

## Diverging Pathways of Troubled Boys

When asked to assess his life at age 65, Arthur answered, "What am I? What do you look at? Nothing. A piece of shit."

Michael at age 63 was asked the same question. He responded, "What I done here is a success story. I have no education whatsoever. I have no grammar school. No high school. No nothing. In plain English I done all the shit jobs, because I had no education . . . My life now is beautiful. Raised five kids. No education. Worked every day in my life. Whenever I lost one job, I got another. No, I think I done pretty goddamn good."

Such divergent life outcomes are not considered surprising in our culture, because they are commonly thought to evolve from divergent childhood backgrounds. As it turns out, this belief is unwarranted. When the lives of Arthur and Michael are examined in more depth, we find that both men had remarkably similar beginnings. For example, both men grew up in Boston, Massachusetts, during the Great Depression, both lived in disadvantaged neighborhoods, both had difficult family and school experiences, and perhaps most important, both were early juvenile delinquents and incarcerated for their crimes in state reform schools. What accounts for their different adult trajectories? A consideration of these men's lives only deepens the mystery.

Arthur grew up in an Italian neighborhood in a poor section of East Boston. This neighborhood was overcrowded, with more than its fair share of barrooms and street gangs. Arthur was one of thirteen chil-

dren. His father died when he was four years old, and his mother was unable to manage the children. Furthermore, Arthur did not do well in school and was frequently truant. He was eventually placed in a "special class." Arthur scored 72 on the full-scale Wechsler-Bellevue Intelligence test, with scores of 63 and 87 for the verbal and performance portions, respectively. With this kind of background, perhaps it is no surprise to learn that Arthur was extensively involved in delinquency during his childhood and adolescence. His first arrest came at age 9 for setting off false fire alarms. He was arrested a total of twelve times as a juvenile (up to age 17 in Massachusetts) and spent close to two years in reform schools. Most of his arrests were for larceny. In addition, reports from his mother indicate that he began keeping late hours at age 8, smoking at age 10, and running away at age 11. As Arthur's experience makes clear, the early onset of delinquency is nothing new.

Like Arthur, Michael grew up in a poor section of Boston, an Irish neighborhood in Dorchester south of downtown. Coming from a family much smaller than Arthur's, Michael had one brother and two sisters. His father was a "heavy drinker" and Michael recalled that his father would "take his pay every week and blow it at the track." During Michael's childhood and early adolescence, his family moved excessively (he moved twelve times prior to age 12). Like Arthur, Michael had a particularly difficult time with school. His mother reported that "he hated school from the first day." Michael repeated second grade several times, and eventually he too was placed in a "special class." He scored an 89 on the full-scale Wechsler-Bellevue Intelligence test, a 74 on the verbal test, and a 106 on the performance test. Like Arthur, Michael's involvement in delinquent activities began at a young age, 6 and 7 years old. In his early years he was involved in smoking, truancy, running away, petty theft, and setting off false alarms. The most serious offense consisted of performing sexual favors for small sums of money. Michael and his friends would hang out in bus stations, train stations, and movie theaters and solicit customers. He was arrested five times as a juvenile and was incarcerated for the first time at age 10. As a juvenile, he served more than two years in reform school.

We interviewed Arthur in his apartment in East Boston. He was 65 years old at the time. Since age 55, Arthur has lived alone in a public housing building for low-income residents in a seedy area. The neigh-

borhood is well known for drug dealing and prostitution. During his adult life, Arthur worked on and off—"cabbng"—for about forty years. On some days Arthur made out pretty well. Much of the income he obtained, moreover, was under the table and never claimed for purposes of income tax. But Arthur also experienced several bouts of unemployment. When we interviewed him, he was living on welfare and his current source of income was social security (SSI). Arthur never served in the military. He told us that he was rejected because he had "flat feet." Independent information, however, indicates that he was rejected for Selective Service because of his criminal record. Arthur was married twice with both marriages ending in divorce. At the age of 57, Arthur became a father for the fifth time when his girlfriend gave birth. When we interviewed Arthur he was not in good physical or mental health. Arthur reported that he had had three-quarters of his stomach removed at age 50 because of ulcers. At the time of our interview, he was taking Paxil for stress. He also smoked four to five packs of cigarettes a day.

As an adult, Arthur had an extensive criminal record, including an astonishing forty-five arrests. He was incarcerated in prison or jail on average thirty-nine days per year over his lifetime. Included in his criminal record were arrests for robbery, assault and battery, including threats on his wife, and indecent assault and battery on a child under the age of 14. At the time of our interview, Arthur was in the midst of a five-year custody dispute involving his son and his girlfriend, a case involving charges and countercharges of physical abuse.

Michael's adult experience could not be more different. We interviewed Michael in his home in Lawrence, Massachusetts, a small city about thirty miles north of Boston. He and his wife plus one of their five children have lived in this house for seven years. Michael has been married forty years to the same woman. During his early adult years, Michael served a seven-year stint in the U.S. Army. Michael enlisted in the Army without either the knowledge or the permission of his parole officer. Apparently he did well in the service, and by the time of his discharge he had obtained the rank of corporal. Michael was also awarded a Purple Heart. Although it was not until much later, Michael used the G.I. Bill to help purchase the house he was living in when we interviewed him. Michael worked virtually all of his adult life at a variety of jobs, mainly in factories. For the last twenty-five years, Michael had worked in security, fifteen of those years as a su-

*Michael*

pervisor. Although he had retired about nine months before our interview, he was moonlighting as a security guard at a local hospital. A year before our interview, Michael had undergone surgery to relieve a blockage in an artery. About three to four years earlier, he had been diagnosed with diabetes. In response to this diagnosis, Michael stopped drinking, but he continues to smoke about a pack and a half of cigarettes a day.

To be sure, there are some differences between Arthur and Michael despite their generally similar backgrounds. Arthur was raised in a large family (thirteen children) by a single parent, while Michael was one of four children raised by two parents. Moreover, Arthur's overall IQ score was lower than Michael's. But while large family size, being raised by single parents, and low IQ scores are related to adolescent delinquency, we have found that these factors do not account for later differences in *adult* outcomes (see, for example, Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998). We are left with the question: what accounts for the radically different adult lives of these two men?

### Making Sense of Lives

Our aim in this book is to understand the lives of Arthur and Michael and many others like them. More specifically, we try to account for patterns of criminal offending and many other behaviors over the full life course of high-risk children. The question of behavioral change and stability within individuals over the life span is virtually uncharted territory in criminology and the social sciences at large. In addressing this topic, we reject several popular notions. For one, we reject the idea that childhood experiences such as early involvement in antisocial behavior, growing up in poverty, and woeful school performance are sturdy markers for predicting long-term patterns of offending. In a similar vein, we reject the notion that individual "traits" such as poor verbal skills, low self-control, and difficult temperament can explain long-term patterns of juvenile delinquents. From our perspective, in order to explain longitudinal patterns of offending, data are needed on childhood, adolescence, *and* adulthood experiences.

We also reject the popular idea that offenders can be neatly grouped into distinct categories, each displaying a unique trajectory and etiology of offending. We believe such approaches reify the idea of offender groups and ignore the instability of categorizations over time.

reject traits 1)

reject categories 2)

Consistent with this belief, our aim is to examine criminal and deviant offending as a general process, with the goal of using both quantitative and qualitative data to explicate the pathways to persistent offending and desistance over the full life course.<sup>1</sup>

### Crime in the Making and the Origins of Life-Course Criminology

This book builds directly upon our earlier work, *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points through Life* (1993), where we developed and tested a theory of crime over the life course. In this section we provide a brief description of that work, discuss several challenges to it, and outline its major unanswered questions. We believe that distinguishing this book from our earlier work is crucial, and we want to make clear to those who have already read our previous work why they should continue here. To be candid, while we think *Crime in the Making* was a great start, several significant questions remain unanswered.

Since 1987 we have been involved in a long-term research project using a unique data archive—the *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* study and subsequent follow-ups conducted by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck of the Harvard Law School. This study is considered to be one of the most influential in the history of criminological research. The Gluecks' data were derived from a three-wave prospective study of juvenile and adult criminal behavior that originated with *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* (1950; see also Glueck and Glueck, *Delinquents and Nondelinquents in Perspective*, 1968). The research design involved a sample of 500 male delinquents aged 10–17 and 500 male nondelinquents aged 10–17 matched case by case on age, race/ethnicity, IQ, and low-income residence in Boston. Extensive data were collected on the 1,000 boys at three points in time—ages 14, 25, and 32. Over a period of six years (1987–1993), we reconstructed and analyzed the full longitudinal data set, currently housed in the Murray Research Center archive at the Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Study at Harvard University.

In *Crime in the Making*, we developed an age-graded theory of informal social control to explain childhood antisocial behavior, adolescent delinquency, and crime in early adulthood. Our theory emphasized the importance of social ties at all ages across the life course. The organizing principle was that crime and deviance are more likely to

occur when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken. We highlighted the role of informal social controls that emerge from the social exchanges and structure of interpersonal bonds that link members of society to one another and to wider institutions such as work, family, school, and community.

The first building block in our life-course theory focused on the mediating role of informal family and school social bonds in explaining child and adolescent delinquency (Sampson and Laub 1993, chaps. 4–5). The second building block incorporated the role of continuity in childhood and adolescent problem behavior that extends into adulthood across a variety of life's domains, such as crime, alcohol abuse, divorce, and unemployment (Sampson and Laub 1993, chap. 6). The third building block examined change in antisocial behavior over time. A fundamental theme of our age-graded theory of informal social control and crime was that while individual traits and childhood experiences are important for understanding behavioral stability, experiences in adolescence and adulthood can redirect criminal trajectories in either a more positive or a more negative manner. Our theory thus incorporated both stability and change in criminal behavior over the life course.

The logical question for us, then, was what factors explain stability and change over the life course? In *Crime in the Making*, we examined the predictors of desistance and persistence in adult crime and violence and found that despite differences in early childhood experiences, adult social bonds to work and family had similar consequences for the life-course trajectories of the 500 delinquents and 500 nondelinquent controls we studied. More precisely, job stability and marital attachment in adulthood were significantly related to changes in adult crime—the stronger the adult ties to work and family, the less crime and deviance among both delinquents and nondelinquent controls (Sampson and Laub 1993, chaps. 7–9). We concluded that “turning points” related to work, marriage, and military service were crucial for understanding processes of continuity and change across the adult life course (see Sampson and Laub 1993, 1996; Laub and Sampson, 1993).

### Challenges and Unresolved Questions

Three major challenges to our work on behavioral change and stability over the life span have appeared.<sup>2</sup> The first challenge comes from

developmental theorists such as Terrie Moffitt. Moffitt argues that there are two types of offenders—what she calls the “Life-Course-Persistent” and the “Adolescence-Limiteds,” with each offender type displaying a distinct causal pathway to criminal behavior (Moffitt 1993, 1994). A variation of this theme can be found in the work of Gerald Patterson, who identifies two groups of offenders—early and late starters (see Patterson and Yoerger 1993). To a certain degree Rolf Loeber and his colleagues, who offer the idea of three distinct and different pathways to specific types of criminal behavior, use this approach as well (see, for example, Loeber and Hay 1997).<sup>3</sup> When addressing the issue of continuity and change in offending over time, Moffitt contends that the answer lies primarily in the background of the offender. Namely, those with a more severe past are less likely to change. Moffitt writes, “Contemporary continuity arises if the Life-Course-Persistent person continues to carry into adulthood the same underlying constellation of traits that got him in trouble as a child” (1994, 25). So while Moffitt claims that change occurs for adolescence-limited offenders, meaningful within-individual change is evidently not possible for the smaller number of life-course-persistent offenders. Arthur and Michael's lives notwithstanding, persistent childhood troublemakers therefore make for persistent adult criminals according to her theory.

The second major challenge relates to the analytical strategy used in *Crime in the Making*. Daniel Nagin (1999) in particular has argued that focusing on stability and change in behavioral trajectories over the life course requires a dynamic methodological approach. Longitudinal models like those employed in *Crime in the Making* may establish causal order, but they do not necessarily capture the progression of change. Moreover, if researchers like Moffitt are correct, different offenders will display different patterns of stability and change over the life course. Nagin and his colleagues have thus developed an analytical strategy for identifying distinctive offending trajectories—a semi-parametric, group-based approach. This “grouping” technique allows one to group offenders not only by their level of offending, but also by their rate of change in offending over time. We apply these and other dynamic approaches in this book (for example, hierarchical change models), testing their ability to identify meaningful patterns of change in crime.

The third and most important challenge to our work was well articulated by John Modell. Despite our claims to integrate a person-based

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Theory

and a variable-based analysis in *Crime in the Making*, Modell's review concluded that we did not fully meet our objective, that our person-based analysis was "not entirely satisfying." Modell elaborated: "The authors cannot divorce themselves from a variables focus, and they virtually treat their small intensive sample as a microscopic quantitative test of their hypotheses. Nor are they adept at discerning (or portraying) the inner logic of lives as revealed in data such as these" (1994, 1391). Reflecting on this critique, we are compelled by the evidence to agree.

#### Analytic Focus

This book is an attempt to address these and other challenges. We do so by presenting and analyzing newly collected data on crime and development up to age 70 for the 500 men who were the original subjects of the classic *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* study by the Gluecks (1950). These combined data represent what is arguably the longest longitudinal study of crime in the world. As noted earlier, the boys in the *Unraveling* study were remanded to reform schools in Massachusetts during their adolescence, followed to age 32 by the Gluecks (see Glueck and Glueck 1968), and studied in our previous work (see, for example, Sampson and Laub 1993). This book updates these men's lives at the close of the twentieth century, and connects them to life experiences all the way back to early childhood.

Why should one care about juvenile delinquents who were born during the Great Depression era and were turning 70 at the end of the twentieth century? Because our theoretical focus is on within-individual patterns of stability and change, we turn to a longitudinal study begun many years ago that permits the updating and empirical investigation of various life adaptations over the long term (see also Vaillant 2002). Put differently, to study crime from childhood until age 70 requires the long-term strategy we have employed. Moreover, our results will show that the processes of persistent offending and desistance from crime are surprisingly robust across place and historical time. In the present case the "old" data critique is thus scientifically without merit. We return to these important issues in Chapter 10.

Our goal for this book, then, is to understand and explain the lives of formerly delinquent boys as they progress from childhood to later adulthood, especially patterns of criminal offending and behaviors in

other key domains of adult life (for example, work, family, military). In trying to explain continuity and change in crime over the full life span, we assess competing explanations of persistent offending and criminal desistance to discover whether there are in fact unique developmental trajectories as argued by Moffitt and others. We also present a revised conceptualization and integrated life-course theory of persistence in and desistance from crime. We specifically revise our age-graded theory of informal social control by bringing into account the interplay of human agency and choice, situational influences, routine activities, local culture, and historical context. \*

Our data are original in two ways. One is that we conducted national death record and criminal history searches for all 500 men in the delinquent sample up to age 70. The second and more innovative feature of our study is that we tracked, located, and conducted detailed life-history interviews with 52 men from the original juvenile-delinquent group as they approached age 70. These men had not been contacted in over thirty-five years. Cases were selected on the basis of their trajectories of juvenile and adult offending (for example, "persisters," "desisters," and "intermittent" offenders) as derived from official criminal records.<sup>4</sup> Overall, we interviewed 52 men across the persistent offender, desister, and intermittent offender categories. These 52 life-history interviews were combined with our collection of criminal histories and death records for all 500 former delinquents to age 70. Integrating these diverse data over seven decades and emphasizing within-individual patterns of variability, we illuminate age, crime, and human development using both quantitative and qualitative methods. For example, we use state-of-the-art dynamic techniques, including linear hierarchical change models and semi-parametric, group-based approaches, to analyze data on crime, incarceration, and mortality over the full life course.

On the other hand, the bulk of the book rests on life-history narratives that we collected in part to respond to Modell's (1994) critique. We contend that life-history narratives are especially valuable in uncovering issues overlooked in more traditional quantitative approaches in criminology. By using life histories, we move away from a strict variable-based approach—a study of the relations among variables across individuals—and shift to a person-based approach—a study of several constructs that, taken as a whole, represent the person. In our view, life-history narratives combined with quantitative

approaches can be used to develop a richer and more comprehensive picture of why some men persist in offending and why others stop. Narratives help us unpack mechanisms that connect salient life events across the life course, especially regarding personal choice and situational context. Life histories that are contrary to one's theory or quantitative data—"negative cases"—can also be exploited to reassess theory and probe new ideas and directions.

### Organization of the Book

Explaining crime over the full life course presents both empirical and theoretical challenges, and we have structured the book as follows. Chapters 1 to 4 outline the major theoretical and methodological strategies for studying criminal and deviant lives through time. Chapter 2 highlights the literature on persistent offending and desistance from crime. To make sense of this literature, we develop a theoretical taxonomy of competing explanations of persistent offending and desistance from criminal behavior. Chapter 3 describes the life-course framework and the main conceptual tenets of our original theoretical model of age-graded informal social control and crime. There we offer important extensions of our previous work by incorporating human agency and situational influences, especially routine activities, into a life-course explanation of crime. We also emphasize the importance of collecting long-term data to unveil the patterning of crime and deviance over time. Finally, we make the case that narrative data are essential for understanding the processes of persistent offending and desistance from crime over multiple phases of the life course.

In Chapter 4 we present our research methods. In many respects these take the form of a detective story in which we seek out criminal and deviant men. Finding the men and carrying out in-depth personal interviews (all of which we conducted ourselves) turned out to be one of the most interesting and satisfying experiences of our careers. There is evidence that many of the men themselves were also affected, as reflected in their continuing contact well after the close of our initial interviews. We thus take special pains to highlight our data collection strategies and the key methodological issues that we were forced to confront in finding the men and interviewing them.

