Teenage Crime

Parents often engage in wishful thinking.

- They *wish* that the D.A.R.E. program would scare teenagers away from using drugs. Yet these programs fail and often backfire.[1]

- They *wish* that crime participation were limited to gang members. In fact, most crime is carried out by youths who do not belong to gangs.[2]

- They *wish* that police officers inside schools suffice to protect their kids. In fact, most crime and delinquency risk emerges o*n the way to and from school*, not inside.[3]

- They *wish* that an hour or two of after-school programming would reduce risk of crime participation—a strategy that fails.[4]

White parents *imagine* that crime and delinquency are mainly problems for minority groups. In fact, these problems span all social groups. Self-report surveys find that *middle-class students participate in similar delinquency*.[5] Modern society has a general youth problem, ranging well beyond low-income areas.

Muscles, Babies, and the Historical Role for Youths

I once visited a traditional farm and tried to chop a whole load of wood—not for one evening fire, but to cook meals and heat the house. I stopped as soon as possible. I remember seeing rural women scrubbing clothes in the creek and tilling their gardens by hand. In a traditional world, most people are busy with the struggle for existence, and youths are highly valued for their energy and muscle.

Through much of human history, youths had valuable roles for procreation and physical work. In biblical times, marriage was common in early teens; babies arrived early and often. Most people then lived on limited protein, so their adolescent growth spurt and sexual maturation did not occur until ages 14 or 15. That left little time for *premarital* pregnancies.

Early procreation and large families were common through most of human history, particularly because rural societies needed young people to work the

land. Most youths were too busy to get involved in drunken misbehavior. There were some notable historical exceptions in the ancient Greek and Roman world, when wealthy youths were likely to get drunk, break rules, and act wildly.[6] Yet most youths through most of history were too busy in agricultural and industrial pursuits, trying to feed their young families. All that changed in the modern world, which created a new stage in the life cycle for average youths.

Modern Role for Youths

The vast increase in protein in modern societies leads to sexual maturation around age 12. That maturation brings early muscularity, but the modern economy has little use for muscles. Machines driven by fossil fuels have supplanted human muscularity and displaced the role of young people. Extended schooling fills ages formerly spent working in home, farm, or factory.

Thus, modern society delays the onset of full and traditional adult roles. If puberty occurs at age 12 and marriage at age 28, that creates a 16-year period without traditional family roles, also disrupting teenage work roles. *That leaves modern youths without a satisfactory or stable position in society and undermines society's ability to keep them out of trouble.* Many young adults work their way through all of this, but not always easily.

As noted in the previous chapter, the growth of cities and suburbs helped youths evade adult supervision. Automobiles dispersed people and property across a wider area, providing excellent targets for attack. As mothers joined the workforce, they were less able to supervise their residential neighborhood.

Another important dispersion altered the nature of American society—the dispersion of adolescent activities away from adult control and supervision. We begin to understand this by calculating crime victimization risks away from home.

Hour-for-Hour Risks

Crime rates have long been calculated as

$$\frac{\text{Number of crimes in the area}}{\text{Number of people living in the area}}$$

Yet sometimes we learn more about crime by using a different crime rate. The idea is to figure out the risk in each activity or setting. This can be accomplished by finding a suitable time use survey to use for the denominator.

$$\frac{\text{Number of crimes occurring in an activity or setting}}{\text{Amount of time spent in that activity or setting}}$$

This crime rate measures the crime risk in each activity or setting.

EXHIBIT 5.1 **Risk of Assault (by Strangers and Nonstrangers) by Time Spent at Home and in Streets**

Source: Created from Cohen & Felson (1979).

In 1979, I calculated the risk of assault victimization at home and in the street. As Exhibit 5.1 shows, the hour-for-hour risk of assault by strangers is much greater in the streets than at home, by a ratio of 45 to 1. In percentage terms, the difference seems even greater—a 4,500 percent greater risk while in the streets. Even assaults by non-strangers are much more likely in streets compared to home. Although people only spend about an hour a day in streets, that is their riskiest hour.

Detailed calculations of risks can be found in Andrew Lemieux's dissertation, published in 2010.[7] He calculated risks of violent crime victimization—hour for hour. As noted in the preceding section, that takes into account time spent in each activity or setting. He learned that youths face 20 times as much risk of violent crime victimization as they go to and from school, compared to their risks in home activities.

