Juvenile delinquency

Definition: juvenile delinquency from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Offences against the law that are committed by young people.

Summary Article: Juvenile Delinquency

*From Encyclopedia of Social Problems*

Prior to 1899, the concept of delinquency—the idea that juvenile crime is something different than crime committed by adults—was nonexistent. When youth violated laws at that time, most people regarded their actions as crimes worthy of the same court processing and punishments (even prison and the death penalty) as offenses committed by adults. Experts credit a group of progressive reformers in the late 1800s, known as the “child savers,” for inventing the concept. Their efforts resulted in the creation of separate juvenile courts and correctional programs. Crimes committed by juveniles were thereafter construed as having different causes than adult crime. Youth were considered less responsible for their actions and, therefore, more deserving of treatment rather than punishment. The child savers also helped to establish status offense laws that defined activities as illegal for persons under a specified age. For example, underage smoking, alcohol use by minors, school truancy, and youth curfew violations are status offenses.

The first juvenile court was established in Cook County, Illinois, in 1899, and the academic study of juvenile delinquency by researchers affiliated with the University of Chicago commenced shortly afterward, in the early 1900s. Today, juvenile delinquency is a well-recognized social problem in U.S. society and a thriving academic research specialty.

Measuring Delinquency

The two main sources of information on the extent of delinquency and who is most likely to engage in delinquency are official arrest statistics and self-report questionnaires. Each has strengths and limitations, and they sometimes provide somewhat conflicting pictures of the extent of delinquency and characteristics of delinquents.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Report (UCR) provides the most comprehensive data on arrests of juveniles in the United States. The UCR is a compilation of information from law enforcement agencies throughout the country on crimes reported to police and those cleared by arrest. For all arrests, the UCR includes information on the age, race, and gender of the person arrested. By combining this information with U.S. census data on the demographic composition of the population, the UCR can report arrests in a given year as a rate per 100,000 U.S. residents in various demographic categories (e.g., white girls ages 10 to 17).

The UCR is a valuable tool for determining changes in delinquency over time, but it has limitations, particularly in undercounting the true amount of delinquency, because most delinquent acts never result in any report to police, let alone lead to an arrest. Especially under-represented in the data are status offenses, the most common type of delinquency. Also skewing the data is the fact that youths living in different communities are subject to greatly varying levels of policing, and police often exercise discretion in deciding whether to arrest a delinquent youth or handle the matter informally without
making an arrest. Another UCR limitation is that it reports only a few demographic characteristics of arrestees, thereby limiting its usefulness for understanding the causes of delinquency.

Self-report surveys use either self-administered questionnaires or interviews in which respondents are asked to report on their own delinquent behavior. These surveys can also ask respondents about various characteristics and life experiences that may be correlated with their delinquency. Self-report studies, especially longitudinal studies studying the same youth on multiple occasions throughout their childhood and adolescence, are useful for learning about delinquency causes. Conducted on representative samples of U.S. youth and repeated over time, the self-report studies can suggest prevalence of various types of delinquency and assess trends in delinquent involvement. Two widely cited nationally representative survey studies are the Monitoring the Future study of eighth-grade students and high school seniors, and the National Household Survey on Drug Use and Health sample of youth ages 12 to 17. These surveys chiefly concern tobacco, alcohol, and drug use, but they also include questions about other common forms of delinquency.

The major strengths of self-report studies are that they allow estimates of delinquent behavior that do not involve police reports or arrests, and they allow researchers to understand the causes of delinquency. These advantages overcome some of the limitations of arrest data. Self-report studies, however, have their own shortcomings and limitations. Self-report studies rely on the accurate recall and honest report of behavior that respondents may rather not remember or disclose. On the other hand, some respondents may falsely report engaging in delinquent acts not actually committed. Young adolescents, it turns out, are most likely to falsely report delinquency, so researchers have developed a number of techniques for evaluating the reliability and validity of self-reported delinquency. Safeguards include asking respondents whether they ever used a fictitious drug (e.g., “bindro”). Self-reports tend to be more accurate when respondents believe their responses will be anonymous or confidential.

Despite the limitations of both arrest data and self-report studies, their complementary strengths and consistent findings across methodologies allow for reasonably reliable conclusions about the extent, trends, and causes of delinquency.