Chapter 5 examines the life course of crime from a quantitative standpoint. We present trajectories of criminal offending from the

first recorded arrest at age 7 to the last recorded arrest at age 69. The quantitative data for this chapter come from state and national criminal records and death records covering the period from childhood to later adulthood for the original 500 delinquents from the Gluecks' study. Our major goal is to assess trajectories of crime in the light of prospectively and theoretically defined taxonomies based on early risk factors. We also take the opposite tack by defining offending trajectories retrospectively, or ex-post, on the basis of patterns of observed offending over the full life course, and then assessing individuals' criminal predictability from childhood and adolescent risk factors. This dual analytic approach allows us to shed new light on prevailing theories that rest fundamentally on the idea of distinct and predictable groups of offenders.

Chapters 6 to 8 explore stability and change in crime over the life course using the life-history narratives that we collected. Our analysis centers on an examination of persistence and desistance for the 52 men we selected for detailed study. These 52 men were selected to maximize variation in patterns of offending over the life course—a goal we believe has been achieved quite well. We begin in Chapter 6 with an examination of desistance from crime. In Chapter 7 we explore persistence in criminal offending over the life course. Chapter 8 then examines the life-history narratives for those men who did not fit neatly in the expected patterns of offending. Some of these men were persistent offenders who were arrested for violence for the first time in middle age, while others experienced what could be called "delayed desistance," and still others displayed an erratic or intermittent pattern of offending over the life course. In all three sets of analyses we rely mainly on our follow-up study of the 52 former delinquents at age 70, but the narratives and life histories we collected are also linked to the extensive quantitative and qualitative data collected by the Gluecks' research team for the same men up to age 32.

In Chapter 9 we revisit long-term trajectories of offending and within-individual patterns of change. We present the results of an analysis of our quantitative data using hierarchical linear modeling that simultaneously examines variations within individuals over time and propensity differences between individuals. We specifically investigate how changes in adult transitions to marriage, work, and military service are linked to changes in offending. We do this for the full sample of 500 men up to age 32 and for the 52 men we interviewed up

to age 70. This quantitative focus on turning points complements our qualitative focus in Chapters 6–8 and integrates these diverse data sources in a unique fashion.

In Chapter 10 we conclude with a synthesis of our major findings and discussion of the implications of our study for understanding the life course. In particular, we articulate how our work challenges a number of current conceptions in criminological theory, research, and policy, along with human development more generally. As Block (1971) has shown so well, studying lives through time is a messy affair fraught with methodological and theoretical challenges. Nevertheless, we believe our end result is ultimately rewarding both for the individuals involved as participants and for a better appreciation of the human complexity of crime and of growing old.

## Persistence or Desistance?

There is no shortage of explanations in the field of criminology for the onset of criminal behavior, typically assumed to occur in childhood or early adolescence. What is not known with much certainty is why some offenders stop committing crimes when they do, while others continue over large portions of the life course. What accounts for stability and change in patterns of criminal offending over time? The longitudinal studies needed to answer this central question are virtually nonexistent. Most criminological research consists of cross-sectional snapshots or relatively short-term panel studies of offending, whereas long-term studies that follow the same individuals over time are as rare as they are difficult to carry out.

In this chapter we address these issues by examining a theoretical taxonomy of explanations for persistent offending and desistance from crime.<sup>1</sup> We organize our discussion by presenting and critiquing four conceptual accounts that have been prominently advanced to explain desistance from crime—maturational, developmental, rational choice, and social learning. We then present an integrated approach based on the core principles of life-course inquiry, building from our previous research (Sampson and Laub 1993). We believe that a life-course perspective offers the most compelling and unifying framework for understanding the processes underlying continuity (persistence) and change (desistance) in criminal behavior over the life span. Before addressing specific theoretical accounts, however, we briefly

*Desistance*

review the literature on long-term studies of offending and confront the relevant findings about persistent offending and desistance from crime. In addition, we highlight key conceptual and definitional issues surrounding the study of persistent offending and desistance.

### Long-Term Studies of Criminal Careers

Gluecks  
Few longitudinal studies contain data on criminal behavior during childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and middle to older age for the same people. Among the first researchers to examine the relationship between age and criminal behavior, including age at termination of offending, were Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck. In their fifteen-year follow-up of 510 male reformatory inmates, the Gluecks found that the proportion of subjects arrested decreased from 71 percent in the first five-year follow-up period to 57 percent in the third five-year follow-up period (1943, 109). However, over the same follow-up period, the average number of arrests among those arrested increased from 3.3 to 3.6. It appeared that while arrests for property crimes declined, they were replaced by arrests for drunkenness. The average age of the subjects at the end of the fifteen-year follow-up was 40 (Glueck and Glueck 1943, 3). Similar patterns can be found in the Gluecks' fifteen-year follow-up of 1,000 juvenile delinquents referred to the Judge Baker Clinic (1940) and their follow-up of 500 juvenile delinquents from the *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* study (1950, 1968).

The Gluecks did not systematically investigate the causes of the decrease in offending over time, although they did compare the reformed and unreformed as well as those who remained serious offenders compared with those who de-escalated to minor offending. The Gluecks concluded that those who reformed "were better circumstanced than those who continued to recidivate over the long-term follow-up span" (Glueck and Glueck 1974, 141). Many of these differences were due to varying experiences, personal traits, and circumstances *before* the onset of offending. From these findings, the Gluecks developed the hypothesis of "delayed maturation" to explain desistance from crime, which we discuss in more detail below.

McCord  
Cambridge  
In another research project on continuity and change, Joan McCord has followed subjects from the Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study into their forties (median age 47). McCord (1980) found that while the vast majority of juvenile delinquents committed a crime as

an adult, the majority of the adult offenders had no history of offending as juveniles. McCord reported that the earlier the age of onset, the greater the likelihood of recidivism in adulthood.

Robins  
Lee Robins's (1966) follow-up study of child guidance clinic patients is also pertinent to the topic of continuity and change in offending over time. Robins found that 72 percent of the male children referred to the clinic for antisocial behavior were subsequently arrested between the ages of 18 and 30. Of those arrested between age 18 and 30, 59 percent were arrested after age 30. Conversely, of those not arrested between age 18 and 30, 18 percent were arrested after age 30 (Robins 1966, 47). Thus while these data show continuity of offending well into middle age, they also suggest that "the effect of the early experience begins to diminish after age 30 and recent experiences become more significant" (Cline 1980, 666).

Wolfgang  
Wolfgang and his colleagues (1987) followed a sample from the 1945 Philadelphia birth-cohort study (Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin 1972) to age 30. They reported strong continuity in offending across the juvenile and adult years. The peak age of offending was 16, and declined thereafter into adulthood. Yet Wolfgang and colleagues also found that the average number of crimes committed among active offenders was relatively constant from ages 10 to 30 (1987, 41). Continuing the Philadelphia birth-cohort tradition, Tracy and Kempf-Leonard (1996) collected criminal records up to age 26 for 27,160 males and females from the 1958 Philadelphia birth-cohort study (Tracy, Wolfgang, and Figlio, 1985). They found that the vast majority of cohort subjects had no record of delinquency or adult crime (71 percent). Six percent committed crimes only as adults and 8 percent committed criminal acts in both the juvenile and the adult period. Sixteen percent of the cohort had a record of delinquency, but no official police record in adulthood. It is noteworthy that about two-thirds (68 percent) of the cohort delinquents did not continue their offending in adulthood (1996, 80-81).

Farrington  
There is empirical evidence that similar criminal career patterns exist in countries outside the United States as well. For example, in the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, Farrington (2002) reported considerable continuity in offending from adolescence to adulthood (defined as age 40). As in the U.S. studies, age of onset predicted persistence in offending. Farrington (2002) also reported that the prevalence of offending increased up to age 17 and then declined.



Interestingly, the prevalence of certain offenses (for example, theft from work, assault, drug use, and fraud) did not decline with age. (For similar results from Sweden, see Stattin and Magnusson 1991).

These findings can now be considered against the backdrop of the age-crime controversy that has roiled the field of criminology. After the publication of Hirschi and Gottfredson's seminal paper (1983) on age and crime, the field of criminology witnessed a series of heated debates about age, crime, and criminal careers (for a sampling of these debates, see Gottfredson and Hirschi 1986; Blumstein, Cohen, and Farrington 1988a,b; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1988). The controversy has had the salutary effect of clarifying the facts about crime that need to be explained. Any reasonable theory of persistent offending and desistance from crime must address the following fundamentals.

- The prevalence of criminal participation in the population declines with age, although there appears to be more variability in the age distribution across offense types than is commonly believed (Steffensmeier et al. 1989). Typically, criminal offending begins in pre-adolescence, peaks sharply during adolescence, and rapidly declines in the transition to young adulthood.
- The incidence of crime does not necessarily decline with age, and may, in fact, increase with age for certain types of crime and subgroups of offenders (Blumstein et al. 1986; Farrington 1986; but see Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983).
- There appears to be substantial continuity in offending from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence into adulthood, with the earlier the onset of criminal activity, the longer the criminal career (Robins 1966; Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin 1972; Blumstein et al. 1986, 86–88).
- Despite this continuity, there is a great deal of variability in criminal behavior over the life span. While it is clear that juvenile delinquency is linked to adult crime, it must be recognized that “40 to 50 percent of adult offenders do not have records of juvenile police contacts” (Blumstein et al. 1986, 88). Cline argues that although there is “more constancy than change . . . there is sufficient change in all the data to preclude simple conclusions concerning criminal career progressions” (1980, 665). Cline rightly concludes that there is far more variation in criminal

behavior than previous work has suggested, and that many juvenile offenders do not become career offenders (Cline 1980, 669–670; see also Loeber and LeBlanc 1990, 390).

In short, despite some promising leads and an accumulation of important facts on age, crime, and criminal careers, there are many unanswered questions. It is remarkable, for example, how little agreement there is regarding the variability of the age-crime relationship for individual offenders. Moreover, little is known about the age-crime relationship over the full life course. Even more important is the fact that much remains to be discovered about the processes that explain persistent offending and desistance from criminal behavior across various stages of the life course. A focus on onset, participation, incidence, career length, and desistance is the essence of a criminal career approach to the study of crime and criminals. But though the criminal career model takes it as given that the causal factors that explain participation in crime, the frequency of offending, and the termination of a criminal career are all different, the empirical support for this notion is at best mixed (for a review, see Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein 2003). A key idea stemming from this approach that we investigate in this book is whether high-rate offenders are really a distinctive group. In other words, is there a group of offenders that have a stable rate of offending over the full life course and hence do not desist from crime? This question goes to the heart of the typological thinking about crime that has come to dominate the recent criminological literature.

Although desistance from crime is seemingly the conceptual reverse of persistence and hence another major component of the criminal career model, desistance is the least-studied process (Loeber and LeBlanc 1990, 407; Farrington 1986, 221–223), especially compared with the voluminous research in criminology on the onset of delinquency. The limited literature focusing directly on desistance from crime indicates that there are multiple pathways, including attachment to a conventional person such as a spouse, stable employment, transformation of personal identity, and the aging process (see Laub and Sampson 2001 for a complete review); however, no clear consensus has emerged on the causes and correlates of desistance.

To illustrate, Rutter (1988, 3) asks whether the predictors of desistance are unique or simply the opposite of predictors leading to

offending and notes that this fundamental question remains unanswered. One school of thought argues that the predictors of desistance are simply the reverse of risk factors predicting offending (LeBlanc and Loeber 1993, 247; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Farrington (1992), for example, contends that the onset of delinquency is due to changes in social influence from parents to peers and that desistance is due to changes in social influence from peers to spouses. The implication is that the predictors of desistance may be distinguished from the predictors of the onset of crime. Although there is some evidence for this "desistance" position going back to the Gluecks' (1943) research on criminal careers conducted in the 1930s and 1940s, we investigate the idea of "asymmetrical causation" (Uggen and Piliavin 1998) for understanding the desistance process over the full life course.

To understand the processes of persistence and desistance requires a theory of crime and the criminal "offender." Crime is typically defined as a violation of societal rules of behavior that are embodied in law. When officially recognized, such violations may evoke sanctions by the state. Deviance is typically defined as violations of social norms or generally accepted standards of society (that is, institutionalized expectations). Even with these definitions, the operational definition of an "offender" remains ambiguous, as does the point at which persistent offending or desistance occurs. Therefore, before we begin our review of explanations for persistence and desistance from crime, we take a closer look at the terms themselves.

### Are Persistence and Desistance Meaningful Terms?

Defining terms like persistent criminal activity or identifying a group called "persistent offenders" is fraught with difficulty. Indeed, discerning readers are likely to wonder whether these are arbitrary designations or, alternatively, valid groupings that serve a scientific function. This debate is especially relevant because terms like "super-predators," "chronic offenders," "career criminals," and "life-course persisters" are used frequently in the criminological literature and in the popular culture (see, for example, Bennett, DiIulio, and Walters 1996; Loeber and Farrington 1998; Moffitt 1993). These offenders represent challenges for both criminological theory and criminal justice policy, yet it is remarkable how little we know about them.

The issue is both conceptual and methodological. What should be counted? How many offenses, arrests, or convictions does one need to be called a persistent offender? How long a time frame should be considered? For example, does a person who was arrested once every decade of his life up to age 60, for a total of six arrests, deserve a "persistent offender" label? What do we call a person who was arrested fifteen times before the age of 30, but desisted from crime thereafter? A related problem concerns incarceration. Should time spent in prison and jail be considered in the definition of persistent offenders? Is time served in prison perhaps a better indicator of a career criminal than arrest history? Consider the homicide offender who serves a long prison term, but would not necessarily display the frequency of offending that the term *persistent* implies. Perhaps, then, both arrests and incarcerations should be taken into account.

Our point is that persistent offenders can be defined by an assortment of relatively objective indicators such as arrest frequency, variety of offending, incarceration time, arrests in each decade, arrests in each phase of the life course, and so on. Alternatively, one can examine the life record and make a clinical (subjective?) assessment about whether someone is truly a persistent offender. It may be that some combination of objective and clinical assessment could be reliably accomplished. In the end, though, it is not obvious that either approach is beneficial in establishing a clear-cut definition of persistent offending.

Even thornier problems arise when examining desistance from criminal activity. Defined as ceasing to do something, desistance from crime is commonly acknowledged in the research literature. Most offenders, after all, eventually stop offending. Yet there is relatively little conceptualization about crime cessation (see also Bushway et al. 2001). As Maruna (2001, 17) notes, "Desistance from crime is an unusual dependent variable for criminologists because it is not an event that happens, rather it is the sustained absence of a certain type of event (in this case, crime)." Compounding this lack of conceptual clarity is the confounding of desistance with aging. It is well known that crime declines with age in the aggregate population (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). The decline of recidivism with age led Hoffman and Beck (1984, 621) to argue for the existence of an age-related "burnout" phenomenon. These authors found that rates of recidivism decline with increased age and that this relationship was maintained

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when controlling for other factors linked to recidivism (for example, prior criminal record). Moreover, there is evidence that even among offenders perceptions and attitudes change with aging (Shover 1985, 1996). As one former delinquent we interviewed remarked, "Every year I get more mellow and more mellow." Another told us that he "grew out of being fresh" and "resentful of authority." It also appears that fear of doing time in prison becomes especially acute with age (Shover 1996).

Several additional questions remain unanswered. For example, can desistance occur after one act of crime? If so, are the processes of desistance from a single act of crime different from desistance after several acts of crime? Is there such a thing as "spontaneous remission" and if so can the term be precisely defined? Stall and Biernacki (1986) define spontaneous remission as desistance that occurs absent any external intervention. How can "genuine desistance" be distinguished from "false desistance"? How long a follow-up period is needed to establish desistance? Baskin and Sommers (1998, 143) argue that a two-year hiatus indicates temporary cessation and is a long enough period to consider the processes that initiate and sustain desistance. Yet how does one distinguish intermittency in offending from true desistance? For instance, Elliott, Huizinga, and Menard (1989, 118) employ the term "suspension," because suspension can imply either temporary or permanent cessation. Farrington has stated that "even a five-year or ten-year crime-free period is no guarantee that offending has terminated" (1986, 201). And in fact Barnett, Blumstein, and Farrington (1989) found a small group of offenders who stopped offending and then restarted after a long period of time.

Moreover, we underscore the role of death or physical incapacitation in the study of desistance. Reiss (1989, 229–239) has emphasized that criminologists tend to mistakenly assume that desistance is always a voluntary decision. The fact is, however, that high-rate offenders are disproportionately likely to exit the risk pool involuntarily through death (see, for example, Lattimore, Linster, and MacDonald 1997), injury, and incarceration. Incarceration and mortality thus need to be taken into account in any study of persistent offending or desistance.

Another question turns on whether de-escalation to less serious offending is an indication of desistance. For example, if serious offending ceases, but problem behavior remains or increases, what does that

say about desistance? Weitekamp and Kerner make the point that "desistance of crime could . . . be considered as a process which may lead to other forms of socially deviant, unwanted or personally dreadful problems" (1994, 448). Some offenders, even though they desist from criminal activity, continue to engage in a variety of acts that are considered deviant or the functional equivalents of crime (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). They may drink alcohol excessively, have children out of wedlock, "loaf" instead of work, gamble, and congregate in bars. Can such "offenders" accurately be called desisters? Perhaps from the narrow confines of the criminal justice system they are, but from a theoretical vantage point, they display traits that imply little change in their antisocial trajectory.

