations from other theorists. Social bonding theory is another notable extension from social control theory. Social bonding theories were developed from a critique of subculture theory by Albert Cohen. David Matza and Gresham Sykes used their idea of neutralization techniques to explain how social control is diminished through using these. They argued that justifying actions was a form of weakening the social bonds and provided the necessary freedom to commit deviant acts (Williams & McShane, 2018). The five forms of neutralization as defined by Sykes & Matza (1957) are; denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties. Sykes & Matza (1957) claim that after rationalizing something with neutralization techniques, individuals will decide to commit another act or begin conforming. This in-between state revolves around two factors; repetition of previous actions, or precipitating new behaviors. This relates to the tie between individuals and the overarching values of society, also defined by Sykes & Matza as the "bond".

Branching from Sykes & Matza's work on social bonds, Travis Hirschi developed the most favored and recent extension of social control theory in the late 1980's. Similar to Sykes & Matza's work, he agreed that a person can regard themselves as "free" to commit delinquent acts. The major difference to the previous theorist's work was the way Hirschi blamed deviance on weak social cohesion and bonds rather than using techniques of neutralization. His take on the theory sought to more closely define what constituted social bonds (Williams & McShane, 2018). He adopted Durkheim's notion that delinquency and deviance are reflections of degrees of morality, and that motivation is not required. His elements of what constitute a "bond" are attachment, involvement, commitment, and belief. Attachment refers to the social connections

an individual has with peers or family, and is noted to be the most important of the four elements. Involvement is central to the amount of time an individual must engage in conforming or non-conforming behaviors. Commitment is representative of the existing connection an individual has built up in society such as: reputation, education, and to significant others. Lastly, belief refers to the general agreement that the rules of society are just, and should be abided by. The more an individual agrees with the commonly accepted values in society, the more likely they are to conform (Williams & McShane, 2018).

Although social control theory is argued to be one of the most tested theories in criminology (Williams & McShane, 2018), there are a few weak points which have been identified. Firstly, it is generally only useful for attempting to explain minor crimes due to its nature in collecting data through self-reporting. Another issue identified was the connection made between attachments and delinquent behavior. Hirschi even found in his research that a delinquent's connections were stronger with other delinquents than with those who conformed. Finally, David Greenberg's critique of Hirschi's SCT concluded that "the general explanatory power of the theory was rather weak" (Williams & McShane, 2018, pg. 144).

## Life-course Theory

Life-course theory is another theory which can be used to understand crime and delinquency. It is one of the more modern theories which branches from multiple previous criminological works. It has roots in sociology, and aims to study the structural contexts and changes in an individuals life (Williams & McShane, 2018). Developed by Robert Sampson and John Laub, the life-course perspective reflects the notion that delinquent behaviors help predict offending in adulthood. Sampson & Laub argue that analyzing a change over time is crucial in understanding crime as a dynamic interaction (Williams & McShane, 2018). The key idea portrayed in the life course theory includes two different kinds of life changes: trajectories and transitions. Trajectories refer to the change in roles over the course of an individual's life. An example of this as outlines by Williams & McShane (2018) is a person going from being a sibling to becoming a spouse or father. Along with this change in roles come transitions, which could manifest in marriage, having children, or graduating (Williams & McShane, 2018). Within crime trends over the life-course there are offenders who will continue engaging in crime and deviance continuously into adulthood. The other group of individuals exhibit a peak in delinquent behavior and desist from crime as a result of transitions or reaching adulthood (Agnew, 2018). Forrest & Hay (2011) argue that self-control is central to life-course trajectories and can determine an individual's tendency towards crime. On an individual level self-control can be adopted, and the individual can choose to employ the techniques or not. It is argued that big life transitions in the life-course can provide some benefits to an individual's self-control. These transitions can provide updated personal standards for their own behavior, personal concern for regulating one's emotions and actions, and news ways the individual can execute self-regulation techniques (Forrest & Hay, 2011).

## Integrating Theories

In analyzing the various strengths and implications of both social control and life-course theory, there are notable similarities. Integrating the two theories together can attempt to provide a more well-rounded explanation for the occurrence of crime and deviance. Principles of social control theory helped develop some of the aspects of life-course theory. Focusing on control of

human behavior is a core concept that both theories share. As social control theory explains deviance as a breakdown of the controls and bonds society has with an individual, life-course theory can help explain when and how these breakdowns occur. As noted by Forrest & Hay (2011), “life-course transitions might facilitate desistance also by helping offenders increase their self-control, thereby enabling them to avoid acts, such as crime, for which the long-term consequences exceed the short-term gains” (pg. 488). This shows that self-control is crucial in both theories. In social control theory the self-control aspect is predicated more by the surrounding connections to society, values, and significant others. In life-course theory self-control can be improved and adapted through transitions and connections. Putting these two aspects together can better help predict delinquency when taking into consideration how social bonds and structure may affect the trajectories and transitions of an individual (Williams & McShane, 2018).