Exhibit 5.2 shows that taking time into account is extremely important. For example, youths spend about 6 hours a day at school and less than an hour in transit. The hour in transit is their most dangerous hour of the day. That is also the hour in which they are least under adult control and supervision. That leads not only to victimization but also to offending.

Time With Peers

In the 1980s, I developed a set of questions to find out about the time adolescents spend with peers and away from the watchful eye of parents. It was a

| EXHIBIT 5.2 | **Relative Hour-for-Hour Risk of Violent Crime Victimization, United States, Ages 15–19** |
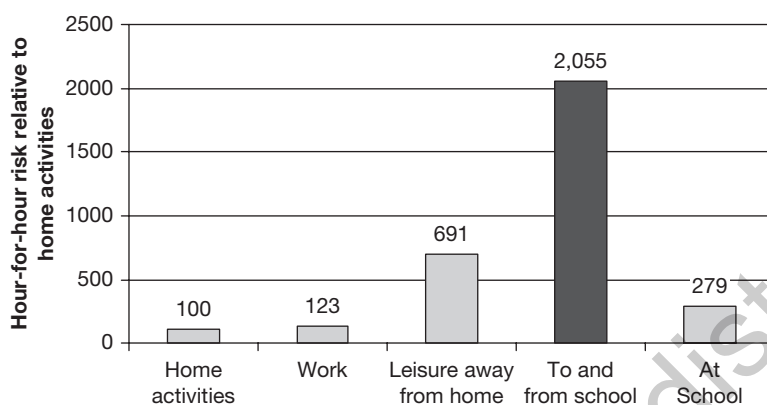
Source: Adapted from Lemieux (2011).

reminiscence study asking respondents 18 years old and older to think back to age 17, and then answer questions about their time use. Although the study is subject to recall error, it asked specific questions about youth activities, producing powerful results. In 1984, Michael Gottfredson and I published a paper titled, "Social Indicators of Adolescent Activities Near Peers and Parents."[8] We asked respondents to think back to age 17, and whether they were able to escape parental scrutiny.[9] Our survey team asked many questions, including

- how many nights a week they were away from home;
- what time they had to be home on Friday and Saturday nights;
- whether their parents noticed when they came home late;
- how often they drove around with other teenagers at night; and
- requirements to be home for family dinners.

The study showed that newer generations could spend much more time with peers and without parents. That transformation in daily teenage life had consequences. In the earliest cohort, relatively few girls had sexual intercourse by age 17, mainly because no guy had ever tried. The activity patterns in the oldest generation provided young men and women much less chance to be alone together, so they had to discover sex later.[10]

Although that sample was not large enough to study crime victimization, we made our routine activity opinion very clear:

Youthful rule-breaking depends upon the convergence of peers in the absence of parents.

Recent research shows that peer influences are most felt when peers are *together*. Exhibit 5.3 illustrates that point powerfully with evidence from Peterborough in Britain. Youths were many times more likely to use alcohol *while their peers were present*. Youths whose friends use alcohol often are considerably more likely to use alcohol themselves in the presence of peers. However, youths whose friends often use alcohol are *not usually impelled to drink while peers are absent*.[11]

Other research tells us that the opportunity to be with peers while adults are absent has considerably more impact on delinquency than norms learned from peers.[12] Researchers have observed teenagers making risky decisions when peers are absent or present. The presence of peers *triples the chance*