So the critical questions pile up: How much offending must ensue before one is defined as an "offender"—one, five, ten, twenty acts? What distinguishes a persistent offender from a nonpersistent offender? And over what period of time must a former offender be free of crime before we say that he or she has desisted—one year, five years, ten years? Although answers to these questions are difficult, we believe that some ground rules are possible and in fact necessary before meaningful research can proceed.

### Conceptual Ground Rules and Approach

To develop a theory of crime that focuses on within-individual change over the long haul, it is first important to distinguish termination of offending from the concept of desistance. Termination is the point at which one stops criminal activity, whereas desistance is the causal process that supports the termination of offending. Although it is difficult to ascertain when the process of desistance actually begins, it is apparent that it continues after the termination of offending. That is, the process of desistance maintains the continued state of nonoffending. Thus both termination and the process of desistance need to be considered in understanding cessation from offending. By using different terms for these distinct phenomena, we separate termination (the outcome) from the dynamics underlying the process of desistance (the cause), which have been confounded in the literature to date.

The termination of offending is characterized by the absence of continued offending (a nonevent). Unlike, say, stopping smoking, where setting a specific quit date is so important, criminal offenders

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typically do not set a date to quit offending. The actual period of time necessary to establish that termination has occurred is a sticky issue, but one that is possible to overcome. For example, in the criminal career literature, the end of the criminal career is defined as the age at which the last crime is committed. It seems reasonable to specify the date of last crime as the point of termination of offending, recognizing that there are serious measurement problems in ascertaining if in fact a person has stopped committing crimes after a certain point.

Desistance, by contrast, evolves over time in a process. According to Vaughan (1986), "uncoupling" is the process of divorce and separation. The process of uncoupling occurs prior to, during, and after divorce. Like desistance, uncoupling is not abrupt, but a gradual transition out of an intimate relationship. We would similarly argue that desistance, similar to uncoupling or quitting smoking, is best viewed as a process rather than a discrete event (Vaughan 1986; Fisher et al. 1993; see also Bushway et al. 2001). The process is a social transition that entails transformation, for example from a smoker to a non-smoker, or from a married/coupled person to a divorced/uncoupled person, or from an offender to a nonoffender. In addition, like quitting smoking or uncoupling, desistance is not an irreversible transition.

Because low-rate offending is so common, especially during adolescence, we further argue that criminologists will not learn much more than is already known about the near ubiquity of delinquency during the teen years. This logic suggests that it is not fruitful for criminologists to spend much time studying termination or desistance for low-rate offenders (defined as involvement in a single event or a series of relatively isolated events in the teenage years). Furthermore, it follows that termination and desistance should be studied among those who reach some reasonable threshold of frequent and serious criminal offending. The precise details of measurement depend upon the data set and the research question under investigation. For example, we have argued for a focus on desistance from persistent and serious delinquency, operationalized in our own research using the Gluecks' delinquent group of 500 formerly incarcerated juveniles with lengthy and serious criminal records (Sampson and Laub 1993).

Our position, then, is that whether or not one embraces the criminal career paradigm (Blumstein et al. 1986), good theories of crime ought to account for the onset, continuation, and desistance from

criminal behavior across the life span. At the heart of this focus on persistence and desistance is a conceptualization of stability and change over the life course. Consider that desistance can occur when there is a change in criminal propensity or a change in opportunities to commit crime. Is desistance related to one or both of these domains? Defining criminality as the stable propensity to offend, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that desistance occurs when there is a change in the opportunity to offend. In their view, because criminality is stable over the life course, it cannot account for desistance from crime. We of course agree that observed acts of crime change over time (Sampson and Laub 1993), but we have also contended that criminal opportunities are either ubiquitous (Sampson and Laub 1995) or not sufficiently variable to account for the sharp declines in crime by age. We have thus been silent as to whether an individual's propensity to crime changes or remains stable over time, although we have implied that traits like self-control can change over time as a consequence of changes in the quality or strength of social ties (Sampson and Laub 1995).

Here we wish to make our position on propensity more explicit, especially in relation to Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) position. We believe that an individual's propensity to crime can change over time because of a variety of factors (for example, aging, changes in informal social control, the increasing deterrent effect of sanctions). In Chapters 5 and 9, we use statistical approaches (for example, Poisson modeling of event rates) that treat the underlying rate of criminal offending as a latent construct that generates a probabilistic distribution. The problem with such methods arises when the idea of propensity to crime is assumed to mean stable individual differences, and when theories focus more on alleged unobserved causes than on demonstrated variability in the commission of criminal acts. In other words, there is an implicit theory underlying the concept of propensity in most criminological circles—the positing of fixed individual attributes that are related to crime yet never observed. It should be clear that propensity is in the end a "black box," and that propensity is the result of a variety of individual, situational, and community factors.

As we have implied thus far and will investigate more thoroughly in the next chapter, we see persistent offending and desistance from crime as two sides of the same coin. There are three broad and distinct processes that can be used to understand these intertwined phenom-

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ena. To illustrate the differences in these processes, we return to the two individuals whose life histories were introduced in Chapter 1, Arthur and Michael. One process stems from what has been labeled population heterogeneity but which might be better described as a "kinds of people" argument. This perspective argues that behavior over the life course is a reflection of differences that vary between persons (usually, but not necessarily, individual differences or traits) and that are established early in life with consequent stability over time. Hence this can be referred to as a theory about differences in persons and the consequences of those differences for persisting in or desisting from crime. For example, Nagin and Paternoster argue that "there may be differences between individuals in socialization, personality, or biological/constitutional attributes which makes crime more likely over time" (2000, 119). Once identified, time-stable traits like self-control, temperament, and intelligence are thought to account for continuity in antisocial behavior—indeed, all behavior—over time. Applying this notion to the lives of Arthur and Michael means that the different life-course outcomes we observe are due to some trait like self-control, temperament, or intelligence.

A second process has been labeled state dependence but which might be better thought of as a "kinds of contexts" argument. According to the notion of state dependence, past behavior constrains or influences future events (contexts), and these in turn can causally affect current and future behavior. For example, getting arrested may weaken one's future employment prospects, which in turn leads to an increased risk for later crime. This can thus be referred to as a theory about differences in situations or contexts and their consequences for persisting in and desisting from crime. As Nagin and Paternoster point out, "committing crimes has the two-pronged effect of both weakening restraints/inhibitions and strengthening incentives for additional criminal behavior" (2000, 118). For example, Arthur's life-course outcomes might be partly explained by the influence of incarceration on weakened social ties that in turn work to keep him on a trajectory of antisocial behavior. Once identified, such time-varying characteristics and social contexts (for example, unemployment status, marital disruptions) can explain continuity in offending behavior over time.

A third process is one that combines the ideas of population hetero-

geneity (differences in people) and state dependence (differences in contexts) into one explanation. In this "mixed model," both differences in persons and contexts matter. For example, it may be that population heterogeneity constrains state dependence. If we follow a mixed model, differences in life-course outcomes for Arthur and Michael are due not only to their individual traits but also to the effects of later life events. This compromise perspective recognizes both time-stable traits and time-varying characteristics as important in explaining continuity and change in offending over time.

What is still lacking in all three of these models, however, is a concerted focus on and a theoretical explanation of change in behavior, especially from criminal behavior to conventional behavior. For instance, if Arthur and Michael share the same individual traits that increase their propensity to crime and these traits are stable over time, how can one explain Michael's desistance from criminal behavior? If the idea of state dependence is that "criminal behavior has a genuine causal effect on subsequent criminality by eroding constraints and strengthening incentives to crime" (Nagin and Paternoster 2000, 117), it is not readily apparent how "state dependence can also explain why there is change or cessation in offending over time" (2000, 127).<sup>2</sup> Although state dependence models are theoretically able to account for desistance from crime (see Nagin and Paternoster 2000, 118–119, 124–125), the fact of the matter is that most criminologists use state dependence to explain the positive correlation between past and future criminal offending (for a recent example, see Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein 2003, 38–39).

The result is that population heterogeneity and state dependence models tend to emphasize one side of the coin—continuity in offending—and do not provide insight into the processes of change. Combining the processes of population heterogeneity and state dependence is a step in the right direction, but still begs the theoretical issue of change. In our view, ultimately the only way for population heterogeneity and state dependence models to provide an adequate explanation of continuity and change in criminal behavior is to adopt a typological approach, which argues that different offenders have different causal pathways to crime and, as a result, different prospects for persistence versus desistance. As our data will indicate, this is not a satisfactory solution.

### Theoretical Frameworks of the Desistance Process

To explain change in offending over time we turn to conceptual accounts that focus primarily on desistance from crime. Implicit in each of these theoretical accounts, however, is an explanation or *image* of the offender that helps explain persistence in crime as well. Although there is overlap across these frameworks, we highlight what we see as the differing elements of emphasis within each framework. We then make the case that the life-course perspective is the most promising approach for advancing the state of knowledge regarding continuity (persistence) *and* change (desistance) in crime and other problem behaviors.

#### Maturation and Aging

The Gluecks developed the idea of maturation as the key factor in explaining desistance from crime. Their theory was that “the physical and mental changes which enter into the natural process of maturation offer a chief explanation of improvement of conduct with the passing of years” (Glueck and Glueck 1974, 149). Desistance occurred with the passage of time; specifically, there was a “decline in recidivism during the late twenties and early thirties” (1974, 175). Thus for the Gluecks desistance was normative and expected unless an offender had serious biological or environmental deficits. At the same time, the Gluecks argued that persistent recidivism could be explained by a lack of maturity; offenders who eventually desisted experienced delayed or belated maturation. Although their argument was perhaps tautological in nature, the Gluecks stressed that the men under study “finally achieved enough integration and stability to make their intelligence and emotional-volitional equipment effective in convincing them that crime does not lead to satisfaction and in enhancing their capacity for self-control” (1974, 170).

The Gluecks believed that maturation was a complex concept and process. They wrote that maturation “embraces the development of a stage of physical, intellectual, and affective capacity and stability, and a sufficient degree of integration of all major constituents of temperament, personality and intelligence to be adequate to the demands and restrictions of life in organized society” (1974, 170). The Gluecks were quite clear that desistance “cannot be attributed to external en-

vironmental transformations” (1974, 173). They called for more research into the “striking maturation” phenomenon from biological, psychological, and sociological perspectives, with the goal to “dissect maturation into its components” (Glueck and Glueck 1940, 270). Interestingly, for the Gluecks age and maturation were not one and the same. It was the case that as age increased, recidivism declined. But age alone was not enough to explain maturation. “It was not the achievement of any particular age, but rather the achievement of adequate maturation regardless of the chronological age at which it occurred that was the significant influence in the behavior change of our criminals” (Glueck and Glueck 1945, 81). Nonetheless, the basic idea of this approach is that desistance results when offenders grow out of crime and settle down.

A variation of the Gluecks’ approach is found in Gottfredson and Hirschi’s *General Theory of Crime* (1990). Like the Gluecks, Gottfredson and Hirschi argue that crime declines with age for all offenders (see also Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983). Gottfredson and Hirschi contend that the age distribution of crime—including onset, frequency, and desistance—is, for all intents and purposes, invariant across time, space, and historical context and therefore cannot be explained by variables currently proposed in mainstream criminology (for example, poverty, subculture, delinquent peers). Gottfredson and Hirschi state, “This explanation suggests that maturational reform is just that, change in behavior that comes with maturation; it suggests that spontaneous desistance is just that, change in behavior that cannot be explained and change that occurs regardless of what else happens” (1990, 136).

A fundamental aspect of the Gottfredson and Hirschi account (1990) of desistance is the distinction between crime and criminality. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi, crimes are short-term, circumscribed events that presuppose a set of conditions. In contrast, criminality refers to relatively stable differences across individuals in the propensity to commit crime. Gottfredson and Hirschi go on to argue that while crime everywhere declines with age, criminality—differences in propensities, like self-control—remains relatively stable over the life course. They write, “Desistance theory asserts that crime declines with age because of factors associated with age that reduce or change the criminality of the actor. The age theory asserts that crime,

independent of criminality, declines with age" (1990, 137). For Gottfredson and Hirschi, criminality is impervious to institutional involvement and impact.

Unlike the Gluecks, Gottfredson and Hirschi do not invoke the process of maturation, but rather see a direct effect of age on crime. Decreases in offending over time are "due to the inexorable aging of the organism" (1990, 141). From this theoretical perspective it follows that criminal behavior is largely unaffected by life-course events—marriage, employment, education—or any situational or institutional influences. The problem with maturational or "ontogenetic" accounts, well noted by Dannefer (1984), is that they do not really offer an explanation—things are thought to just naturally happen. The basic idea is that desistance "just happens" and that the age effect cannot be explained with the available terms and concepts.

#### Developmental Accounts

A similar problem is seen in developmental accounts that are rooted in ontogenetic reasoning (Dannefer 1984). One explanation is that changes in identity account for reductions or cessation in crime (see Maruna 2001; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Gartner and Piliavin 1988; and Shover 1996). Mulvey and LaRosa (1986) focus on the period from age 17 to 20, the period they call the time of natural recovery. They argue that desistance is the result of shifts in behavioral patterns that characterize adolescence, especially late adolescence (see Mulvey and Aber 1988 for details on this developmental perspective). This developmental process is similar to the one advanced by Shover in his study of behavioral shifts among aging men involved in crime (see Shover 1985, 1996). Shover contends that changes in offending are linked to age and aging, especially the changing calculus of decision making. This process is similar to age-related changes in the lives of nonoffenders. Aging influences subjective contingencies or what Shover calls "orientational, resolve-enhancing contingencies" (1996, 130). Men turn away from crime because they take fewer risks and become more rational; gain a new perspective on self; have a growing awareness of time as a diminishing resource; and experience a change in their aspirations and goals (1996, 131). Such accounts of desistance suggest two themes. First, desistance is normative (ontogenetic) and expected across the life span. Some rough and tumble toddlers will desist from antisocial behavior as they enter

school, some adolescent delinquents will desist while in high school, and some older delinquents will desist as they make the transition to young adulthood, and so on. Second, cognitive change is a precursor to behavioral change. What Maruna (2001) calls "identity deconstruction" is necessary to begin the long-term process of desistance.<sup>3</sup>

A second developmental account of desistance is offered by Gove (1985). He argues that explanations of the cessation of various forms of crime and deviance must incorporate biological, psychological, and sociological variables. Like Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983), Gove maintains that sociological theories of crime are unable to explain patterns of desistance revealed in the data. Gove reviews six sociological theories of deviance, including labeling, conflict, differential association, control, anomie, and functional theory, and concludes that "all of these theoretical perspectives either explicitly or implicitly suggest that deviant behavior is an amplifying process leading to further and more serious deviance" (1985, 118). By contrast, changes in socially structured roles, psychological well-being, psychological maturation, and biological factors such as physical strength, physical energy, psychological drive, and the need for stimulation provide reasonable accounts of desistance from crime with age. Gove concludes that "biological and psychological factors appear to play a critical role in the termination of deviant behavior" (1985, 136). The peak and decline in physical strength, energy, psychological drive, and the need for stimulation maps fairly well with the peak and decline in deviant behavior.

A third developmental account of persistence in and desistance from crime and perhaps the most influential to date is found in Moffitt's writings (1993, 1994). Moffitt spells out two distinct categories of individuals, each possessing a unique natural history of antisocial behavior over the life course. From a desistance standpoint, what is important is that these two antisocial trajectories have unique etiologies that in part account for the differences in desistance. Life-course-persistent offenders start early in childhood and persist in offending well into adulthood. For this small group of offenders, neuropsychological deficits in conjunction with disrupted attachment relationships and academic failure drive long-term antisocial behaviors. Simply put, life-course-persistent offenders do not desist from crime. As Moffitt states, it is not the traits or the environment per se that account for continuity. Rather her theory of continuous antisocial be-

havior (and by definition, no desistance) “emphasizes the constant *process* of reciprocal interaction between personal traits and environmental reactions to them” (Moffitt 1994, 28). Antisocial dispositions infiltrate into all domains of adolescence and adulthood and this “diminishes the likelihood of change” (1994, 28).

The adolescence-limited offenders are involved in antisocial behavior only during adolescence. This large group of offenders has no history of antisocial behavior in childhood. The delinquency of the adolescence-limited group is situational and, as a result, virtually all of these offenders desist from criminal behavior over time. Adolescence-limited offenders seek to enjoy the spoils of adulthood (what Moffitt calls the maturity gap) and mimic the antisocial styles of life-course persisters, and, in turn, they are socially reinforced by the negative consequences of delinquent behavior (Moffitt 1994, 30–33). Adolescence-limited offenders desist from crime in response to changing contingencies and reinforcements. For this group desistance, like delinquency, is normative. Because adolescence-limiteds have no history of childhood antisocial behavior resulting from neuropsychological deficits, the forces of cumulative continuity are much weaker. Simultaneously, adolescence-limited offenders have more prosocial skills, more academic achievement, and stronger attachments than their life-course-persistent counterparts, characteristics that facilitate desistance from crime.

In sum, Moffitt argues that “the age of desistance from criminal offending will be a function of age of onset of antisocial behavior, mastery of conventional prosocial skills, and the number and severity of ‘snares’ encountered during the foray into delinquency. Snares are consequences of crime, such as incarceration or injury, that constrain conventional behavior” (1994, 45). Moreover, “Adolescence-Limited delinquents can profit from opportunities for desistance, because they retain the option of successfully resuming a conventional lifestyle. Life-Course-Persistent delinquents may make transitions into marriage or work, but their injurious childhoods make it less likely that they can leave their past selves behind” (1994, 45).