**Prevalence and Trends**

Although many people believe we are currently in the midst of a juvenile violent crime wave, arrests of juveniles for serious crimes have actually decreased in recent years. The number of juveniles arrested for murder in 2005 was 47 percent lower than in 1996. Overall, the juvenile violent index crime arrest rate in 2005 was 25 percent lower than it had been in 1996. Unlike other crimes against persons, however, the juvenile arrest rate for simple assault has not declined substantially since the mid-1990s. This may be due to recent policies that require police to make arrests in school and domestic incidents that previously would have been handled informally.

Property crime arrest rates of juveniles have decreased substantially. In 1981, there were approximately 2,500 property crime index offense arrests per 100,000 juveniles ages 10 to 17 in the United States. By 2005, the juvenile arrest rate for property crime index offenses had decreased to less than 1,500 per 100,000 youths. The burglary arrest rate of juveniles in 2005 was less than half the rate it had been 25 years earlier (i.e., in their parents’ generation). Although motor vehicle theft arrests of youth increased between 1981 and 1991, they have since fallen to less than half the 1991 level.

Arrests for drug abuse violations have not followed the declines observed for violent and property arrest rates.

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crimes. In fact, the rate of arrests of juveniles increased over 50 percent from 1981 to 2005. The large increase in juvenile arrests over this period, however, appears to reflect increased law enforcement rather than greater drug involvement by youth since self-reported drug use by youth in national epidemiological surveys decreased over this same time period.

**Characteristics of Delinquents**

Age is the strongest predictor of delinquent behavior. For nearly every type of delinquency, involvement is rather low in childhood or early adolescence, increasing steadily with age until reaching a peak in late adolescence. Although the exact rate of increased involvement and peak age of involvement varies across offense types (property crime peaks at about age 16 and violent delinquency peaks at age 18), this general pattern of increased delinquency with age occurs in both arrest rates and self-report studies. An important related concept is age-at-onset. The age at which youth first engage in delinquent behavior is a strong predictor of the seriousness and intensity of subsequent delinquent and criminal behavior. For example, a young age at first arrest (under 14) is strongly predictive of serious, repeat delinquency and continuing criminal behavior into adulthood. Similarly, early first use of the so-called gateway drugs—tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana—strongly correlates with serious drug or alcohol dependency in adolescence or adulthood.

Next to age, gender is the best predictor of delinquent behavior. Boys are more likely than girls to engage in nearly every form of delinquency and are more pronounced in official arrest statistics. For violent index crimes (homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, and forcible rape), UCR data from 2005 indicate that male juvenile arrests exceeded female juvenile arrests by a ratio of 4 to 1. For serious property crimes, the male-to-female arrest ratio in 2005 was nearly 2 to 1, and the 2005 ratio of male-to-female drug abuse violation arrests was nearly 5 to 1. Some less-serious offense types show greater gender equality. For instance, boys are only slightly more likely than girls to be arrested for larceny-theft. Self-report studies also indicate boys are more delinquent than girls, but the sex differences in most self-report studies are smaller than the arrest data would suggest. This discrepancy between self-report and official arrest statistics may occur because girls’ delinquency is less often observed by, or reported to, police or because law enforcement officials exercise discretion in arrest decisions to the favor of girls. This hypothesis has been termed the *chivalry thesis*.

Race/ethnicity is another characteristic for which official arrest data and self-reports provide discrepant findings. In the United States, white youth have lower arrest rates than black youth. Asian American youth have the lowest arrest rates, whereas rates for American Indian youth are higher for some offenses (e.g., homicide) but lower for other offenses (e.g., drug abuse and weapon law violations). Black youth are more than twice as likely as white youth to be arrested for both violent index crimes and property index crimes. In self-report studies of commonly occurring delinquency such as status offenses and marijuana use, however, white youth tend to report greater involvement in delinquency than black youth. The greater arrest rates of minority youth may result, in part, from heavier police activity in predominantly minority neighborhoods, yet studies in which researchers ride along with police and record their interactions with youth generally do not find racial bias in police officers’ use of discretion in arrest decisions.

Many studies indicate that youth in juvenile detention and correctional facilities are more likely than youth in the general population to come from low-income families. Self-report studies of delinquency, however, do not consistently find greater delinquency among low-income youth. Youth from families
with lower socioeconomic status (SES) are more likely to report serious violent offenses, but higher SES youth are more likely to report some common forms of delinquency such as alcohol and marijuana use. For most forms of delinquency, self-report studies find no SES differences.

