

Developmental Criminology

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Definition

The defining feature of developmental criminology is its focus on offending in relation to changes over time in individuals and their life circumstances, with most research being focused in practice on childhood and youth. Developmental criminologists are concerned with questions of *continuity and change* in behaviour, including the onset of and desistance from offending, and patterns of offending over time.

Discussion

Developmental criminology has its roots in mainstream criminology and positivist social science and studies the relationship between biological, psychological, and social factors and offending across the life course, from conception to death. A foundation assumption is that the 'baggage' people carry from the past – the continuing effects of earlier experiences such as a happy childhood or sexual abuse – affect the ways they behave in the present. Thus developmental criminologists reject traditional approaches that emphasise *between-group* differences in favour of a study of *within-individual* changes in offending in relation to changes in many other factors. The field has been dominated by quantitative methods that aim to measure relationships between developmental processes and offending. A strong emphasis has been on the use of longitudinal research with repeated measurements to determine correlations between *risk factors* such as abuse or poverty and subsequent offending. Famous studies include the Pittsburg Youth Study in the US and the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development in the UK.

An early influence in developmental criminology was Cyril Burt and his study of adolescent offending in the 1920s. Since then interest in developmental processes in offending has expanded. A major question in the 1980s was the relationship between *age* and *offending*. The claim that age simply matures people out of crime appeared to be supported by the general tendency for offenders to reduce their rate of offending as they get older. It was argued that some people are more prone to commit crime than others, particularly because their family socialisation in the first few years of life had failed to build in them a sufficiently strong capacity for self-control. This *propensity* to offend, it was claimed, does not change over the life course, with crime-prone individuals committing more crime at all ages. Developmental critics of this view argued that crime trajectories or pathways, known as *criminal careers*, are far more varied than this simple model suggests, and that it is necessary to have separate models for exploring such processes as age of crime onset, participation levels, frequency, duration, and desistance from crime, recognising the different influences at various life phases and stages of criminal careers. Social and psychological factors after the early years, including peer influences and parenting practices, exert strong effects, with a failure to exercise self-control being only one risk factor.

In the 1990s developmental criminology took the idea of risk factors further and developed the *risk and protective factors paradigm*. While risk factors are associated with an increased probability of a negative outcome, protective factors are thought to buffer the effects of risk factors, helping to make people more *resilient* in the face of

adversity. This approach was imported from public health, which had shown (for example) that smoking, fatty diets, and lack of exercise increased the risk of heart disease. Developmental criminologists have used this paradigm to explore many problems, including the relationship between early onset of problem behaviour and future offending. Longitudinal research has identified relationships between a large number of risk factors and future offending. While causal pathways are complex and prediction at the individual level problematic, there is strong evidence that as a group those children and young people with *multiple risk factors* are more likely to be offenders in the future.

Until recently most developmental criminologists in the US and the UK have had little engagement with, or influence on policy and practice. There has been a tendency to marginalise this relationship and see it as separate from science. For example, the Pittsburgh Youth Study produced significant new knowledge on youth crime yet its implications for policy and practice were not discussed. Recently developmental criminologists have initiated a closer working relationship with policy and practice. First, they have been active in promoting and developing early intervention and prevention programmes. For example in the 1990s programmes that aim to address levels of risk and protection in local communities, such as *Communities that Care*, were introduced in a number of countries. These use randomised controlled trials and quasi-experimental evidence of ‘what works’ to help policy makers and practitioners tackle local social problems. Secondly, the risk and protection model has had a significant influence on youth justice policy, especially in the UK. Not only has it influenced the development of the youth crime prevention strategy it has shaped the way offenders are assessed in terms of risk. Thirdly it has influenced the development of *Every Child Matters: Change for Children*, a major UK government initiative to enhance the wellbeing of children and young people from birth to age 19.

Developmental criminology has made a major contribution to our understanding of the relationship between offending and a wide range of factors that vary across the life course. In the 1980s and 90s the research and policy agenda in the UK emphasised offending as a rational choice, suggesting that punitive measures or measures that reduced the opportunities to commit crime offered the most promising prevention approaches. Situational techniques such as target hardening and increased policing of public and private spaces, together with new technologies such as closed-circuit television, were promoted as solutions to the crime problem. Developmental criminology, even in its most technical and quantitative forms, provided an alternative perspective and got psychological and social factors back onto the research and policy agenda. While there is much debate over the relationship between the psychological and the social, developmental criminology provided a timely reminder that offending must to be located in its social context. For example, whatever their limitations in contributing to an understanding of underlying processes, risk factors direct attention to the importance of poverty and family adversity in explaining offending. Developmental criminology therefore provides strong support for the argument that a non-punitive response that strengthens families and communities is fundamental to the prevention of crime.

Development criminology, at least as it is understood in the UK, could make a more constructive policy contribution if several problems were addressed. First, policy makers have taken the research finding that at the aggregate level there is a strong

degree of continuity in antisocial behaviour from childhood to youth to mean that risk factors can be used to identify and to intervene at an early age in the lives of 'risky individuals or families'. For example, a chart by Stephen Scott of the Institute of Psychiatry in the UK, reproduced in the British Government's 2003 consultation paper *Every Child Matters* shows how half the children who are viewed as anti-social at the age of 8 can still be diagnosed as anti-social at the age of seventeen. While this indicates a strong statistical relationship between early anti-social behaviour and future problems it also shows that a large number of *false positives* exist, with half the children *not* going on to have problems. Secondly, developmental criminologists tend to see the relationship between offending and non-offending as unproblematic, having little to say about the role of the state in defining what is 'criminal'. This lacuna is exacerbated by the misunderstanding by policy makers of the evidence about the continuities in antisocial behaviour produced by developmental criminologists, leading in practice to the stigmatization and labelling of children and families identified through new batteries of tests. Thirdly, while developmental criminology does recognise social context its focus tends to be limited to the influences of friends and family within a community. Consequently developmental criminology has had little to say about wider influences on life course outcomes such as the global impact of re-structured labour markets on national and local employment opportunities. Finally it has been too uncritical of government policies, failing to recognise that major risk factors for offending can be imbedded unintentionally in new programs when these fail to comprehend the complex realities of the lives of children and young people growing up in disadvantaged communities.

Key texts and sources

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