#### Rational Choice Accounts

The main idea of the rational choice framework is that the decision to continue or give up crime is based on a conscious reappraisal of the costs and benefits of crime (Clarke and Cornish 1985; Cornish and

Clarke 1986; and Gartner and Piliavin 1988). In this perspective, persisters and desisters are seen as “reasoning decisionmakers” (Cornish and Clarke 1986, 13). One important component of this decision is the increasing fear of punishment with aging as found in Shover’s (1996) qualitative study (see also Cromwell, Olson, and Avary 1991, but compare Shover and Thompson 1992). However, as we have seen, aging is not necessarily tied to the decision to give up crime.

Some researchers have tried to understand the context of rational decisions to stop offending. Cusson and Pinsonneault (1986) contend that the decision to give up crime is triggered by a shock of some sort (for example, a shoot-out during a crime) or “delayed deterrence” (for example, increased fear of doing more time) or both. Cusson and Pinsonneault found the decision to give up crime was “voluntary and autonomous” (1986, 78). These findings are highly speculative, as conceded by the authors, since the study was based primarily on interviews with 17 ex-robbers in Canada. In a similar vein, Leibrich (1996) studied 37 men and women in New Zealand who were on probation and in the process of going straight. She found that shame, as the most commonly identified cost of offending, was the primary factor in the desistance process. Three kinds of shame were reported: public humiliation, personal disgrace, and private remorse. As Leibrich stated, “shame was the thing which most often dissuaded people from offending and the growth of self-respect was the thing which most often persuaded them to go straight” (1996, 297). In another interesting study, Paternoster (1989) integrated deterrence and rational choice perspectives in an attempt to understand decisions to participate in and desist from delinquency (that is, marijuana use, drinking liquor, petty theft, and vandalism). Drawing on data from 1,250 high school students surveyed at three points in time, Paternoster found that the decision to desist was not related to formal sanction threats (for example, the perceived severity and certainty of punishment). Such decisions were, however, related to changes in moral tolerance of the delinquent act. Those offenders who made a decision to stop offending began to have stronger moral reservations about the illegal acts in question. This finding held for all four delinquent offenses. It is noteworthy that changes in moral beliefs were associated with changes in peer delinquency and degree of peer support for delinquency. Whether changes in beliefs and tolerance can be properly understood to support rational choice theory is questionable. What

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seems important to know is *why* individuals underwent changes in moral reasoning.

#### Social Learning

Social learning has been offered as an integrative framework to provide explanations of desistance from crime and other forms of problem behavior. In fact, Akers (1990) has forcefully argued that social learning incorporates all of the major elements of rational choice and deterrence frameworks, including moral reasoning. One of the strengths of the social learning approach is its application to all crime types as well as to illicit drug use, alcohol abuse, and other problem behaviors (see Akers 1998 for an extensive review of the research literature).

In the social learning framework, the basic variables that explain initiation into crime are the same variables that account for cessation from crime. That is, for the most part, the account of desistance is the account of initiation in reverse. For example, differential association with noncriminal friends and significant others, less exposure to or opportunities to model or imitate criminal behavior, developing definitions and attitudes favorable to conformity and abiding by the law, and differential reinforcement (social and nonsocial) discouraging continued involvement in crime are all part of the desistance story. Imitation appears less important after onset; social and nonsocial reinforcements become more important (see Akers 1998). As for onset and continuation, the most important factor in desistance is peer associations.

In perhaps the most important application of social learning theory to desistance, Warr (1993) argued that differential association accounts for the decline in crime with age. Using data from the first five waves of the National Youth Survey for respondents aged 11–21, he found that peer associations (exposure to delinquent peers, time spent with peers, and loyalty to peers) changed dramatically with age. With respect to desistance, declines in crime were linked with declines in peer associations. When peer variables were controlled for, “the association between age and crime is substantially weakened and, for some offenses, disappears entirely” (Warr 1993, 35). Along similar lines, Warr (1998) has argued that changing peer relations account for the association between marital status and desistance from crime. Using longitudinal data, again from the National Youth Survey, he

finds that the transition to marriage is followed by “a dramatic decline in time spent with friends” and “reduced exposure to delinquent peers” (1998, 183). Warr concludes that marriage is important because it reduces peer influences, a finding consistent with social learning theory but also with other perspectives. For example, marriage may lead to the greater social control of men (Sampson and Laub 1993) and thus explain their desistance. A theory of desistance needs to better account for such mediating social processes.<sup>4</sup>

#### A Life-Course View

We believe the life-course framework offers a number of advantages, developed further in the next chapter, over the traditional accounts of persistence and desistance from crime, even developmental perspectives.<sup>5</sup> According to Elder (1998), the life-course perspective is based on several principles: (1) a focus on the historical time and place that recognizes that lives are embedded and shaped by context; (2) the recognition that the developmental impact of life events is contingent on when they occur in a person's life—that is, timing matters; (3) the acknowledgment of intergenerational transmission of social patterns—the notion of linked lives and interdependency; and (4) the view that human agency plays a key role in making choices and constructing one's life course. The major objective of the life-course perspective is to link social history and social structure to the unfolding of human lives. A life-course perspective thus looks to within-individual variations over time, regardless of whether one is interested in understanding persistence or desistance in crime. Applying the life-course framework leads to a focus on continuity and change in criminal behavior over time, especially its embeddedness in historical and other contextual features of social life.

Developmental accounts, especially from developmental psychology, focus on regular or lawlike individual development over the life span. Implicit in developmental approaches are the notions of stages, progressions, growth, and evolution (Dannefer 1984; Lewontin 2000). The resulting emphasis is on systematic pathways of development (change) over time, with the imagery being one of the execution of a program written at an earlier point in time. Although there are aspects of developmental approaches that rely on pure population heterogeneity models, some developmental theorists, like Moffitt, ex-

plicitly recognize the possibility of change. Still, change is usually explained by childhood characteristics and experiences—some people are simply more programmed early on for change than others. In other words, desistance is possible only for those with the “right” characteristics, which have been previously determined. Developmental models are thus ultimately forced to assume that there are “groups” or “types” of offenders (for example, life-course persisters) that display distinct and different causal pathways and probabilities of continuity and change, even if the manifestations of these pathways vary by age.

In contrast, life-course approaches, while incorporating individual differences and notions of lawlike development such as aging, emphasize variability and exogenous influences on the course of development over time that cannot be predicted by focusing solely on enduring individual traits (population heterogeneity) or even past experiences (state dependence). Flowing mainly from sociology and history, life-course accounts embrace the notion that lives are often unpredictable and dynamic and that exogenously induced changes are ever present. Some changes in the life course result from chance or random events; other changes stem from macro-level shocks largely beyond the pale of individual choice (for example, war, depression, natural disasters, revolutions, plant closings, industrial restructuring). Another important aspect of life-course criminology is a focus on situations and time-varying social contexts that impede or facilitate criminal events.

\* At the end of the day, however, our fundamental disagreement with developmental (especially psychological) accounts concerns a theoretical commitment to the idea of social malleability across the life course and a focus on the constancy of change, including the dynamic processes that serve to socially reproduce stability (Dannefer 1984). A life-course focus recognizes emergent properties and rejects the metaphor of “unfolding” that is inextricably part of the developmental paradigm. To be more specific, like Lewontin (2000), we reject the idea of determinism and lawful predictability from childhood factors. It follows that we must reject the pure version of the so-called population heterogeneity models. We argue that the traits that are at the heart of this perspective, whether derived from genetics or childhood experiences, do not sufficiently predict behavior over the long haul. In our view, the full life course matters, especially post-childhood, ado-

lescence, and adult experiences.<sup>6</sup> We are also compelled to reject the pure version of state dependence. Although state dependence models improve upon population heterogeneity models, they too do not sufficiently account for change—there are simply too many outcomes that cannot be explained by focusing on the past.

Although the life-course perspective is compatible with several criminological theories (for example, social control, social learning, and rational choice), for both theoretical and empirical reasons elaborated in the next chapter, we favor a modified version of social control theory. Because of the life-course perspective's explicit focus on lives in social context, we link it with a revised and expanded age-graded theory of informal social control as a means of understanding onset, continuation, and desistance from criminal behavior (see Sampson and Laub 1993 for background). We thus focus on the structural sources of both continuity and change and their role in the processes of persistent offending and desistance from crime. The idea of “turning points,” plays a central role in our theory, especially when linked to the interaction of human agency, life-course events, situations, and historical context. Highlighting emergent experiences that result from person-environment interactions, our framework thus builds in contingencies and returns us to an appreciation of the role of chance, or what Short and Strodtbeck (1965) once called “aleatory elements.”

“Modified Social Control”

Sutherland?

## CHAPTER THREE

## Explaining the Life Course of Crime

We need to take seriously the remarkable heterogeneity in criminal offending over the life span. Some offenders have short careers in violence, theft, and public order crimes; other offenders have very long careers. From a theoretical perspective, rather than thinking in simplistic, rigid offender/nonoffender categories, Matza (1964) offered the image of "drift" to capture the instability of offending over time. Along similar lines, Glaser (1969) suggests that it is more appropriate to view criminality as a "zig-zag path" consisting of a crime and noncrime cycle. In his research on ex-offenders, Glaser showed that men typically do not commit crime for long periods of time. Instead, they "follow a zig-zag path . . . going from noncrime to crime and to noncrime again. Sometimes this sequence is repeated many times, but sometimes they clearly go to crime only once; sometimes these shifts are for long duration or even permanent, and sometimes they are short lived" (1969, 58).

This view of criminal careers is a poor fit with the static person-based conceptualizations reviewed in Chapter 2. At the same time, the zigzag image of offending is consistent with more relational studies of personality (see Emirbayer 1997, 302–303). This line of research examines what a person does in particular situations rather than what broad traits a person possesses. By contrast, traditional criminology measures delinquency in an invariant manner in constant settings, inducing more stability than is likely to be found in the everyday lives of

its subjects. The point we wish to stress is that criminality is a dynamic concept, especially when viewed over long periods of time. From this starting point, persistent offending and desistance from crime are inextricably tied together—theoretically, methodologically, and analytically.

Although at first it may seem counterintuitive, our fundamental beginning argument is that persistence and desistance can be meaningfully understood within the same theoretical framework. In its strong form, our argument is that persistence in crime is explained by a lack of social controls, few structured routine activities, and purposeful human agency. Simultaneously, desistance from crime is explained by a confluence of social controls, structured routine activities, and purposeful human agency. In this version of our argument the fundamental causes of offending are thus the same for all persons, although for some there may be a single pathway to crime or desistance, whereas for others there are multiple pathways. Regardless of the number of pathways, then, it is possible that the same causal mechanisms account for trajectories (pathways) of criminal behavior over the life course. This framework is similar to the stance we have taken in our prior work regarding crime-specific analyses (see Sampson and Laub 1993). In the current argument, the specific manifestations of violence may be different than the specific manifestations of property crime, but both are explained by the same general processes, namely, informal social control, routine activities, and human agency. The dynamics of persistence in crime may be different from the dynamics of desistance from crime, but the same general processes of social control, routine activities, and human agency explain both. We approached the follow-up study for this book with these general premises in mind, while allowing for a revision of our thinking along the way in light of discoveries in the data.

### A Theory of Persistent Offending and Desistance from Crime

We seek a theory of social control that will identify sources of persistence in and desistance from crime. What sustains persistent offending? What keeps some offenders from moving to more conventional pathways? In a similar vein, how do offenders go straight? How do offenders shift from crime and deviance to more conventional pathways? How do ex-offenders maintain conformity to the law? The cen-

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tral question we seek to answer is: what are the mechanisms underlying the processes of persistent offending and desistance from crime?

One of our theoretical goals is to expand the understanding of informal and formal social control across the life course. In the follow-up, we focused our attention on work, family, the military, community organizations, and neighborhood hangouts (for example, taverns) as well as on formal social control institutions like the police, prison, and parole. Thus we propose to examine a wide array of institutions that we believe influence both formal and informal social control. At the same time, we explicitly recognize that these institutions are embedded in a specific local culture (place) as well as a specific historical context (time).

Consider next the topic of delinquent peer influences (see Warr 2002). Our life-history data suggest that delinquent peers are important not only in the development of antisocial behavior in adolescence but in sustaining offending over the life course. Perhaps people who persist in offending over the life course are in a state of "arrested development" as they age. Consistent with that notion, Glaser (1969, 325-326) notes that association with deviant peers is especially appealing to people who are unsuccessful in securing satisfying and meaningful relationships in other domains such as family and work. This does not mean that social learning explanations are necessarily correct; rather, peer relations are important in structuring routine activities and opportunities for crime over the life course.

We also believe that human agency (or personal choice) and situational context, especially routine activities, are vitally important for understanding patterns of stability and change in criminal behavior over the life course. Individuals make choices and are active participants in the construction of their lives. For example, as revealed in more detail in Chapter 7, calculated and articulated resistance to authority is a recurrent theme in the lives of persistent offenders. At times crime is attractive because it is exciting and seductive (see Katz 1988). In crucial ways, then, crime is more than a weakening of social bonds—human agency must be recognized as an important element of understanding crime and deviance over the life course.

Situational contingencies and routine activities may also lure individuals toward or away from crime, and these contingencies and activities need to be systematically incorporated into our understanding of criminal trajectories over the life course. For example, we found

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persistent offenders to have rather chaotic and unstructured lives across multiple dimensions (such as living arrangements, work, and family). Routine activities for these men were loaded with opportunities for crime and extensive associations with like-minded offenders. Thus situational variation, especially in lifestyle activities, needs to be taken into account when explaining continuity and change in criminal behavior over the life course.

Aging is another significant feature in understanding the life course of crime. There are "natural sanctions" associated with criminal offending—early mortality, for example. Moreover, there are health costs associated with crime and deviance. It is also apparent that both formal and informal social controls become more salient with age. That is, the influence of social bonds interacts with age and life experiences. As seen in work by Shover (1996) and by Graham and Bowling (1995) in Great Britain, we find in our life-history narratives that, for some offenders, there has to be an "accumulation of losses" before one becomes sensitive to the inhibiting power of informal social controls. Likewise, it seems to be the case in our life-history data that fear of doing more time in prison becomes more acute with age (see also Shover 1996).

Our conception of crime builds on our previous work (Sampson and Laub 1993), wherein we posited an age-graded theory of informal social control. In *Crime in the Making*, we concluded that marriage, work, and military service represent "turning points" in the life course and are crucial for understanding the processes of change in criminal activity. Abbott contends that "turning points are narrative concepts, referring to two points in time at once" (1997, 85). He notes that "what makes a turning point a turning point rather than a minor ripple is the passage of sufficient time 'on a new course' such that it becomes clear that direction has indeed been changed" (1997, 89). Turning points are often retrospective constructions, but Abbott claims they do not have to be. Abbott identifies several types of turning points—focal, randomizing, and contingent (1997, 94)—but all turning points are "consequential shifts that redirect a process" (1997, 101). In a similar vein, Denzin emphasizes "epiphanies," defined as a "moment of problematic experience that illuminates personal character, and often signifies a turning point in a person's life" (1989, 141). Like Abbott, Denzin identifies several types of epiphanies—major, cumulative, illuminative, and relived (see Denzin 1989,

129–131). Turning points and epiphanies are more likely to be implicated in the desistance process than in the persistence process.

Although a wide range of experiences have been associated with the notion of a turning point (for example, residential moves, marriage, and military experience), Rutter (1996) warns that turning points should not be equated with major life experiences or expectable transitions (see also Maughan and Rutter 1998; Clausen 1998). First, some transitions lead to no change in a life trajectory. Second, some transitions merely accentuate preexisting characteristics rather than promoting change. Despite these difficulties, Rutter concludes that “there is convincing evidence” of turning-point effects, defined as change involving “a lasting shift in direction of life trajectory” (1996, 621). Thus in our view, the turning-point idea reveals the interactive nature of human agency and life events such as marriage, work, and serving in the military. Nevertheless, more needs to be learned about the mechanisms underlying turning points in the life course.

It is noteworthy that Maruna argues that the value of the turning-point idea to understanding desistance has “probably been overstated” because “nothing inherent in a situation makes it [an event] a turning point” (2001, 42–43). For Maruna, a more promising strategy is to focus on individuals as agents of their own change. This view underscores desistance as a process, not an event (Laub and Sampson 2001), but our theory focuses on the potential of structural turning points and the subsequent within-individual change in behavior that results. From this perspective, desistance from crime can be initiated by a “disorienting episode” (Lofland 1969) or a “triggering event” (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998) seemingly independent of an individual’s cognitive restructuring.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, turning points take place in a larger structural and cultural context. Group processes and structural determinants (for example, race and ethnicity, social class, and neighborhood) need to be considered in the process of continuity and change in criminal behavior (see also Sullivan 1989). In other words, concepts such as crime, agency, choice, and informal social control need to be contextualized, because their meaning and significance varies by context.

In this chapter we therefore revisit the areas of marriage, employment, and military service, examined in our previous study (1993), as well as uncover some previously unexplored sources of turning points. Our goal is to further unpack the processes of persistence and

desistance, or why some offenders stop offending and why other offenders continue offending throughout large portions of their life. Our approach illuminates why marriage, employment, the military, and other institutions have the potency to reshape life-course trajectories for those previously involved in crime. As will be developed in detail below, a major part of the answer is that involvement in these institutions reorders short-term situational inducements to crime and, over time, redirects long-term commitments to conformity (Briar and Piliavin 1965). We then examine the criminal justice system, especially prison, and ask whether this institution facilitates persistence or desistance in offending. After examining the institutional sources of informal and formal social control, we move to a discussion of human agency, situational influences, and local culture and historical contexts. These elements play a key role in our modified version of informal social control theory. We conclude the chapter by arguing that person-based life-history narratives are required to fully capture the processes of persistence in and desistance from crime.