EXHIBIT 5.3 **Peer Effects on Respondent's Alcohol Consumption While Peers Are Present and Absent, Peterborough, UK**
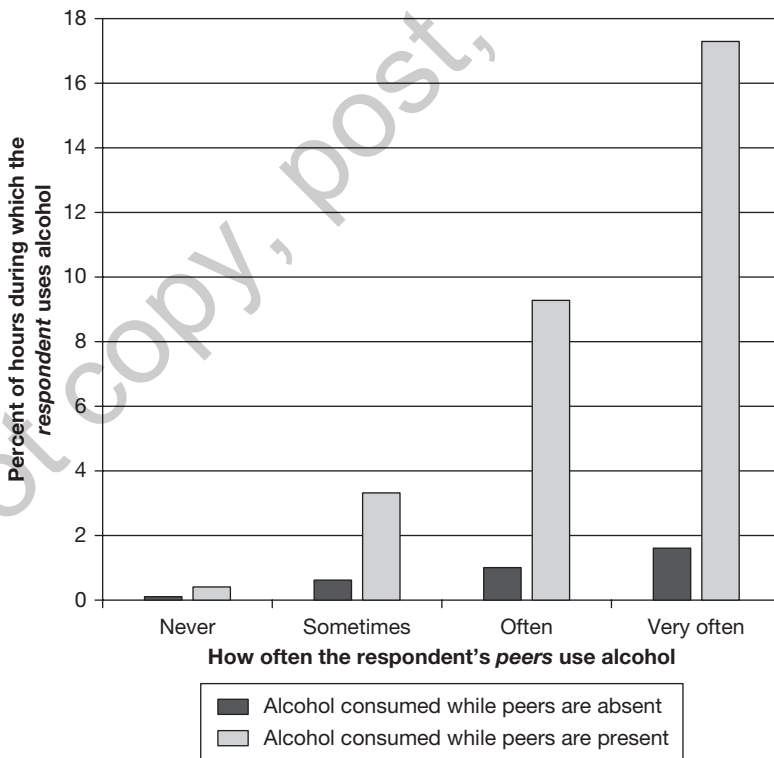
Source: Created from Beier (2018).

that adolescents will make a risky decision.[13] You can see why it makes sense to study where youths are and whether adults are in sight.

Unstructured Socializing

Wayne Osgood and colleagues greatly extended this approach.[14] They defined the term "unstructured socializing" to summarize the ability of youths to hang out together without adult supervision or adult rules being enforced. During unstructured activities, youths are most likely to drink underage, to smoke marijuana, or to steal things. Evading parents enhances delinquency not only for high-risk teenagers, but even "average" teenagers face greater risks in similar settings.

This list gives an idea of how adult supervision ranges from high to low:

1. Parents have substantial control while home with their children.

2. Teachers have considerable control in classrooms.

3. School officials might have partial control of schoolyards.

4. Adults probably supervise official sports programs.

5. Journeys to and from official programs might not be supervised.

6. Informal sports and games usually lack direct adult supervision.

7. Street corners and hanging out times are almost always unstructured.

The list above is not perfect, but it makes the point: Youths evade adult control more easily in some settings than in others. When they evade adults, they are much more likely to engage in delinquent behavior. That finding has been substantiated in dozens of studies in multiple nations.[15] This also explains why routine activities are so important for crime—not only for victimization but also for offending.

Teenage Routine Activities

Very strong support for the routine activity approach to teenage offending has emerged in Peterborough, a city in Britain. Respondents reported on the *delinquent acts* they committed during certain activities, as well as how much *time* they spent in those activities. I was able to combine two tables from that report and then to re-calculate delinquency participation for unstructured activities compared to other teenage activities.[16]

Exhibit 5.4 sums up the results. Teenagers committed 57 crimes per thousand hours spent in unstructured peer-oriented activities, but only 2 crimes for the same share of time spent with family. Hour for hour, unstructured

EXHIBIT 5.4   **Crimes Teenagers Commit per 10,000 Hours in Each Setting**
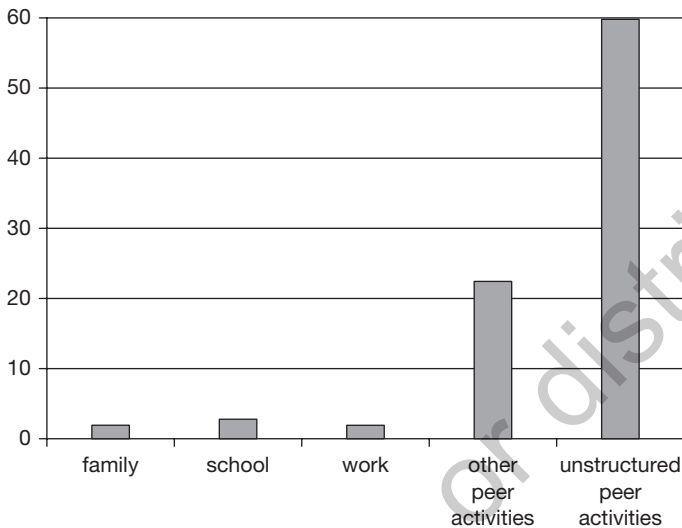
Source: Created from data presented in Wikstrom, Oberwittler, Treiber, & Hardie (2012).

