Annu. Rev. Sociol. 2000. 26:711–14


# WHITHER THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF CRIME?

Robert J. Sampson
*Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, 1126 E 59 Street, Chicago, Illinois 60637; e-mail: rjsam@src.uchicago.edu*

The study of crime and deviance has always been one of the most theoretically fertile areas in sociology. Fundamental questions on why individuals violate norms, the origins of social order, official reactions to deviance, and macro-level sources of violence—to name but a few—have attracted some of the best minds in the discipline. The result is a rich lineage of sociologically oriented criminological theory (e.g., control, subcultural, strain, differential association, labeling).

It is perhaps axiomatic, however, that fundamental questions yield equally fundamental challenges. Criminology is no exception, and indeed the facts on crime continue to trouble extant theories. This is especially the case for theories that have hitched their wagon to the dominant strains of accepted sociological wisdom. Stratification *is* sociology to many, and in criminology it comes as no surprise that deprivation theories privileging materialism and economic motives are perennially popular. Everybody believes that "poverty causes crime" it seems; in fact, I have heard many a senior sociologist express frustration as to why criminologists would waste time with theories outside the poverty paradigm. The reason we do, as Jack Katz brilliantly demonstrated in *Seductions of Crime* (1988), is that the facts demand it. Whether increases in crime during periods of economic growth, epidemics of violence in wealthy countries such as the United States, the weak correlation of social class with delinquency, or crime in the suites, materialist theory is clearly insufficient. But it is not just deprivation-based theory that has failed. Most criminological theory is static in logic and handicapped by a focus on (allegedly) fixed explanatory categories, thereby failing to address the processes and dynamics leading to criminal events. The most important thing about crime that we do not know, in other words, concerns its causal *social processes*.

## Within-Individual Variability

Consider first the question of individual variations in common-law crime. Criminologists typically address this question by studying why some individuals commit crimes and others do not, leading to between-individual analysis and a bevy of well-known correlates (race, gender, class, personality, family background, peers, and so on). Although this research tradition is important, a different way of looking at the world can be found in life-course criminology. Taking a developmental view,

0360-0572/00/0815-0711$14.00 

longitudinal research has revealed an apparent paradox: although adult criminality is nearly always preceded by "antisocial behavior" in childhood, most antisocial children do not become criminals as adults. Despite aggregate stability, that is, there is far more heterogeneity in criminal behavior over time within individuals than individual-difference or structural-causation models allow. Change is near ubiquitous.

There is marked variability in adult outcomes even among serious and persistent juvenile delinquents. In my research with John Laub, for example, we found that none of the static variables measuring family background—such as poverty, parental criminality, and child supervision—predicted trajectories of adult offending among formerly incarcerated delinquents (Sampson & Laub 1993). Personality characteristics fared no better. Measures of childhood extroversion, egocentricity, aggressiveness, difficult temperament, and tantrums all failed to distinguish persistent offenders from desisters. Looking *forward* from childhood thus reveals the successes and failures, including troubled adolescents who desist. Apropos the paradox noted earlier, looking *back* over the careers of adult criminals suggests a picture of stability.

In short, background variables are surprisingly modest prognostic devices in the prospective explanation of trajectories of crime over the life course. Within-individual changes in criminality are not called forth from the distant past but are mediated by proximate and time-varying social processes grounded in life transitions, situational interactions, routine activities, and turning points. Theories limited to time-stable factors are thus incapable of unpacking the zigzagging and temporally variable patterns of offending. Studying variation within individuals over the full life course requires not only creative methodologies (e.g., the integration of life-history narratives with dynamic modeling), but also integrative theories that reconcile the social interactional and hence changing features of the self (a la Mead, Blumer, and Becker) with stable individual differences.

## Community-Level Processes

Consider next the study of variations in rates of crime. Once again the logic in criminology is largely static—over the twentieth century we have been repeatedly confronted with structural correlates (attributes?) associated with crime-rate variation (e.g., poverty, racial composition, family disruption). By contrast, the social mechanisms hypothesized to account for the effects of neighborhood and community-level structural characteristics remain relatively unknown (Sampson et al 1999). Why, for instance, should concentrated poverty (a compositional attribute defined by the concentration of poor people) matter? If "neighborhood effects" on crime exist, presumably they are constituted from processes that involve collective aspects of community life (e.g., informal social control, spatial diffusion, subcultures). How do we theorize and measure neighborhood variations in social mechanisms and processes? What are their structural antecedents? Are neighborhood collective properties embedded in metropolitan-wide dynamics that transcend local boundaries and structural characteristics? Simply put, what social processes explain crime rates in modern communities?

Answering these questions has proven difficult. Differential selection of individuals into communities (compositional and selection effects), indirect community effects that work through family and peer mechanisms, measurement error, spatial interdependence, and simultaneity bias (e.g., does crime cause concentrated poverty?) represent serious challenges to drawing conclusions on the role of neighborhood and community contexts. Perhaps the biggest challenge is direct measurement of the processes hypothesized to generate crime. As interest in the social sciences turns increasingly to an integrated approach that emphasizes individual factors in social context, a potential mismatch has arisen in the quality of measures. Standing behind individual measurements are decades of psychometric research, producing measures that often have excellent statistical properties. Neighborhood-level research, on the other hand, is dominated by the study of poverty and other demographic characteristics drawn from census data or other government statistics that do not provide information on social mechanisms and collective processes. (Not to mention the reliance on official definitions and measures of crime.) Equally important, the methodology needed to evaluate neighborhood effects is in its infancy. What is needed is a concerted effort to enhance the science of ecological assessment ("ecometrics") by developing systematic procedures for directly measuring social mechanisms in community context, and by developing tools to improve the quality of community-level research (Raudenbush & Sampson 1999). I would argue that an important yet neglected ecometric strategy is systematic social observation (Sampson & Raudenbush 1999). The ultimate goal would be to understand processes of change in the community as a social system, along with the role of individual social actions in shaping collective properties.

In sum, I believe that social processes should be at the heart of sociological inquiry. The fact that criminology as well as many other specialty areas in sociology has become mired in static research is not just a methodological problem, for many a longitudinal study succumbs to between-individual or between-community explanations that reify fixed categories and stability. To get at the major unanswered questions in the study of crime thus requires a renewed focus on the unfolding of social action, process, and change within both individuals and communities. Such a focus is, of course, foundational to the sociological imagination–Chicago-School style.



## LITERATURE CITED

Katz J. 1988. *Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil.* New York: Basic

Raudenbush S, Sampson RJ. 1999. 'Ecometrics': toward a science of assessing ecological settings, with application to the systematic social observation of neighborhoods. *Sociol. Method.* 29:1–41

Sampson RJ, Laub JH. 1993. *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points Through Life.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press

Sampson RJ, Morenoff J, Earls F. 1999. Beyond social capital: spatial dynamics of collective efficacy for children. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 64:633–60

Sampson RJ, Raudenbush S. 1999. Systematic social observation of public spaces: a new look at disorder in urban neighborhoods. *Am. J. Sociol.* 105:603–51