### Marriage and Family

Marriage, especially strong marital attachment, has been implicated as a predictor of desistance from crime among men (for a detailed review, see Laub and Sampson 2001).<sup>2</sup> This idea was illustrated most directly by a former delinquent who had been married for forty-nine years when we interviewed him at age 70: “If I hadn’t met my wife at the time I did, I’d probably be dead. It just changed my whole life . . . that’s my turning point right there.” These kinds of declarations raise fundamental questions. What is it about marriage that fosters desistance from crime? And must changes be recognized by the men? There are several possibilities.

First, a change in criminal behavior may not necessarily result from marriage alone. Rather, change may occur in response to an enduring attachment that emerges from entering into a marriage. From this perspective, the growth of social bonds is like an investment process (Laub and Sampson 1993, 310–311; Nagin and Paternoster 1994, 586–588). As the investment in social bonds grows, the incentive for avoiding crime increases, because more is at stake. Our past position has been that social ties in marriage are important insofar as they create interdependent systems of obligation and restraint that impose

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significant costs for translating criminal propensities into action. In this scheme, adults will be inhibited from committing crime to the extent that they accumulate social capital in their marital relationships.

Empirical support for the idea of marriage as an investment process comes from Laub, Nagin, and Sampson (1998), who showed that early marriages characterized by social cohesiveness led to a growing preventive effect. Consistent with the informal social control theory of Sampson and Laub (1993) and Nagin and Paternoster (1994), the data support the investment-quality character of good marriages. The effect of a good marriage takes time to appear, and it grows slowly, gradually inhibiting crime. These findings accord well with studies using contemporary data. For example, Horney, Osgood, and Marshall (1995) showed that large within-individual variations in criminal offending for a sample of high-rate convicted felons were systematically associated with local life circumstances (for example, employment and marriage). As the authors noted, some of the time, some high-rate offenders enter into circumstances, like marriage, that provide the potential for informal social control (see also Farrington and West 1995).

Marriage also influences desistance because it frequently leads to significant changes in everyday routines. It is well known that lifestyles and routine activities are a major source of variation in exposure to crime and victimization (Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo 1978; Cohen and Felson 1979). Osgood and colleagues (1996) have shown that participation in unstructured socializing activities with peers increased the frequency of deviant behaviors among those aged 18 to 26. Marriage, however, has the potential to radically change routine activities, especially with regard to one's peer group. As Osgood and Lee (1993) have argued, marriage entails obligations that tend to reduce leisure activities outside of the family. It is reasonable to assume that married people will spend more time together than with their same-sex peers. We already noted that there is supporting empirical evidence that the transition to marriage is followed by a decline in time spent with friends and exposure to delinquent peers (Warr 1998, 183). Marriage, therefore, has the potential to cut off an ex-offender from his delinquent peer group (see also Graham and Bowling 1995). Shover (1996, 126) notes that "successful establishment of bonds with conventional others and participation in con-

ventional activities are major contingencies on the path that leads to termination of a criminal career."

Marriage often means the introduction of new friends and family (in-laws), who can affect routine activities as well. These changes hold the promise of new opportunities for socialization and changed routines. Marriage can also lead to a residential change—moving from the old neighborhood to the suburbs or to a different state altogether—and this physical relocation changes one's routine. In addition, parenting responsibilities lead to changes in routine activities as more and more time is spent in family-centered activities rather than in unstructured time with peers. *Parenting*

Further, marriage may lead to desistance because of the direct social control exerted by spouses. This may be particularly true of marriages in the 1950s and 1960s, which we partially examined in our previous work (Sampson and Laub 1993). Along with providing a base of social support, wives in this era took primary control of the planning and management of the household and often acted as informal guardians of their husbands' activities. Implicit was an obligation to family by the male partner, especially concerning economic support. Married men thus felt responsible for more than just themselves. Spouses provided additional support by exercising direct supervision. Supporting evidence for this idea can be found in Umberson (1992). Umberson hypothesizes that marriage is beneficial to health because spouses monitor and attempt to control their spouse's behavior. She finds that women "nag" about health more than men and that men engage in more risky behaviors compared with women. Thus marriage has the capacity to generate both informal social control and emotionally sustaining features.

Finally, marriage can change one's sense of self. For some, getting married connotes getting "serious"; in other words, becoming an adult. Although it now may seem retrograde, the men we are studying came of age when getting married meant becoming a man and taking responsibility. Marriage also meant having someone to care for and having someone to take care of you. This view became even more evident once children entered the family. \*

A key unanswered question is whether there is something unique about marriage from the standpoint of desistance from crime. Or can the apparent crime suppression benefits of marriage extend to those

that are involved in cohabitation or other arrangements as well? This question is important for criminology in light of recent work by Waite (1995), who makes a strong case that marriage is indeed different and better, for participants across several domains (see also Waite and Gallagher 2000).<sup>3</sup> Horney and her colleagues have shown that marriage is different than cohabitation with respect to crime suppression effects (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Horney, Roberts, and Hassell 2000). That is, marriage reduces crime; cohabitation appears to increase criminal behavior.

Overall, we would agree with Waite and Gallagher, who have argued that "marriage actually changes people's goals and behavior in ways that are profoundly and powerfully life enhancing" (2000, 17). This is especially true with respect to those with damaged backgrounds and who have offended in the past. Waite and Gallagher add, "Marriage makes people better off in part because it constrains them from certain kinds of behavior, which, while perhaps immediately attractive (i.e., staying up all night drinking beer, or cheating on your partner) do not pay off in the long run" (2000, 24). Thus marriage, and the subsequent marital attachment, is an important source of desistance from crime. If marriage is absent, or characterized by weak or nonexistent attachment, continued offending will occur. From our perspective, the influence of marriage is nonetheless complex, operating through multiple mechanisms, not all of which necessitate cognitive transformation.

#### Is Marriage a Selection Effect?

Of course, some researchers have argued that marital bonds do not just happen but are created by individual choice, therefore rendering the marriage-crime relationship spurious (for example, Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1995). For theoretical and empirical reasons, we reject selection as a simple explanation of the marriage effect (see Sampson and Laub 1995 for details). For one thing, Laub, Nagin, and Sampson (1998) demonstrated that childhood and juvenile characteristics were insufficient for predicting patterns of future offending in a high-rate group of juvenile offenders. Individual differences presumed to influence the marriage process (for example, temperament, intelligence, aggressive behavior) were explicitly controlled. These findings imply that many of the classic predic-

tors of the onset and frequency of delinquency do not explain desistance, much less explain away the marriage effect.

More generally, in an intriguing study, Johnson and Booth (1998) examine the question of whether stability in marital quality is due to the dyadic properties of the relationship or to personality or to social factors that individuals bring into the marriage. Using data from a national probability sample of persons married in 1980, these authors analyzed marital quality for those with two successive unions compared with data on marital quality over time for those with the same partner. The data suggest that stability in marital quality is due largely to the dyadic relationship environment. This finding suggests that while individuals bring personality and interactional styles to any relationship, these characteristics are malleable and can be altered by emergent qualities of the marriage itself. In other words, although one cannot deny selection effects, the resulting marital relationships can be quite powerful.

Selection into marriage also appears to be less systematic than many think. As we shall demonstrate, many men cannot even articulate why they got married or how they began relationships, which often just seemed to happen by chance. There is a long history of research on marriage that reveals strong effects for prosaic factors such as residential propinquity (Blau 1977). Selection is surely operating at some level, but most marriages originate in fortuitous contacts rooted in everyday routine activities. Frank Cullen has also pointed out that such fortuitous contacts almost always result in deviant men ending up with less deviant women. According to Cullen: (1) men are more criminal and deviant than women; (2) there are many more men than women with low self-control (in the parlance of Gottfredson and Hirschi); (3) therefore the composition of the marriage pool for women results in a short supply of high self-control men as marital partners, so a certain proportion of women must marry or otherwise associate with men who have less self-control than they do; (4) thus, from an ecological or routine activities perspective, women come into contact with men who have less self-control (Cullen, pers. comm., May 25, 1996).

We could perhaps put it more bluntly—given the crime differences between men and women, it is almost invariably the case that men marry "up" and women "down" when it comes to exposure to vio-

lence and crime. For this reason alone it is little wonder that marriage, to virtually any woman, could benefit men. We admit this position is crude and pessimistic regarding the character of men, but would defend it as empirically correct. Indeed feminists are justified, by this logic, in recoiling at arguments about "good marriage" effects. Good for whom, we must ask. Yet given the gendered nature of the Glueck sample along with the historical context, we cannot help but focus here on male outcomes. We look to other scholars to uncover the role of marriage, if any, in the offending careers of women (for example, Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002).

### Work

Like marital bonds, strong ties to work can lead to desistance from crime. In our previous analyses (Sampson and Laub 1993), we found that job stability was strongly related to desistance. In a similar vein, using qualitative data, Shover (1996) determined that acquiring a satisfying job was an important contingency in the lives of men who desisted from crime. It is therefore important to examine the mechanisms underlying the desistance process for work. We contend that the processes for work are similar to those for marriage.

First, in *Crime in the Making*, we argued that job stability, commitment to work, and mutual ties binding workers and employers increase informal social control and, all else equal, lead to a cessation in criminal behavior. As with spouses, here we emphasize the reciprocal nature of social capital invested by employers. For example, employers often take chances in hiring workers, hoping that their investment will pay off. This investment by the employer may trigger a return investment in social capital by the employee. The theoretical point is that interdependency is reciprocal and embedded in the social ties between individuals and social institutions. This conception may help explain how change in delinquent behavior is initiated, as when an employer takes a chance on a former delinquent, fostering a return investment in the job, which in turn inhibits the deviant behavior of the employee. This was the experience of one former delinquent, who said to the Gluecks' interviewer at his age 25 interview, "My employer . . . was good to me. He trusted me with the money, put his confidence in me, and I learned to respect such confidence and was

loyal to him." Work provided the Glueck men clear benefits as well as responsibilities and obligations.

Second, even more than marriage, work, especially full-time work, leads to a meaningful change in routine activities. Work restricts many criminal opportunities and thus reduces the probability that criminal propensities will be translated into action. For example, men in stable employment situations are typically subject to more structured activities and have less free time than those not employed or employed intermittently. As William Julius Wilson argues, work is important as a "central experience of adult life" and is a "regulating" force in life (1996, 52). Like marriage, full-time legal employment gives structure to one's time and provides fewer opportunities for offending and other forms of deviance. Work is central to structured routines. The simple fact is that people who work are kept busy and are less likely to get into trouble.

Third, depending upon the nature of the work, employers, like wives, can provide direct social control. In other words, employers can keep their employees in line. For example, one former delinquent told us that his employer was "like a strict father. He went after me a few times. He also took me under his wing. We would have a few drinks together." This man was such a valued and dedicated employee that the company bought him the house he now lives in and provides him with a luxury car every two or three years for his good work.

Finally, work can give a man a sense of identity and meaning to his life. Paul Goodman (1956), for example, wrote about "man's work" as work that allows one to keep "one's honor and dignity." For Goodman, having a good job is one of the principal mechanisms enabling young men to be taken seriously, to be seen as useful, and, indeed, to grow up. Young men who fail to work may get stuck in a state of arrested development (see also Graham and Bowling 1995, 97). This was especially true during the 1950s and 1960s, when men were viewed as the sole household breadwinner and women's work outside of the home was perceived as "extra." Writing from a different disciplinary vantage point, Vaillant and Vaillant (1981, 1434) have argued that work can "reflect competence, social utility, and self-esteem" and is central to mental health.

As for marriage, a selection argument can be made on the spurious nature of the work-crime connection. It is likely that selection con-



tamination is even greater for employment, if for no other reason than that there are sorting mechanisms (for example, applications, interviews) for work that are not found in informal marriage markets. Perhaps the most convincing attempt to counteract selection bias comes from a recent analysis of data from a national work experiment that drew participants from poor ghetto areas in nine U.S. cities. Uggen (2000) found that overall, those given jobs showed no reduction in crime relative to those in a control group. Age, however, significantly interacted with employment to affect the timing of illegal earnings and arrest. Those aged 27 or older were more likely to desist when provided marginal employment. Among those younger, the experimental job treatment had no effect on desistance. This is an important finding, because the experimental nature of the data addresses the selectivity that has plagued much research in this area. By specifying event history models accounting for assignment to, eligibility for, and participation in the National Supported Work Demonstration Project, Uggen provides more refined estimates of the effects of work as a turning point in the lives of criminal offenders. Furthermore, we would maintain that although individual factors most certainly matter, employment relationships, like marriage, generate emergent properties that take on a life of their own and are not easily reducible to the character of the person. The whole idea of "vacancy chains" (White 1970) in the employment literature was to show that getting a job is an interdependent system not reducible to individual decisions. In any case, we treat selection and work as an empirical question to be resolved in analysis.

### Military Service

In our previous work (Sampson and Laub 1996), we have argued that military service is a turning point in the transition to young adulthood (see also Elder 1986). Using quantitative data from the Gluecks' study, we found strong evidence that military service in the World War II era fostered long-term socioeconomic achievement among men raised in poverty areas of Boston during the Great Depression. Military service during World War II stands out as the defining moment for an entire generation, touching the lives of three in four American men and yielding one of the largest social interventions in U.S. history—the G.I. Bill of Rights. Our results revealed that overseas duty,

in-service schooling, and G.I. Bill training at ages 17 to 25 generally enhanced subsequent occupational status, job stability, and economic well-being, independent of childhood differences and socioeconomic background. The benefits of the G.I. Bill were also larger for veterans stigmatized with an officially delinquent past, especially those who served in the military earlier rather than later in life (see Sampson and Laub 1996 for more details).

Some evidence, though limited, suggests that the military presents a unique setting for men with a disadvantaged past in yet another arena—the stigma of prior criminal conviction. Mattick (1960) compared the recidivism rates of men paroled to the army with those of a group of civil parolees, and found that the rates among army parolees were much lower. An eight-year follow-up revealed lasting positive effects of the army experience: the recidivism rate for the army parolees was 10.5 percent, compared with the national average of 66.6 percent. Mattick, however, could not identify the aspects of the army experience that may have accounted for this difference.

Our age-graded conceptualization of the life course suggests that military service sets in motion a chain of events (or experiences) in individuals' lives that progressively shape future outcomes. What is it about the military that facilitated change in behavior, especially for those who were involved in crime prior to entering?

First, military service exemplifies change by removing disadvantaged youths from prior adverse influences (for example, bad neighborhoods, delinquent peers) and social stigma (for example, criminal record). As Elder (1986, 244) argued, war and serving in the military can profoundly affect a person's development by introducing a major source of discontinuity in the life course. Caspi and Moffitt (1993, 247) also point out that the military is a strong situational transition because it includes institutional discouragement of previous responses and provides clear direction and novel opportunities for behavioral adaptation. Beginning with basic training, the military provides a basic education and socialization designed to reorient newcomers to a world with different rules and structures. Past accomplishments and past deficits alike have diminished influence. Thus a prominent feature of serving in the military is the "knifing off" of past experience and its potential for reorganizing social roles and life opportunities (see Brotz and Wilson 1946; Janowitz 1972). One former delinquent told us, "The military cured me. It took a young hoodlum off the

street. My neighborhood in East Boston was a jumping-off place for jail."

Second, the military provided opportunities such as in-service training and subsequent training or education under the G.I. Bill. In this way military service may offer additional structural benefits that in turn enhance later attachment to work and marriage, which may in turn encourage desistance. As evident in the life-history narratives described in Chapter 6, the military provided a bridging environment for disadvantaged men, especially those with a delinquent past (Browning, Lopreato, and Poston 1973; Cutright 1974, 318).

In short, similar to marriage and work, but more by conscious design, the military changes routine activities, provides direct supervision and social support, and allows for the possibility of identity change. In addition, the military setting provides qualities often missing from the homes of disadvantaged men, such as firm discipline, cooperative relations or teamwork, strong leadership, social responsibility, and competent male models for emulation (Elder 1986, 236–238). The military also entails new options and experiences, especially travel to diverse places and corresponding exposure to all sorts of people and situations—varied backgrounds, talents, interests, goals, and even new conceptions of meaning (Elder 1986, 238–240; see also Elder and Hareven 1993, 53).<sup>4</sup> For some, the military even provided basic necessities—food, shelter, and clothes, for example. One man we talked to said, "I liked the uniform. It seems like it's [the military] altogether different from my childhood. From what I went through." For some, the attraction of the military was so great that they went to great lengths to enter. One former delinquent wanted to join the Marines to get away from his father, and he was so desperate to do so that he signed up under another name.

Of course, serving in the military has its downside as well. Some men were seriously injured in the military, affecting their lives dramatically. According to Elder (1986), veterans least likely to benefit from the military experience were those who served in combat, who were wounded or taken captive, or who observed killing by others. War-induced trauma can undermine the stability of marriage or can result in avoiding marriage altogether. Using data from the Terman study, Pavalko and Elder (1990) examined the effects of mass mobilization in World War II and found that veterans were more likely to divorce than nonveterans. Similarly, Laufer and Gallops (1985) suggest that

trauma resulting from combat heightens the risk of marital instability. The tragic consequences of military service cannot be ignored, nor can the wider historical context of war be neglected. The Vietnam War unleashed a dimension of military service and strife unknown to our men. Consistent with the life-course perspective, we are thus careful to situate claims about the military in their historical context.