**Causal Theories**

Early theories of why youth become delinquents focused on the socially disorganized neighborhoods in rapidly urbanizing and industrializing U.S. cities. The common belief was that the problem lay in the exposure of youth in these transitional communities (many of them children of European immigrants and African American migrants from the rural South) to conflicting cultural norms and parents with fewer personal and institutional resources for socializing and supervising them to ensure law-abiding behavior. Although some critics of the social disorganization perspective noted an over-reliance on official statistics that might neglect delinquency by middle- and upper-class youth, the neighborhood disorganization perspective remains influential—especially as an explanation of violent and gang delinquency.

In the 1950s and 1960s “strain theorists” also focused on delinquency by socioeconomically disadvantaged youth. Robert Merton described a “goals-means disjunction” whereby all youth are socialized to desire success, but not all have the legitimate means to attain success. Merton suggested that economically disadvantaged youth might respond to the resulting strain by resorting to illegitimate means (e.g., stealing) or by retreatist behavior such as substance abuse. Albert Cohen also described the strain that lower-class children experience in school when they fail to meet the academic and behavioral expectations of middle-class teachers. They may cope with this “status frustration” by joining delinquent peer groups. Critics argue that strain theory, like social disorganization theory, exaggerates the delinquent involvement of lower-class youth while neglecting to explain why so many middle-class youth also engage in delinquency. Remedying this limitation is Robert Agnew’s general strain theory, which suggests that a variety of social strains, not just the strain associated with poverty, can cause delinquency.

Whereas social disorganization and early strain theories emphasized social structural inequalities as the primary cause of delinquency, process theorists focus on social interactions within primary groups such as the family and peer group. Two influential process theories are the social learning theory and the social bonding theory. Social learning theory, also known as differential association theory, suggests that juvenile delinquents learn delinquent values, attitudes, and behavior through their associations in families, peer groups, schools, and neighborhoods. According to this perspective, the delinquent is essentially normal, but through exposure to deviant influences, the youth learns delinquent behavior in the same ways that any other behavior is learned.

Whereas social learning theorists view relationships as the cause of delinquency, social bonding theorists view a lack of strong social attachments as the cause of delinquency. Social bonding theorists assert that many delinquent activities are fun and pleasurable, and therefore, all youth would become delinquent if they were not kept in check by the social bond. Instead of asking themselves why some youth engage in delinquency, bonding theorists ask, Why isn’t every youth a delinquent? They conclude that youth who lack strong attachments to peers, school, or family; who are uninvolved in conventional activities such as school or sports; who haven’t been instilled with a conventional belief system; and who are not committed to educational or other future goals are most likely to act on their delinquent opportunities and impulses.

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Much of the delinquency research conducted today is guided by integrated and life course theories. Integrated theories combine aspects of social structure, social learning, and social bonding theories to predict delinquency. Life course or developmental theories also integrate traditional theoretical perspectives, but in addition, they emphasize that delinquency is a developmental process whereby innate temperament, social stresses, attachments, and opportunities early in life predispose some youths to later delinquent involvement. Delinquent involvement, in turn, adversely affects normative social relationships and opportunities to increase the likelihood of further delinquency and adult criminal behavior. This snowball effect is especially likely to occur if delinquency results in arrest, juvenile justice system intervention, and resultant stigma.

**Current Controversies**

Advances in brain science challenge both social scientists and the justice system in their understanding of, and response to, delinquency. It is now known that certain regions of the brain responsible for learning from the present, anticipating the future, and controlling one’s impulses are impaired in some serious and chronic delinquents. Head injury, lead poisoning, fetal alcohol exposure, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are just a few of the identified conditions associated with alterations in brain functioning that could predispose some youth to delinquency. If delinquency is, to some extent, biologically caused, can the justice system hold delinquents accountable for their behavior? This is especially problematic given the trend over the past 2 decades to try more and more juveniles as adults.

Moreover, modern brain imaging techniques reveal that the regions of the brain responsible for foresight and impulse control are not fully developed in the normal brain until age 22 or 23. The challenge is for social scientists to incorporate this biological evidence into their theories of delinquency causation and for the U.S. justice system to reconcile personal responsibility with brain limitations as a mitigating factor. This recognition of developmental limitations influenced the 2005 U.S. Supreme Court decision that persons who were under age 18 when their crime was committed cannot receive the death penalty.

*See also*

- Deviance; Differential Association; Drug Subculture; Gangs; Juvenile Justice System; Marginality; Social Bond Theory; Social Disorganization; Strain Theory; Uniform Crime Report

**Further Readings**


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