peer activities are 28 times riskier for crime participation—hour for hour, these activities are 2,800 percent worse.
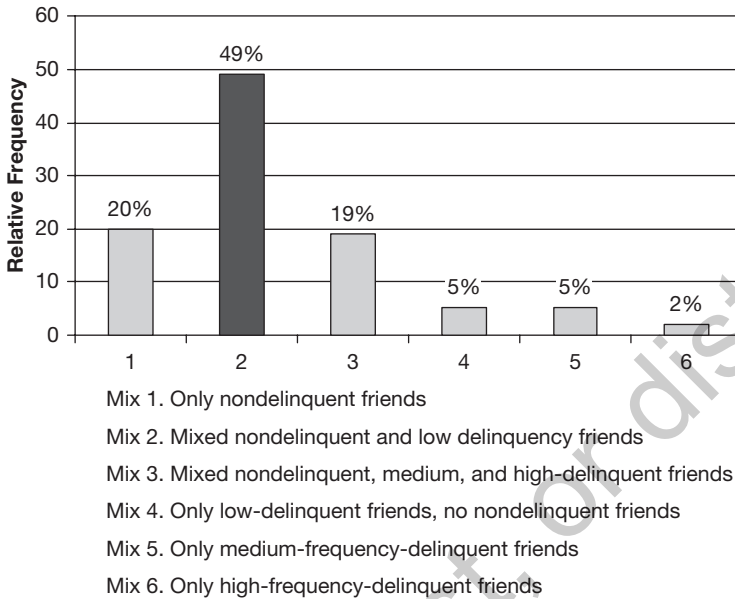
Researchers from the Netherlands and Belgium are finding *even stronger results* when considering *where* teenagers get together. Unstructured socializing *especially increases youth offending when it occurs in public places*.[17] You can see why it is so important to study how, where, and when teenagers converge.

Peer Mixing Patterns

The life of a criminologist would be easier if all the delinquent youths spent the afternoon together at one hangout, while all the nondelinquent youth spent their time together at another hangout. In fact, delinquent and non-delinquent youth mix quite frequently. Their sociability in general has more significance than their delinquency. Indeed, delinquency is often infrequent.

Even among the more active offenders, delinquency does not take up most of the time. What happens instead is that they hang out together, passing the time away. Youths drift into delinquency from time to time, usually with little planning and often in response to situational inducements.[18] It does not have to be part of their identity.

That helps us understand why delinquents and nondelinquents can mix so easily in social settings. Based on a Dutch study, Exhibit 5.5 shows us that

EXHIBIT 5.5   **Six Mixing Levels for Delinquent Peers Based on a Study in the Netherlands**

Mix 1. Only nondelinquent friends

Mix 2. Mixed nondelinquent and low delinquency friends

Mix 3. Mixed nondelinquent, medium, and high-delinquent friends

Mix 4. Only low-delinquent friends, no nondelinquent friends

Mix 5. Only medium-frequency-delinquent friends

Mix 6. Only high-frequency-delinquent friends

Source: Created from Hoeben (2016).

just about 1 in 5 youths in this sample report has only nondelinquent friends. (Other research often finds smaller numbers than this.)

The largest group of youths—half of the sample—mix nondelinquent friends with friends involved in minor levels of delinquency. Those with medium or high delinquency friends also tend to mix their time with non-delinquent friends. About 1 in 8 youths have only delinquent friends, but most of these friends engage in minor or medium delinquency. Just 2 percent report having only high delinquency friends.

Parents have a difficult task as they seek to insulate their children from delinquent friends. Too many youths engage in minor delinquency from time to time, and parents cannot easily keep their teenage children away from other teenagers.

School Proximity Effects

Schools play an important role in the youth convergence process. A typical American high school assembles over a thousand youths, then dumps them out together onto the streets, funnels them into the same school buses, and drops them off at the same bus stops or dumps them out on the street at the same time. This process sets the stage for quite a number of problems as youths travel to and from school.[19]

Classic work by Dennis Roncek established that secondary schools produce crime nearby.[20] These patterns apply on school days, especially in the afternoons. Yet on non-school days, crime rates near school are minimal.[21]

Parental Efforts to Delay Peer Dominance

Parents use three basic methods to counteract peer effects on delinquency:

- Fostering afternoon activities

- Encouraging teenagers to take part-time jobs

- Monitoring their children's locations and activities

In the North American context, afternoon activities have not succeeded in reducing delinquent behavior.