### Justice System Involvement

Do criminal justice sanctions, especially incarceration, foster recidivism or help lead to the termination of offending? This question has had a long and protracted history in criminal justice research, but is becoming ever more relevant given the recent incarceration increases in the United States. Central to life-course research is how early events like juvenile incarceration influence later outcomes. Conventional wisdom suggests that involvement in the juvenile justice system, especially incarceration, can have consequences that reverberate over the life course.

In our research program analyzing the Gluecks' data, we examined the role of both criminal behavior and reactions to it by the criminal justice system, finding that delinquent behavior has a systematic attenuating effect on the social and institutional bonds linking adults to society (for example, labor force attachment, marital cohesion). More specifically, we found that social bonds to employment were directly influenced by criminal sanctions—incarceration as a juvenile and as a young adult had a negative effect on later job stability, which in turn was negatively related to continued involvement in crime over the life course (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 1995).<sup>5</sup> From this finding as well as other suggestive evidence (see Freeman 1991; Nagin and Waldfogel 1995), we explored the idea of "cumulative continuity," which posits that delinquency incrementally mortgages the future by generating negative consequences for the life chances of stigmatized and institutionalized youth (see Sampson and Laub 1997). For example, arrest and incarceration may spark failure in school, unemployment, and weak community bonds, in turn increasing adult crime. Western and Beckett's recent study (1999, 1048) shows that the negative effects of youth incarceration on adult employment time exceed the large negative effects for dropping out of high school and living in an area with high unemployment. Serious

Del (-) → bonds

delinquency can thus cut off future opportunities such that participants have fewer options for a conventional life.

By design, all of the delinquent subjects in the Gluecks' *Unraveling* study were incarcerated in either the Lyman School for Boys in Westboro or the Industrial School for Boys at Shirley. The Lyman School was the first state reform school in the United States. George Briggs, the governor of Massachusetts, stated in 1846 at the opening:

Of the many and valuable institutions sustained in whole, or in part, from the public treasury, we may safely say, that none is of more importance, or holds a more intimate connection with the future prosperity and moral integrity of the community, than one which promises to take neglected, wayward, wandering, idle and vicious boys, with perverse minds and corrupted hearts, and cleanse and purify and reform them, and thus send them forth in the erectness of manhood and in beauty of virtue, educated and prepared to be industrious, useful and virtuous citizens. (quoted in Miller 1991, 69)

Work by Miller (1991), McCord and McCord (1953), Ohlin, Coates, and Miller (1974) and an autobiography by a former Lyman inmate, Devlin (1985), however, make clear that the reality of the Lyman School was quite different from the lofty hopes expressed by Governor Briggs.

During the 1940s and 1950s (the time period of the Gluecks' study), the Lyman School was a large custodial institution containing 250 to 350 boys, primarily 13- to 15-year-olds. The institution was organized as a cottage system that was age-segregated with house parents. The institutional structure was extremely regimented. For instance, inmates marched from their rooms to meals, and each day activities were segmented and marked by a series of bells and whistles. Credits were earned for privileges like cigarettes and ultimately parole. If an inmate misbehaved, a master could subtract any amount of credit from the boy's total. Physical punishment and verbal humiliations were common. For instance, boys were kicked for minor infractions like talking. Other physical punishments included hitting inmates with wooden paddles or straps on the soles of their bare feet. Cold showers were also used as a form of punishment and intimidation by the masters (see Miller 1991, 96).

Most distressing were the unusual and cruel punishments imposed by the staff. For example, boys were forced to sit at their lockers for hours. Haircuts were also used as a form of punishment and punitive

discipline. Jerome Miller, the former director of the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services, writes of staff reporting the need to "hit the little bastards for distance" (Miller 1991, 94). Miller goes on to describe "programs" that included "kneeling in a line in silence, scrubbing the floors with toothbrushes, or being made to stand or sit in odd, peculiarly painful positions" (1991, 94). Along with these demeaning rituals, there were examples of sadistic discipline (such as having to drink from toilets or kneel for hours on the stone floor with a pencil under one's knees) (Miller 1991, 95).

Our analyses in Chapters 6, 7, and 8 aim to uncover the connection between such incarceration experiences and later life. In addition to transmitting information on punishment and length of incarceration, our narrative data provide a unique window from which we can also view subjective understandings of the criminal justice system. One theme that emerged from our interviews is that the criminal justice system is corrupt and a "game." The men we spoke with talked about police planting evidence, cons selling each other down the river, and arbitrary decision making by judges, district attorneys, and probation and parole officers. In the eyes of the men we interviewed, no one was concerned about justice, truth, helping offenders, or even exacting punishment for crimes committed. Everybody was out to get "the best deal," and the deal you got had little to do with what you did. There is a growing body of research on the perceived legitimacy of law and institutions of social control (see, for example, LaFree 1998; Tyler 1990; Sampson and Bartusch 1998) that we draw upon to better understand how attitudes about criminal justice bear on the adult lives of convicted men.

We also hope to understand the consequences of incarceration, especially early on in the adolescent period, across a variety of adult domains, including family, work, and the military. We ask a simple but provocative question: to what extent is incarceration a turning point (positive or negative) in the experience of human lives? It may be the case that the effects of incarceration are variable, especially when viewed from the perspective of the men themselves.

### Expanding Informal Social Control Theory

Reflecting upon developments in life-course criminology over the decade since the publication of *Crime in the Making*, we have concluded that our age-graded theory of informal social control needs to be

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modified in some significant ways. Perhaps even the language of social control is in need of revision, although we set that question aside for the moment. In this section we identify several components—human agency, situational influences and contexts, and historical context—that should be incorporated into social control theory in order to provide a richer and more complete explanation of criminal behavior over the life course, especially patterns of persistence in offending and desistance from crime.

#### Human Agency

Drawing on ethnographic studies and first-person accounts, Katz (1988) argues that crime is purposeful, systematic, and meaningful. Crime is therefore action—“something to do”—which for Matza (1964) evokes the notion of will and desperation.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, crime is a vehicle for demonstrating freedom and agency. Other themes that are evident in the life histories of offenders include the attraction and excitement of crime (the seduction of crime; see Katz 1988) and crime as calculated and articulated resistance to authority (crime as defiance; see Sherman 1993).

Our view is that these agential processes are reciprocally linked to situations and larger structures (cultural, social, and psychological), past, present, and future. Agency is thus best viewed as an emergent process, both spatially and temporally. Kohli makes a similar argument: “The individual life course has to be conceptualized not as a behavioral outcome of macrosocial organizations (or of its interaction with psychological properties of the individual) but as the result of the subject’s constructive activity in dealing with the available life course programs” (1986, 272). What is important is the interplay between agency, action, and structure through time, such that “agency is path dependent as well as situationally embedded” (Emirbayer 1997, 294). Emirbayer goes on to argue that “social actors are always embedded in space and time; they respond to specific situations (opportunities as well as constraints) rather than pursuing lines of conduct in purely solipsistic fashion” (1997, 307).

The questions asked in the course of collecting our life-history narratives were designed to reveal human agency and the contexts within which criminal and deviant actions occur. Yet as in Katz (1988), narratives have been used in criminology primarily to study persistence in crime, or what keeps offenders going. Less understood are the actions

and mechanisms by which offenders stop or withdraw from a life in crime. If crime is so seductive, how does one exit the temptation? This question points to an important gap in the criminological literature on desistance—the actions that active criminals take in order to improve their chances in life need to be recognized (see also Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). Fortunately, as developed in more detail below, what is most striking in the narratives we collected is the role of human agency in processes of desistance from crime and deviance. The Glueck men are seen to be active players in their destiny, especially when their actions project a new sense of a redeemed self. One man told us how he felt when he left prison: “The heck with you [guards and others in authority]. I made a conscious effort—do my time and get the hell out. And don’t come back.” There are numerous examples of similar actions in our narrative interviews, with “redemption” emerging as a key process in desistance. We therefore exploit our life-history narratives to better understand the agential processes involved in the lives of former delinquents, especially mechanisms that differentiate the life paths of persistent offenders from desisters.

#### The Situational Context of Crime and Violence

It is important to ground crime and social control in their situational context. As Birkbeck and LaFree (1993, 129) point out, “situations vary in the extent to which they constrain behavioral choices.” Informal social controls may be contingent on social context. From our life-history narratives, it is apparent that crime and violence are normative in certain settings and in certain situations. This fact has implications for understanding persistence in and desistance from crime over the life course.<sup>7</sup> The men we interviewed made fine shadings in their characterization of violence. In fact, in certain contexts and situations, strong informal social controls can sometimes promote crime rather than prevent it (Black 1983). Black, for example, argues that one kind of social control is “self-help”—“the expression of a grievance by unilateral aggression such as personal violence or property destruction” (1983, 46). Others have argued that there is a great deal of overlap among offenders and victims (Lauritsen, Sampson, and Laub 1991). Thus it is wise to consider crime, especially violent episodes, as situated transactions (Luckenbill 1977).

Routine activities are, of course, linked to situational variations.

whoa!

We saw that for persistent offenders, the percentage of time spent married, in the military, or in the labor force is very low, especially in contrast to those that desisted. In contrast, the percentage of time spent institutionalized is quite large. Two patterns emerged with respect to persistent offenders: (1) little or no work, relatively speaking—a low percentage of time is spent working or in a marriage situation; and (2) a lot of short-term work—some seasonal—but nothing long term. There is lots of hustling, but few stable, structured work routines are evident. There are also multiple marriages (between two and five) that do not last very long (for example, two to four years). One persistent offender told us that “a change of pasture makes the cow fat.” The men also appeared to go back and forth between their wives and their ex-wives fairly frequently. These patterns show a considerable lack of stability in routine activities.

It is also apparent that alcohol sustains crime in part because it makes work and marriage more difficult. One persistent offender told us, “As soon as I started on a drunk, I’d wind up walking off the job.” Moreover, if consuming alcohol is a major part of your life—“tonight, I am going drinking”—then your lifestyle activities involve bars, clubs, and parties with others similarly situated, men and women. One man told us that he never met a woman that was not “a drunk.” It is no surprise then that heavy drinking was a dominant feature in the group of persistent offenders we interviewed. In contrast, none of the desisters we interviewed were heavy drinkers and those that had been in the past had gotten help to deal with their problem drinking.

Overall our narrative data suggest that criminologists should treat the definition and meaning of crime as problematic. For this generation and in these neighborhoods, some crime is normative. One man said to us, “I don’t classify that [fights down at the bar] as crime because it was normal to fight around here anyways.” He went on to say that “well, we got black eyes. One guy got a broken jaw and stuff like that. But no serious stuff.” In addition, these men are not afraid to take cash for a side job and not report it as income. Fudging on taxes is not viewed as wrong, nor is overcharging on repair jobs. In fact, many of the men seem willing to cut any deal they can.

#### Historical Context

Historical context, especially growing up during the Great Depression and World War II era, heavily influenced the objective opportunities

and the subjective worldview for the men in our study (see Laub and Sampson 2002). The historical embeddedness of particular turning points (for example, early marriage and children; lack of education and geographic mobility; military service and the G.I. Bill) cannot be overstated. Although not necessarily reflected in the lives of the Glueck men, this period of history was marked by less mass alienation and crime than today, low unemployment, increasing national wealth, expansion of the occupational structure, and, for some, the G.I. Bill with its occupational and educational training.

We believe this time period is a particularly interesting one in which to think about crime and deviance as well as more general developmental patterns over the life course (for example, the adolescence-to-adulthood transition). For example, drugs like crack cocaine were not even known in this period, and the level of criminal violence, especially gun use, was below what we see at present. Pervasive alcohol abuse, coupled with the virtual absence of other drug use, suggests a strong period effect. As already noted, one of the major forces in the lives of some of the men we interviewed was the military. These men were also in a position to take advantage of numerous opportunities offered by the G.I. Bill (see Modell 1989, 204–205). As Modell has argued, “the dominant lasting effect of the war seems to have been the economic forces it unleashed, and the personal optimism and sense of efficacy that it engendered” (1989, 162). This description rings true for the men who desisted from crime in adulthood, as shown in Chapter 6.

In addition to macrolevel historical events, we explore the role of local culture and community context in the lives of the Glueck men. As been said many times, Boston is a city of neighborhoods, and not surprisingly the local context helps us understand the processes of persistent offending and desistance from crime. For too long, individual lives have been examined in isolation, even though it is now clear that historical time and geographic place are crucial for understanding lives in their full complexity (Elder, Modell, and Parke 1993).

#### Life Histories

With the exception of single case histories like *The Jack-Roller at Seventy* (Jack-Roller and Snodgrass, 1982), there have been very few long-term qualitative studies of offenders and ex-offenders. Our goal in this book is to explicate and better understand the processes of per-

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sistent offending and desistance from crime over the life course. Using a life-history approach has five major advantages.

First, the life-history method uniquely captures the process of both becoming involved in and disengaging from crime and other antisocial behavior. This information is crucial for understanding the relationship between crime and the mechanisms of informal and formal social control. Life histories reveal in the offenders' own words the personal-situational context of their behavior and their views of the larger social and historical circumstances in which their behavior is embedded. For example, life histories can be used to discover how people react to salient life events, the meaning of those events to the persons involved, and most important, how their experience of the events structures later life decisions. In this way, life-history narratives expose human agency and reveal how conceptions of self and others change over time. These personal accounts play a dual role; they represent the past, but they also actively shape future actions (Scott and Lyman 1968).

Second, life histories can uncover complex patterns of continuity and change in individual behavior over time. Life-history narratives focus on the whole life, not just one dimension or one set of variables, and reveal the interconnectedness between life events and situations. Shover has argued that "the notion that most offenders follow a zig-zag path of criminal participation compels us to be sensitive to turning points in criminal careers and the reasons for changes in direction at these junctures" (1996, 1-2). Life-history narratives, ordered temporally, can be used to show sequences that are "on-line" and "off-line" over long time spans (Mishler 1996). We are especially interested in detecting systematic patterns in subjective assessments of "turning points," including the nature or type of self-identified turning points, their timing over the life course, and the triggering mechanisms.

A third advantage is that life histories reveal the complexity of criminal behavior. Ernest Burgess pointed out many years ago that "to label behavior does not serve to explain it. In fact, it may act to prevent understanding of the many different kinds of behavior that may be covered under one term" (1931, 235). Multiple pathways to the same outcome may be present, and life histories expose "the heterogeneity of experience that can lead to a given outcome" (Carr et al. 1995, 23; see also Singer et al., 1998). Life-history narratives offer a way of breaking down complex phenomena by providing detailed in-

formation about events as they are experienced and the significance of these events for the actors involved.

A fourth advantage is that life histories are grounded in social and historical context. Shover's research on persistent thieves illustrates this notion with respect to choice and social class. Shover asks: what is rational choice for those who are economically marginalized with little hope for the future? He argues that "offenders do calculate in some manner, but the process is constrained severely by their prior choices of identity and lifestyles" (1996, 177). Life chances and views of opportunities for crime depend on historical circumstances and location in the social structure. Moreover, such calculations often change with age. Thus for each offender the rational calculus surrounding the decision to participate in crime becomes quite different over time and place.

A fifth advantage is that the life-history method shows the human side of offenders. Bennett (1981) notes that life histories disclose the "essential humanity of those who offend," and in turn the distance between the offender and nonoffender is reduced. The purpose of life histories is not to romanticize offenders and their lifestyles, but the closer one is to delinquents or adult offenders, the less likely one is to impute pathology (see also Hagan and McCarthy 1997).

In sum, life histories have advantages that cannot be easily obtained using traditional quantitative data on offenders and the patterns of offending. More broadly, life-history research has the potential to change the discipline by "reorienting criminology to the concrete" (Bennett 1981, 157). We concede that the development of quantitative methods has solidified criminology's claim as a scientific enterprise, but what criminology is lacking is a rich, detailed knowledge base about offending from those who commit crime, expressed in their own words. The consequence is that we have little understanding of the circumstances underlying the dynamics of criminal activity and processes of social control. Life histories can provide the human voices to counterbalance the wide range of statistical data in criminology and the social sciences at large (Bennett 1981; Clausen 1993; Hagan and McCarthy 1997).

### Setting the Stage

There is much to learn about persistence in a life of crime versus desistance from crime and other antisocial behavior. We believe that a

life-course theory of crime that incorporates a dynamic view of social control, situations, and individual choices that vary within individuals over time provides the best hope for unpacking the processes of persistence and desistance. Furthermore, by drawing on ex-offenders' own words, life-history narratives can more fully illuminate continuity and change in criminal and deviant behaviors as individuals construct their own life course. The data found in our narratives challenge our theory, and we therefore approach the analyses open to subsequent changes in theoretical concepts, the specifics of which unfold in the chapters that follow.

Our approach, then, is to integrate quantitative and qualitative data in both data collection and data analysis. This integration takes two forms. First, we collected, coded, and analyzed criminal record data from criminal histories and death records from vital statistics (see Chapter 5 for results). Second, these quantitative data were combined with an analysis of life-history narratives. In addition, "objective record data" from the Gluecks' earlier studies (1950, 1968) were integrated with the life histories (see Chapters 6, 7, and 8). In Chapter 9, we return to the quantitative data for an analysis of how changes in adult domains—marriage, work, and military—are related to changes in criminal activity within individuals over time. We now turn to the original sources of the data that we collected to resolve these challenging issues in understanding persistent offending and desistance from crime over the life course.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### Finding the Men

Where are they now? How have time and experience changed them? Who has died? Who is still alive? Such questions are the stuff of television specials, high school and college reunions, and gatherings of war veterans. These questions are also important for researchers interested in criminal behavior over time. One objective of life-course research is to examine how events that occur early in life can shape later outcomes. Thus long-term longitudinal studies are needed to understand the pathways of development from childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. It is also true that longitudinal studies allow the uncovering of turning points that may help to explain significant changes in behavioral trajectories over time. One problem in the social sciences generally, and especially in criminology, is the short-term nature of most longitudinal follow-up studies. To rectify this problem, we initiated a comprehensive follow-up study of the original delinquents in Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck's *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* study (1950).