It is concluded in life-course theory that events after adulthood can provide the necessary change which causes an individual to desist from crime. Persisting in criminal behavior can be explained through lacking social control and poor structure and routines. Sampson & Laub (2017) argue that there are pathways which exist to lead individuals to crime or desistance from crime, for some there are more than one. These pathways can also be viewed as trajectories, and when positive changes or transitions occur, the person is more likely to desist from criminal behavior. Without social and self-control and lack of opportunities to practice these, the individual may continue participating in deviant behavior into adulthood (Forrest & Hay, 2011). Combining the core elements of both theories creates a strong explanation and a better understanding for why juvenile delinquency occurs.

## Youth Crime and Theory

Applying social control and life-course theory principles to the delinquency of homeless youth can help explain the reasons and motivations for behavior. Foster care youth who are aged out of the system are the primary contenders for youth homelessness (Patterson et al., 2015). Social control theory focuses heavily on bonds and connections to society, and when these are broken or weakened, deviance can occur. Negative experiences in foster care or on the streets are conducive to criminal behavior and may explain why a young individual may resort to crime. It is important to consider the social environment that a youth is exposed to, and their subsequent attitudes towards the given environment. If their feelings are negative, it is likely youth will cope with these feelings through delinquency and violence (Agnew, 2018).

Parental influences on an adolescent play a role in behavior patterns and outcomes in adulthood. Negative familial experiences during childhood create a disconnect between the youth and formal socialization processes, and creates a link between parenting and delinquency (Schroeder, Giordano, & Cernkovich, 2010). Youth who are living in foster care do not always have strong ties to their foster parents and may be living in adverse conditions. Some of these experiences can “include physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, dysfunctional family environments, and unstable family structure” (Patterson et al. 2015, pg. 2). These factors can help explain a disrupted socialization process and negative outcomes for youth.

Peer groups are also an important factor to consider in examining the connection between homeless youth and delinquency. Sub-groups of street youth can encourage a new set of values and processes by which the youth begins to abide by (Saddichha et al., 2014). In having

previous weak connections to parents or foster care parents, a youth will build connections with likeminded individuals. It has been noted in the literature that “commitment to peer groups is an integral part of the social control process leading to delinquency” (Heimer, 1996, pg. 57). Other social bonds must also be accounted for in relation to homeless youth and offending. Lack of education and employment are two major noted factors which encourage criminal behavior (Sampson & Laub, 2017). Youth living in foster care are more likely to drop out of high school, and upon becoming homeless have an even lesser chance of getting an education. Values, friendships, and lessons learned in formal high school settings are substituted with the values and norms learned among street youth (Saddichha et al, 2017).

Applying ideas from life-course theory, it is possible to examine how transitions can affect juvenile offending and allow for desistence. Once homeless, it is difficult for youth to find positive transitions away from crime, drug abuse, and other related issues. Being aged out of the foster care system is a major life transition which creates the problem of homelessness. Integrating Hirschi’s idea of social capital into life-course theory proves that quality relationships are crucial in an individual’s ability to conform (Williams & McShane, 2018). As education is important in determining youth offending, employment is also a driving factor. Williams & McShane (2018) note the relative effects of levels of education and employment on teen delinquency. Homeless youth may not be able to find a job due to lack of support, resources, and knowledge. They may also suffer from mental illnesses and substance abuse issues which inhibit their ability to work or find work (Patterson et al., 2015). Poor social bonds further encourage delinquent behavior and create a barrier where positive life transitions cannot occur.

Social control theory and life-course theory also integrate well in the implications for maturing away from crime and criminal behavior. It is noted that when “juveniles and youths continue to increase their levels of commitment” (Williams & McShane, 2018, pg. 144) to themselves, finding employment, and making positive choices, the result is maturation and desistence from crime. Life-course transitions which are positive and maturation of youth can create better grounds for formal social and self-control to occur (Forrest & Hay, 2011).

## Conclusion

Applying theories to issues is beneficial in understanding why crime and deviance occur. Both social control theory and life-course theory can be applied to explain juvenile delinquency. Many articles suggest that deviance and crime is especially prevalent in the homeless youth population. Familial issues, home instability, mental illness, and associations with other street youth all are criminogenic factors which encourage crime. From a social control perspective, homeless youth are more likely to commit deviant acts because they have broken or weakened social bonds. From a life-course perspective, engaging in deviant behavior is a lifelong process which can continue into adulthood if the youth does not have positive life transitions. They may continue to offend beyond adolescence, or they may desist from crime if their trajectories change and transitions occur. Using both theories it is possible to build a substantial framework to understanding crime and juvenile delinquency in homeless youth. Social controls and bonds are weakened or strengthened in relation to the subsequent life-course transitions which occur. Negative transitions such as being aged out of foster care and abusing drugs are conductive to delinquency in youth and weaken bonds to society and others. Positive transitions such as finding a job or getting an education have shown to increase the likelihood of desistence to crime. Both theories serve integral explanations to understanding juvenile delinquency and

desistence therefrom in homeless youth.

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