> [O]ne undesirable side effect of grouping youths together for schooling or for after-school programming is an increase in crimes against persons. This effect is greatest during the school day, when youths can potentially encounter other youths with whom they have "beefs" or during which time any number of irritations might arise that lead to fights or other interpersonal crimes.[22]

The research on jobs for youths gives even worse results. High school students who have jobs get involved in *more* crime, not less.[23] Perhaps their jobs give more opportunities to steal and more money to spend to evade parents.

The research on parental monitoring does show some successful results.[24] It also shows that youths often deceive and thwart parental monitoring, feeding misinformation back to parents who often prefer to think their children are following their rules.[25]

Perhaps future research will help us sort out when adult efforts to supervise teenagers work or fail, and why.

Conclusion

In general, modern society leads to less control. It is a mistake to interpret this as a "cultural change" or "moral deterioration," or "bad child rearing." Rather, it represents a shift in the tangible features of everyday life. Bodies, products, technology, and transportation have also changed, undermining adult control over teenagers. However, youths are not in trouble every moment of the day or in every location. Their offending and victimization alike are highly concentrated in certain behavior settings characterized by peer dominance and parental absence. That information helps us improve

our perspective on the innocent youth fallacy (discussed in Chapter 1). Youths have a wide range of possibility, even within a single day. They are capable of compliance with adult wishes, as well as evasion of those wishes. They have a lot of volatility but are not strictly random. Trouble is most likely to occur when peers are present and parents are absent. The extension or contraction of the *period* of peer dominance is essential for understanding the arithmetic of individual and community crime and delinquency. Those communities that are able to narrow that period will end up with considerably less overall crime, even though their youths dabble in delinquency, at least for a while.

MAIN POINTS

- A major transformation occurred in the United States and numerous industrial countries, affecting the roles of youth, and hence their crime and delinquency.

- Biosocial change in adolescence came from a protein-rich environment that shortened the onset of puberty and had profound implications for both the productive and the reproductive roles of teenagers, because work roles shifted in exactly the opposite direction.

- Changes in the American occupational structure led to highly specialized jobs requiring more years of schooling and experience, which means that young, strong adults have fewer opportunities for work.

- Changes from the 1960s onward, in particular when more women went to work, meant that the lives of teenagers were transformed with the lack of supervision.

- Modern life puts young people in a bad position, taking away their historical roles in work and family life. However, it puts them in a good position for escaping parental supervision.

- Automobiles greatly enhance the ability of youths to escape parental controls. That causes crime to disperse over a wider area, while providing good targets for illegal attacks.

- Schools help to control crime and victimization of youths, but they also facilitate problems by bringing many youths together and then releasing them simultaneously at particular times and in particular areas.

- Managing the time of teenagers becomes a major problem for society. Many ill-considered and ineffective control methods are still offered and believed effective by people who think little about the timing and location of adolescent activities. Jobs and recreation for youths can easily fail to reduce crime and may even make things worse.

PROJECTS AND CHALLENGES

Interview project. Interview three high school students about how they use text messaging and cell phones to escape parental controls.

Media project. Look at media treatment of young people as offenders 20 years ago and today. Has it changed?

Map projects. (a) Map a secondary school and major nearby housing areas. Emphasize the main paths those teenagers on foot take home in the afternoon. (b) Map an entertainment area or district where young people often go. Map bars, attractions, hangouts, and so on. Predict trouble spots.

Photo project. Photograph a path often taken by teenagers. Take a photo every 10 feet; array these photos into a sequence with discussion. Note any litter, vandalism, or signs of burglary. Note where problems have not occurred.

Web projects. (a) Find websites that deal with school bullies and bullying. What do they say about dealing with the problem? Is their case persuasive? (b) If you are a user of a social networking website, think about the dangers of youths sharing too much information about themselves and accepting strangers as friends. How can parents help prevent and monitor their children's activity on these sites?

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