As detailed below, the Gluecks' three-wave study of juvenile and adult criminal behavior involved a sample of 500 male delinquents aged 10–17 and 500 male nondelinquents aged 10–17 matched case by case on age, ethnicity, IQ, and low-income residence. Over a twenty-five-year period (1940–1965), the Gluecks' research team collected a wealth of information on these subjects in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (see Glueck and Glueck 1950, 1968). Subjects

Overall, then, our final quantitative analyses have converged to validate the importance of proximate adult social processes, especially marriage but also employment and military service, that are systematically associated with less crime across the adult years, just as they have converged to show how childhood risk factors are consequential not only in childhood but spanning into adulthood as well. It would appear that child and adult factors are continually and interactively at play in a complex process that winds through time along a number of pathways. Despite the complexity, however, in the end the qualitative and quantitative analyses agree more than they disagree on the fundamental pathways to eventual desistance from crime.

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CHAPTER TEN

## Rethinking Lives in and out of Crime

Both science and autobiography affirm that a capacity for change is as essential to human development as it is to the evolution of new species. The events of the opening years do start an infant down a particular path, but it is a path with an extraordinarily large number of intersections.

—JEROME KAGAN (1998)

The events that go wrong in our lives do not forever damn us.

—GEORGE E. VAILLANT AND CAROLINE VAILLANT (1981)

We return to the lives of Arthur and Michael, whom we introduced in Chapter 1. Despite remarkably similar beginnings, Arthur and Michael constructed radically different adult lives. Recall that at age 65 Arthur was in poor health and living alone on social security. He smoked four to five packs of cigarettes a day and was taking Paxil for stress. Married and divorced twice, Arthur was a self-described loner. Somewhat pathetically, he told us, "I live alone. I'm happier that way. If I want to get laid, I get a broad for \$15." Besides soliciting prostitutes, Arthur had been extensively involved in a variety of crimes as an adult and was no stranger to prison and jail. Given his lack of meaningful connections to people and institutions, Arthur's prospects for change, even in old age, appear to be grim.

In contrast, Michael's adult life was a story of success. He was a decorated war veteran and had recently become a homeowner. Happily married for forty years and a grandfather six times over, Michael has a close relationship with his wife and their five adult children. Although he officially retired at age 63, he still moonlights as a security guard. Living off pensions, social security payments, and income from his wife's job and his part-time work, Michael has not missed a mortgage payment in the seven years since he purchased his house. He suffered some health problems once he hit the age of 60, but his response was to stop drinking and take his medication on a regular basis. Per-



haps most important for this book, Michael clearly desisted from criminal behavior as an adult. Although we have recognized the complexity of turning points and their interpretation throughout our analysis, his explanation was a simple but powerful one—"Well, you can say that the Army changed me."

A dominant theme in our culture is that divergent adult outcomes are the result of varying childhood experiences. Strong versions of the notion that "wounded inner childhoods" explain adult experiences are more popular than ever (see, for example, Merkin 2002). It is interesting to speculate on why notions of childhood determinism have such appeal in our society (see Kagan 1998, 83–150; Bruer 1999). We believe that cultural beliefs about the childhood-adult connection are in part distorted by dominant methodological approaches. If we start with adult offenders, the childhood origins of crime and antisocial behavior become evident and relatively straightforward. The simple "bad boys–bad men" connection seems to fit quite well. If we begin with children, however, and follow their paths to adulthood, we find considerable heterogeneity in adult outcomes. Some antisocial children do become involved in delinquency as adolescents and then they graduate to adult offending; yet other children and adolescents cease all offending by adulthood. Retrospective data tend to confuse and simplify cause and effect for both laypersons and scholars alike. Although maddeningly difficult to carry out, only prospective longitudinal data—studying lives going forward—can sort out causal ordering and shed light on how complex processes emerge over time (Vaillant 1995; 2002, 29–33). As George Vaillant pointed out with regard to retrospective narratives, "It is all too common for caterpillars to become butterflies and then to maintain that in their youth they were little butterflies" (2002, 30).

#### Advances in the Study of Whole Lives

Like following life thro' creatures you dissect,  
You lose it in the moment you detect.

—ALEXANDER POPE (1993 [1733])

Drawing on what is arguably the longest study of criminal behavior in the world, we have sought to understand the lives of Arthur and Michael and others like them. Our approach contrasts with that of many

social scientists, especially criminologists, who have sought to identify and isolate distinctive "effects" due to individual traits, family, school, peer group, and neighborhood. The problem with this latter approach is that it has "led to an overly simplified view of the relations of parts to wholes and of causes to effects" (Lewontin 2000, 72). As noted by John Modell (1994), we were guilty of this as well in *Crime in the Making* (1993). The problem, according to Richard Lewontin, an evolutionary biologist, is that the organism is the nexus of a very large number of weakly determining forces (2000, 76) and "much of the uncertainty of evolution arises from the existence of multiple possible pathways even when external conditions are fixed" (2000, 88). In other words, when thinking about a phenomenon like crime, there is a multiplicity of causal chains and pathways, all of which have a weak individual influence (Lewontin 2000, 94; Rutter 1988; Rutter, Giller, and Hagell 1998).

Of course, the challenge is to find a middle ground between a naive reductionism and a wholism that does not allow for any precise explanation. We believe we have done so by capitalizing on a wide range of both quantitative and qualitative data and by taking seriously the life-history narratives provided by the men themselves. We have worked throughout to integrate quantitative and qualitative data, weaving back and forth between rigorous analysis of both within-individual longitudinal records and narrative accounts. Systematic integration such as this is paid lip service by many social scientists but is rarely carried out, especially in an interactional sequence that allows one data source to challenge and inform the other. With our extensive and varied forms of data gathered for a large number of serious criminal offenders across the full life course, we believe we are well positioned to address the major challenges to our previous work on behavioral change and stability over time, as well as to answer unresolved questions. In so doing, we hope to move criminological theory and policy forward in new and productive ways. In our view, criminology seems to be falling into a simplistic debate between "kinds of people" versus "kinds of contexts" arguments, although doing so in a sophisticated and technically complex manner. Both arguments fail to take seriously the idea of behavioral change across the life course.

One of the advantages of employing life-history narratives is their ability to uncover new ideas and challenge conventional wisdom. We are struck by the surprises in our data, surprises that challenge not

only the prevailing wisdom in criminology but also some of the themes in our prior work, *Crime in the Making*. A prominent example is findings that challenge the structural determinism of turning points in the life course. We now turn to these new themes and articulate in more detail our revised theory of crime, which recognizes the importance of human agency and choice as embedded in social structures. We also summarize our revised conception of the mechanisms that underlie persistent offending and desistance from crime.

### Desistance by Default

Such a theory might start with the observation that the commitment made without realization that it is being made—what might be termed the “commitment by default”—arises through a series of acts no one of which is crucial but which, taken together, constitute for the actor a series of side bets of such magnitude that he finds himself unwilling to lose them.

—HOWARD S. BECKER (1960)

The process of desistance is complex and occurs for all types of offenders (for example, serious and nonserious, violent and nonviolent) at different ages over the life course. Although there are multiple pathways to desistance, our data indicate that desistance is facilitated by self-described “turning points”—changes in situational and structural life circumstances like a good marriage or a stable job—in combination with individual actions (that is, personal agency). Although age is clearly important in understanding desistance, a focus on age and age alone obfuscates understanding the life course of crime. From our perspective, desistance is best viewed as a process realized over time, not a single event.

Our stance on the desistance process contrasts with emerging theories of desistance that emphasize cognitive transformations or identity shifts as necessary for desistance to occur (see Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Maruna 2001). We believe that most offenders desist in response to structural turning points that serve as the catalyst for long-term behavioral change. The image of “desistance by default” best fits the desistance process we found in our data. Desistance for our subjects was not necessarily a conscious or deliberate process, but rather the consequence of what Howard Becker calls “side bets” (1960, 38). Many men made a commitment to go straight without

even realizing it. Before they knew it, they had invested so much in a marriage or a job that they did not want to risk losing their investment (H. Becker 1960, 1964; see also Matsueda and Heimer 1997, 171). In other words, “habits provide an anchor by strengthening the forces making for persistence in behavior” (G. Becker and Murphy 2000, 152). We agree that the offenders’ own perspectives and words need to be brought into the understanding of desistance, and we believe we have done so. However, offenders can and do desist without a conscious decision to “make good” (compare Maruna 2001), and offenders can and do desist without a “cognitive transformation” (compare Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002).

Some of the men we studied, of course, did want to make good, and they in fact desisted from crime. Consider, for example, Richard and his wife, who have taken in foster children who were wards of the state for many years. Our main point is that many of the desisters did not seek to make good—they simply desisted with little if any cognitive reflection on the matter. “Redemption scripts” (Maruna 2001) were also noticeably absent in most of the life-history narratives. The majority of men we interviewed desisted from crime largely because they were able to capitalize on key structural and situational circumstances. They often selected these structural and situational circumstances (for example, they decided to get married, get that job, hang out with those friends), but these institutions and relationships in turn influenced the men as well (see also G. Becker and Murphy 2000). Thus the developmental phase of cognitive transformation or making good is not a necessary pathway to desistance.

### (De)Connectivity and Marginality

The lyricism of marginality may find inspiration in the image of the “out-law,” the great social nomad, who prowls on the confines of a docile, frightened order.

—MICHEL FOUCAULT (1995 [1975])

Men who desisted from crime were embedded in structured routines, socially bonded to wives, children, and significant others, drew on resources and social support from their relationships, and were virtually and directly supervised and monitored. In other words, structures, situations, and persons offered nurturing and informal social control

that facilitated the process of desistance from crime. Even the most hardened offender is not a persistent offender in the true sense of the term and, as we have observed in our long-term follow-up study, virtually all offenders eventually desist albeit at different rates and ages.

The key question is, What is it about "persistent" offenders that distinguishes them from other offenders? In our view, more than being identified by a single trait like poor verbal intelligence or low self-control or even a series of static traits, the persistent offender, to the extent the term has meaning, seems devoid of linking structures at each phase of the life course, especially involving relationships that can provide nurturing, social support, and informal social control. Generally, the persistent offenders we interviewed experienced residential instability, marital instability, job instability, failure in school and the military, and relatively long periods of incarceration. Except when in prison or jail, they were "social nomads," to use Foucault's term (1995 [1975]). In contrast to the men who desisted from crime, the life of the persistent offender was marked by marginality and a lack of structure that led to even more situations conducive to crime. For those without permanent addresses, steady jobs, spouses, children, and other rooted forms of life, crime and deviance is an unsurprising result—even for those possessing so-called prosocial traits. As a consequence of chaotic and unstructured routines, one has increased contact with those individuals who are similarly situated—in this case, similarly unattached and free from nurturing, social capital or support, and informal social control. Thus while group offending may well decline with age (Warr 2002, 130), we find in our narrative data that the influence of deviant peers and criminal networks is particularly salient in the lives of persistent offenders.

### Will: The Power of Human Agency

Will is the conscious foreshadowing of specific intention capable of being acted on or not. It is a sense of option that must be rendered in context.

—DAVID MATZA (1969)

For a number of our formerly delinquent men, personal agency looms large in the processes of persistence and desistance from crime. Our narratives showed that some men who persisted in crime consciously chose to continue involvement in crime and did not apologize or

make excuses for their criminal behavior (see also Katz 1988). Many men who desisted from crime similarly displayed a variety of volun-taristic actions that facilitated the process of desistance. In our life-history narratives, one thus sees strong evidence for both will/human agency and "commitment by default" (H. Becker 1960), often in the same man's life. In other words, there is no escaping the tension surrounding conscious action and unconscious action generated by default.

The net result is that our work offers a dual critique of social science and popular thinking about crime over the life course. Many developmental criminologists believe that childhood and adolescent risk characteristics are all that really matter, but our work shows otherwise. Not to be overlooked and equally important is our critique of structuralist approaches in criminology that contend that location in the social structure, namely poverty and social class, are all that really matter. The men we studied were active participants in constructing their lives, a finding that challenges more deterministic theories like Moffitt's (1993), derived from developmental psychology, as well as theories like Merton's (1938), Cohen's (1955), Cloward and Ohlin's (1960), and Wilson's (1987), derived from sociology.

In our view, both objective and subjective factors are implicated in the processes by which some offenders commit crime at a higher rate and for a longer period of time than other offenders (see also Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Maruna 2001; Shover 1996). The linked ideas of "contingencies" and "intercontingencies" are useful in this discussion (see H. Becker 1998, 28–35). Events and their resulting actions are contingent upon other events and their accompanying actions. Intercontingencies are events and actions that are dependent upon events and actions by other people. Thus a quality marriage may be a turning point for some men because of the event itself, their subjective state, and the behavior of others around them as well as the subsequent events that result because of the fact that they are now married.

Perhaps the concept that best captures this theoretical idea is "situated choice." Our interest is the interaction between life-course transitions, macro-level events, situational context, and individual will. Moreover, we recognize that both the social environment and the individual are influenced by the interaction of structure and choice. This view of individual choice extends well beyond selection effects—

structures are determined by individual choices, and in turn structures constrain, modify, and limit individual choices. In other words, choices are always embedded in social structures. Following Gary Becker and Kevin Murphy (2000), we believe that the interaction of choice and structure produces behavior that cannot be predicted from a focus on one or the other. From our perspective, it is particularly important to reconcile the idea of choice or will with a structuralist notion of turning points (Abbott 1997, 96–97). Indeed, as Abbott has written, “A major turning point has the potential to open a system the way a key has the potential to open a lock . . . action is necessary to complete the turning” (1997, 102). In this instance, action is both thought and behavior, and thus individual action needs to align with the social structure in order to produce behavioral change and to maintain change (or stability?) over the life course. As noted above, this process of change reflects the continuous interplay between purposeful action and default “side bets” (H. Becker 1960) that accumulate over time.

#### Who Cares about Boston Boys Born in the 1920s?

Perhaps you ask, “Are these lives from a previous generation relevant to us today?”

—JOHN CLAUSEN (1993)

We have argued that the effects of historical context cannot be ignored in any study of offending patterns over time. This raises the question—is our work merely a historical document or does it speak to the issues of the day? In other words, who cares about Boston boys born in the 1920s if one is interested in understanding and doing something about antisocial behavior and crime in the new millennium? To push the deconstruction argument a bit further, why should we be concerned about a study of all boys in the first place? Along similar lines, why should we be concerned about white boys? Paul Tracy and Kimberly Kempf-Leonard, for example, summarily dismissed the findings in *Crime in the Making* because they were drawn from an “all-white, all-male sample” and offered “only a distorted perception of the reality of crime” (1996, 62–63).

From our perspective, the context of criminal opportunities and the ways in which antisocial tendencies are manifested needs to be recog-

nized in any discussion of offending patterns over time. Moreover, we believe that the patterns of persistence in and desistance from crime that we have uncovered are more general than specific with respect to place, historical time, gender, and race (see also Laub and Sampson 2001, 2002).

Let’s take the example of marriage, the most consistent factor to emerge on the basis of both the qualitative narratives and the longitudinal analysis of within-individual change (where each man acted as his own control for stable traits). Why is marriage important in the process of desistance? From our data, it appears that at least five dimensions of marriage affect desistance, and none of them to our knowledge are limited to a particular historical period or demographic subgroup. First, marriage offers the potential resources of another person (social support and capital). Presumably, as marriage continues, these investments grow over time and get stronger. Second, marriage contains an element of direct social control. Spouses often monitor and supervise their mates regarding a variety of behaviors, including crime and deviance. The strategies adopted by spouses vary from “zero tolerance” to “management and containment,” but the intent is the same—informal social control. Third, marriage means a change in routines and lifestyle activities, namely, new friends, new family, and new time obligations. Previous routines may no longer be possible because of competing demands and obligations. Fourth, marriage often means a residential change, which can affect routine activities and in turn influence both opportunities and barriers to crime. Fifth, marriage may lead to children, who can not only change one’s worldview but dramatically alter routine activities. This view is readily accepted in the popular culture. Consider a recent statement by the actor Nicolas Cage: “Before I was the anarchist setting off fireworks. Once I had my son, instead of big explosions, I looked for stability in my life” (Hawkes 2002, 4).

We are witnessing a revival of interest in the causal effects of marriage, and there is serious discussion and debate regarding the larger role of marriage in society (see Amato and Booth 1997; Waite and Gallagher 2000; Wilson 2002). We do not take a normative stance on marriage, but considering the present climate our findings on the importance of marriage seem relevant. We see our work as central to the debate about how within-individual behavior changes or remains stable over time as individuals connect or disconnect across a variety of

institutional domains (for example, marriage, work, the military). Indeed, these were the central questions pursued here by both the qualitative and the quantitative analysis. In any case, as Waite and Gallagher (2000) summarize, most people marry and most who divorce get married again, so the idea that marriage is not relevant to the study of crime is indefensible.

The apparently strong effects of marriage on health are particularly suggestive: if marriage can influence or regulate physiological responses (Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton 2001; Mazur and Michalek 1998), it is possible to conceive of behavioral responses to marriage. To be sure, in this book we have studied the connection of marriage to criminal deviance among men. It is not obvious that women reap the same benefit, although in the case of health the evidence suggests, contrary to prevailing wisdom, that the net gains are positive for all participants (Waite 1995; Waite and Gallagher 2000, 47–64; Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton 2001).

With respect to persistence in crime, consider next the role of addiction and substance abuse. Drawing on a large body of empirical literature, Michael Rutter and his colleagues have concluded, “Antisocial behavior at an earlier age increases the risk of alcohol or drug problems at a later age and vice versa” (1998, 152). Whether involving alcohol or other drugs, substance abuse is an important component in the maintenance of crime over the life course. Moreover, since most of the Glueck men who were substance abusers abused alcohol, it is worthwhile to point out that “alcohol is a more important risk factor for antisocial behavior than are other drugs (because it is more frequently taken in excess)” (Rutter et al. 1998, 154). As revealed in the life-history narratives, drug and alcohol abuse sustains crime in part because of the negative consequences and social difficulties caused by heavy drinking and drug use in the domains of work, family, and the military. Like our findings on marriage, our findings on the role of substance abuse in sustaining criminal behavior over time are not isolated. The Glueck men do not have to have used crack cocaine in order to be relevant to current criminological thinking.

Critics whose gaze is limited to the present thus suffer in the end from a lack of scientific sense. Because our focus is on within-individual patterns of stability and change, we must rely on longitudinal data that other investigators began collecting many years ago in order to empirically study various life adaptations over the long-term (see also

Vaillant 2002). There is no other way to proceed—the study of crime cannot sit still while the principal investigators of today’s ongoing longitudinal studies collect data. To be sure, we look forward to learning more about trajectories of adult crime and their linkage to childhood behavior in such studies (for example, the Pittsburgh Youth Study; Rochester Youth Development Study; Dunedin cohort study; Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods) when those subjects turn age 70 in the year 2045 and well beyond. But of course by then those data too will be criticized as old.

### Implications for Developmental Criminology

Development (*sviluppo* in Italian, *desarrollo* in Spanish, *Entwicklung* in German) is literally an unfolding or unrolling of something that is already present and in some way preformed.

—RICHARD LEWONTIN (2000)

If one defines development as life-history change, then developmental criminology should focus on changes in the development of crime and antisocial behavior over time. Relying on what Michael Tonry and David Farrington (1995) refer to as the central insight from Shakespeare—that the child is father to the man (see Caspi 2000)—researchers have addressed how developmental processes are linked to the onset, continuation, and cessation of criminal and antisocial behavior. Much has been learned and developmental criminology is now ascendant. One of the most popular and compelling theories of crime in the developmental camp is Terrie Moffitt’s dual taxonomy theory of offending.

In our view, the character of “development” in developmental criminology is a key theoretical issue. Lewontin has stated that “the term *development* is a metaphor that carries with it a prior commitment to the nature of the process” (2000, 5). Using the analogy of a photographic image, Lewontin argues that the way the term “development” is used is a process that makes the latent image apparent. This seems to be what developmental criminological theory is all about. For example, in Moffitt’s theory of crime, the environment offers a “set of enabling conditions” that allow individual traits to express themselves. Although reciprocal interactions with the environment are allowed, life-course-persistent offenders and adolescence-

limited offenders follow a preprogrammed line of development—an unwinding, an unfolding, or an unrolling of what is fundamentally “already there.” The view of development as a predetermined unfolding is linked to a typological understanding of the world—different internal programs will have different outcomes for individuals of a different type. Lewontin writes, “If the development of an individual is the unfolding of a genetic program immanent in the fertilized egg, then variations in the outcome of development must be consequences of variations in that program” (2000, 17).

Debates about development in the social sciences are not new (see, for example, the exchange between Dannefer (1984) and Baltes and Nesselrode (1984)). As noted, some developmentalists recognize social interactions, but in the end they embrace a between-individual focus that emphasizes the primacy of early childhood attributes that are presumed to be stable. We view the life course as something altogether different. Furthermore, we see development as it is typically defined and emphasized in the literature as not necessarily pertinent to the study of situated human behavior. In our theory of crime, development is better conceived as the constant interaction between individuals and their environment, coupled with the factor of chance or “random developmental noise” (Lewontin 2000, 35–36). Recognizing developmental noise implies that “the organism is determined neither by its genes nor by its environment nor even by interaction between them, but bears a significant mark of random processes” (2000, 38).

From this view it makes sense that we uncovered enormous heterogeneity in criminal offending over the life course. Some offenders start early and stop; others start early and continue for long periods of time. A sizable portion of the offending population displays a zigzag pattern of offending over long time periods. Most important, long-term patterns of offending cannot be explained by individual differences (for example, low verbal IQ), childhood characteristics (for example, early onset of misbehavior), or adolescent characteristics (for example, chronic juvenile offending). In our conception of development, then, the sum of the parts includes individual differences, environmental differences, social interactions, and random, chance events. All of this leads to considerable “noisy, unpredictable development.” Coupled with the analyses presented throughout this book, this description captures well the life-course reality of much crime.

### On the Dangers of Offender Typologies

The price of metaphor is eternal vigilance.

—ALEXANDER ROSENBLUETH AND NORBERT WEINER (1951),  
AS QUOTED IN LEWONTIN (2000)

The typological idea is a fairly simple and straightforward one that has superficial plausibility, but it is also an idea whose time has probably gone.

—DON GIBBONS (1985)

Richard Lewontin has cautioned that while metaphors are important in intellectual debates, there is a significant danger of confusing the metaphor with the thing of real interest (2000, 4). The discipline of criminology would do well to heed this warning, for if the trend toward reifying offender groups as distinct rather than approximations or heuristic devices continues, we may well miss indications that statistically constructed groups or types do not, in fact, exist. In other words, despite appropriate cautions and caveats, research questions and research designs run a considerable risk of reinforcing the “metaphorical imagery.”

Typological configurations pose a related but perhaps more vexing risk. Despite early warnings by Don Gibbons in the 1980s, the popularity of typological approaches to crime has, if anything, increased in recent years. In our view, the problems with typological approaches are many and far reaching. In a general sense, typologies are related to the larger issue of development as a packaged unfolding, as discussed above. But in other ways, the issue of typologies in criminological theory and research is distinct and different from the larger issue of development. One fundamental problem is that most typological approaches in criminology are atheoretical and post hoc. After the fact, it appears possible to find groups in any data set, many of which cannot be replicated or validated with independent data.

The underlying question is whether delinquency and crime are homogeneous or a unidimensional phenomenon. As Travis Hirschi pointed out more than thirty years ago, “the problem with the typological approach is that it begs the question of causal homogeneity by focusing exclusively on the question of behavioral homogeneity” (1969, 53). As we witnessed in our long-term follow-up data, it is

more likely that offender groupings follow a fairly continuous distribution across variables. The key finding from our analyses is that the process of desistance follows a remarkably similar path for all offenders, albeit at different rates. Moreover, we could find no credible evidence that this finding is an artifact of our data source.

The notion of offender typologies is also inextricably linked to interventions. The fundamental idea is that different interventions are needed for different types of offenders (see Gibbons 1985). One result of this intellectual approach is the development of specialized study groups and the emergence of the risk-factor paradigm. For instance, in 1995 the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention convened a study group on serious and violent juvenile offenders (Loeber and Farrington 1998). The unexamined assumption was that serious and violent juvenile offenders are distinct and different from nonserious and nonviolent juvenile offenders in ways other than what their outcomes indicate. A few years later, a second study group was formed on child delinquents (Loeber and Farrington 2000). The underlying assumption of this study group is that early offenders are different from later offenders. The next study group will no doubt focus on yet another offender category or offense type.

An obvious problem is that there is little consistent empirical support in decades of criminological research for the idea of offense specialization and differential causal forces (Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin 1972; Wolfgang, Thornberry, and Figlio 1987; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein 2003). Moreover, depending upon the data source (official versus self-report), offender types are at best a loose reflection of reality and do not capture the complexity of offending over the life course. When one considers long-term follow-up data, offender typologies become even murkier and difficult to justify on empirical grounds. Indeed we designed our follow-up study to capture a typology of adult offending, only to question it as the complexity of the men's lives became apparent. Finally, the success of specialized, targeted interventions focusing on offender types such as life-course-persistent offenders has not been demonstrated; this approach may lead to grandiose proclamations like those seen in the National Summit on Violence pamphlet (1999) that far exceed the state of scientific knowledge in the field of criminology.

By raising critical questions about typological approaches, we are not arguing that groups or grouping techniques have no place in crim-

inology. As discussed in earlier chapters, groups serve many useful purposes, and methods such as trajectory group analysis (Nagin and Land 1993) are innovative in recent criminology. Nevertheless, serious problems arise when groups are defined atheoretically and reified as substantively real without prospective or external validation. Despite the appeal of groups for simplifying a messy reality, we believe that criminologists may be better served by attending to individual trajectories of crime. Understanding general causal pathways to crime at all points in the life course is the research question that criminology might profitably begin to address.

### Reconsidering the Risk-Factor Paradigm

Certainly the art of constructing [prediction] instruments for use at an early age is in a somewhat parlous state.

—DAVID J. BORDUA (1961b)

The conference "Delinquents under 10: Targeting the Young Offender" was held in Minneapolis in 1999. As the name indicates, the risk-factor and prediction paradigm has again taken hold of criminology, especially for those interested in crime prevention and crime control policies (for an excellent overview of this approach, see Farrington 2000). Investigators know what the risk factors are; however, what we don't know very well is which kids will do what and when. In other words, as David Bordua observed more than forty years ago, our ability to predict behavior prospectively over the long term continues to be weak at best.

An analogy may be appropriate here. In an article in *Science*, Robert Geller and his colleagues have concluded that earthquakes cannot be predicted. They write:

Whether any particular small earthquake grows into a large earthquake depends on a myriad of fine details of physical conditions throughout a large volume, not just in the immediate vicinity of the fault. This highly sensitive nonlinear dependence of earthquake rupture on unknown initial conditions severely limits predictability. The prediction of individual large earthquakes would require the unlikely capability of knowing all of these details with greater accuracy. Furthermore, no quantitative theory for analyzing these data to issue predictions exists at present. Thus, the consensus . . . was that individual earthquakes are probably inherently unpredictable. (Geller et al. 1997, 1616)

*MSA*

What is needed, Geller and his colleagues conclude, are “observable and identifiable precursors that would allow alarms to be issued with high reliability and accuracy” (1997, 1616).

In the field of criminology do such precursors in fact exist? Yes and no. The yes refers once again to the fact that adult criminals seem always to possess early childhood risks (Robins 1966, 1978), a sturdy finding in criminology. The no refers to the prospective reality. There is a lengthy history of prediction research in criminology showing that childhood variables are quite modest prognostic devices, going forward in time. Known as the false positive problem, prediction scales often result in the substantial overprediction of future criminality (Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber 1987; Farrington and Tarling 1985). Likewise, prediction attempts often fail to identify accurately those who will become criminal even though past behavior suggests otherwise (false negatives). In one of the best studies that illustrates the problem, Jennifer White and her colleagues (1990, 521) document that “early antisocial behavior is the best predictor of later antisocial behavior.” This study examined behavior from age 3 to age 15. Nevertheless, their data clearly show the limitations of relying only on childhood information to understand behavior over time. As White et al. (1990, 521) argue, a high false positive rate precludes the use of early antisocial behavior alone as a predictor of later crime. They go on to note the general inaccuracy of specific predictions and describe how the heterogeneous nature of delinquency in later adolescence (and by implication, adulthood) thwarts accurate prediction. White’s findings complement our own. Using data from ages 7 to 70 we have illustrated the inherent difficulties in predicting crime prospectively over the life course. This long history of problems in predicting crime and delinquency has been a core criticism of the Gluecks’ research program dating back to the 1950s and 1960s (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 1991).

### Incarceration and Offender Reentry

The most terrible moment in the life of an offender is not that in which the prison door closes upon him, but that in which it opens to permit his return to the world.

—FREDERICK HOWARD WINES (1919)

The study of criminal recidivism after prisoner release has a venerable tradition in criminology and has produced some of the field’s most important works (for example, Glaser 1969), but what to do about offender “reentry” after incarceration remains a major policy issue. This concern is being driven by the number of ex-prisoners returning home (roughly 1,600 a day) and by the unexamined belief that the needs of ex-offenders are different today than in eras gone by (see Travis, Solomon, and Waul 2001; compare Glaser 1969).

One of the more troubling findings from our analysis of the Gluecks’ data concerns the possible counterproductive effects of punitive sanctions, such as incarceration, when considered in the long run of individual lives. Our analyses over the years have found that employment is directly influenced by criminal sanctions—incarceration as a juvenile and as a young adult had a negative effect on later job stability, which in turn was negatively related to continued involvement in crime over the life course (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 1995). Notwithstanding positive assessments of juvenile incarceration in the narratives of some men who desisted, the view of incarceration, especially long-term incarceration, was overwhelmingly negative among those men who persisted in crime over the life course. From these findings as well as other evidence on the consequences of imprisonment (see Fagan and Freeman 1999; Hagan 1993; Western 2002), the idea of cumulative disadvantage seems germane. Cumulative disadvantage posits that arrest and especially incarceration may spark failure in school, unemployment, and weak community bonds, in turn increasing adult crime (Sampson and Laub 1997; Thornberry 1987; Thornberry and Krohn 2001).

This line of inquiry in life-course criminology appears directly relevant to policies based on deterrence and other forms of punitive intervention as well as to efforts addressing prisoner reentry. We need to take into account the potential negative effects of sanctioning in forestalling desistance, along with factors that facilitate offender reintegration. What is needed is a mechanism or, better yet, a series of mechanisms to bring offenders back into the institutional fabric of society. The critical question that should be on the table, then, is how does society facilitate reconnections that are so essential to the process of desistance from crime?

“Well sir, I guess there’s just a meanness in this world,” sings Bruce Springsteen (1982). Our data also reveal the inherent complexities



and difficult challenges facing offenders in their reentry efforts. Behavioral change is complicated, varied, and seemingly impossible to predict. We studied men who were arrested in every decade of their life, some of whom committed murder, child rape, and armed robbery well into adulthood with no regrets whatsoever. Their crimes, attitudes, and lifestyles confirmed for us what James Q. Wilson noted decades ago: "Wicked people exist" (1975, 260). Or as Jack Katz (1988) observed, many offenders are deeply and possibly forever attracted to the seductions of what we might call "doing harm." In confronting the pathos and destruction of such men, we were struck by the Pollyannaish quality of much criminological talk about reintegration. Nevertheless, although warm and cuddly prisoner reentry options seem ill suited for such hardened men, we do not wish to use this fact to attack all rehabilitation efforts and crime prevention programs, as Wilson did. We believe these initiatives are essential and well justified from a scientific standpoint (Cullen and Gendreau 2000; Sherman et al. 1997). Moreover, we see these initiatives as important components of a fair, just, and humane society. Our point is a cautionary one to those who have embraced "offender reentry" as the answer to the crime problem, especially the idea that we merely need to help offenders "make good." The road is long, the participants often unwilling, and our state of knowledge quite limited.

### Conclusion

Whereas in *Crime in the Making* we saw informal social control as the primary explanation of crime and desistance over the life course, here we offer a more nuanced perspective. As David Matza said almost forty years ago, the missing element in traditional social control theory is human agency (1964, 183); motivation has always been its weakest link. Moreover, as we argued in the past, traditional social control theory suffers from other problems: it is narrowly portrayed as a static, cross-sectional theory that ignores the dynamic, longitudinal aspects of informal social control and support; the theory neglects the role of social structure in the social bonding process; and the theory fails to appreciate the feedback effects of crime and incarceration on social bonds as an important part of the causal story. And though beyond the scope of this book, traditional social control cannot easily explain (or possibly even comprehend) crime that results when indi-

agency/  
motivation

viduals are socially bonded and tightly connected to strong subcultures or higher-echelon segments of society. Events such as the Enron and WorldCom scandals, alleged insider trading by Martha Stewart, terrorism here and abroad, and sex abuse by priests in the Catholic Church should cause even the most ardent supporter of traditional social control theory some discomfort and consternation.

Although we do not abandon control theory, we see other concepts as equally relevant for understanding persistent offending and desistance from crime over the life course. As we discussed in Chapter 3, these concepts include personal agency and situated choice, routine activities, aging, macro-level historical events, and local culture and community context. We have thereby offered an expanded vision of our age-graded theory of informal social control presented in *Crime in the Making* and our other writings over the last decade. Interestingly, as much as our earlier theory was linked to our methodological and analytical approach (for example, regression models focusing on holding individual differences constant to see the effects of turning points), our revised theory here is also linked to our method and analytical strategy (for example, life-history narratives derived from the men themselves integrated with quantitative longitudinal data reconstructed from the Glueck archive supplemented by our own follow-up study at age 70). This merging of quantitative and qualitative data allowed us to gain insight into the life course of crime that would not have been possible using traditional approaches. Within-individual hierarchical models and trajectory analyses turned out to sit rather well with in-depth narratives and qualitative analysis, at least for the purposes of better understanding lives through time. Integrative and emergent findings pushed us to expand our theory of informal social control to include, among others, the idea of situated choice as central to an understanding of crime from childhood through old age. As the Glueck men near the end of their lives, the complexities and possibilities of such choices become ever more apparent and, inevitably, ever more consequential.