

larger number of writers of fiction and nonfiction. In the 1930s, its usage expanded when serendipity crossed over into the discourse of American scientists and, thereafter, fell into the hands of those in industry and the popular press commenting on scientific progress. Taking stock, Merton and Barber state that, by 1958, 135 people had used serendipity in print, although they forecast (with uncanny prescience) an approaching era in which the word would become a fashionable “commonplace” (p. 87).

Fascinating as this history is in itself, Merton and Barber put it to a larger purpose. They identify the sociological pattern underlying the word’s adoption, diffusion and frequently changing meanings. Indeed, Merton and Barber find that users of serendipity tend to “come from social milieux where happy unanticipated discoveries constitute a salient feature in their common patterned experience” (p. 123). Over time, as these milieux differ in who is present and what they are doing, so has serendipity acquired different connotations.

This is the “sociological semantics” referred to in the book’s title. The authors’ central message is that a patterned “interplay” exists between word use and the “different social strata and groups” in a society (p. 251), and that this relationship makes words fertile soil for sociological investigation. Had the authors published their book when they finished it, there might be more research on sociological semantics today. Regrettably, studies in this vein remain few and far between, although the book’s belated appearance may yet encourage scholars to extend to other key words the kind of sociological inquiry that Merton and Barber here pioneer.

But Merton does not leave it at this. His 70-page “Afterword” brings the story up to the present. Using dictionaries in 25 languages and various online search engines,

Merton documents the once arcane word’s “virtually worldwide diffusion” and recent “explosion into popularity” (pp. 251, 287), as reflected by 636,000 hits for “serendipity” in a Google search, its first-place finish in a 2000 British poll of favorite words, and its appearance in contexts as diverse as film titles, underwear ads and dog shows. Merton also comments on the growing bifurcation of the word’s meanings, with serendipity subject to “countless inept usages” in popular discourse (p. 289), even as it looms larger in academic writing on scientific discovery.

While plainly pleased that modern scholars have corroborated his thesis from the 1940s about serendipity’s role in science, Merton strongly questions the widespread practice of treating serendipity in exclusively psychological terms, as an individual talent or aptitude for making fortuitous discoveries. Ever the sociologist, he argues, with detailed and compelling examples, that opportunities for such discoveries vary across social settings, and that “serendipitous opportunities” occur most often for scientists in certain distinctive research niches.

In originality and significance, this “Afterword” ranks among the finest writings of Merton’s career. That this luminous essay is the handiwork of a man in his 90s, physically enervated by multiple cancer surgeries who had just witnessed, in the city of his home, “the airliner-missile immolation of thousands of human beings” (p. 284), confounds all standards of scholarly achievement. Here, a valediction, and the valedictorian without equal. ■

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where tough guys go

review by *christopher uggen*

*Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives:
Delinquent Boys to Age 70*

by John H. Laub and Robert J. Sampson.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, 352 pages.

People tend to think of criminals as fundamentally “other.” Contemporary criminologists, who should know bet-

ter, are also wont to forget that criminal behavior is human behavior and that human behavior is malleable. John Laub and Robert Sampson, preeminent figures in the study of how criminals’ behavior changes over a lifetime, have thankfully avoided this pitfall. Their 1993 book *Crime in the Making* drew its evidence from a study of delinquent boys conducted from the 1930s to the 1960s by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck. Laub and Sampson showed how these delinquent boys desisted from criminal activities when they developed work and family relationships as young adults. Their new book, *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70*, follows these 500 delinquent boys into late adulthood, analyzing in detail their official criminal histories as well as intensive interviews with 52 of the former offenders.

The book is a stunning achievement. In a field where studies at best track subjects for the few years between adolescence and their 20s, Laub and Sampson offer an unbroken chain of observations spanning 60 years. Even their most basic case studies are invaluable to researchers. For example, we learn that about half of the delinquent boys had died by their late 60s, far more than the 30 percent of a nondelinquent control group. Laub and Sampson recount the lives of the survivors with clarity, compassion and intellectual honesty.

Shared Beginnings reviews the research literature and the authors' theoretical approach and method. The book then provides a statistical picture of the boys' paths to old age, followed by detailed accounts of the 52 interviewees' lives in separate chapters on the "desisters," the "persisters," and the "zigzag" or intermittent offenders. Laub and Sampson then summarize the key conclusions of their earlier book, with a rigorous analysis of the effects of work, marriage and military service on criminal careers. Throughout, they offer masterful reappraisals of cutting-edge research on crime. They draw important insights that challenge, and sometimes deconstruct, at least four taken-for-granted assumptions in contemporary criminology.

First, they present powerful evidence that "all offenders eventually desist" (p. 176). This is a provocative challenge to theories that assume that some kinds of offenders continue to break the law throughout life. They found no trace of such a group, even after a systematic search bringing to bear all the available data (p. 113). Perhaps more importantly, those who persisted in crime the longest ended up as virtually indistinguishable from the early desisters. This leads Laub and Sampson to a more general critique of "childhood determinism" (p. 276) and the developmental imagery so prevalent in research on the life course: the lives of these men did not "unfold" like a roadmap. Instead, they changed course when opportunities offered support and when they made conscious decisions to change their behavior.

Second, Laub and Sampson refute criminologists who equate crime with arrest, referring to official records as "crude instruments" (p. 247). Because the Glueck data represent a single group of white males in a single jurisdiction (Boston), arrest biases linked to age, race, and gender are certainly minimized. Nevertheless, Laub and Sampson show that those classified as "non-violent" by official records often had long histories of violent behavior (revealed through the interviews and other sources) and that arrest statistics crudely approximate the timing of criminal activity. While Laub and Sampson draw upon official records, they also put their archival and interview sources to work in several persuasive passages. For example, when the authors were skeptical of a claim by

"Charlie" that his sister's death turned his life around, Laub and Sampson revisited the Gluecks' earlier surveys, which established Charlie's attachment and loyalty to his older sibling at age 25 and again at age 32.

Third, Laub and Sampson continually remind us of the essential humanity of their subjects. Many readers will no doubt hear the voices of their fathers or grandfathers in the quotations, even in those from persistent offenders such as "Patrick" or "Boston Billy." Nevertheless, Laub and Sampson also convey the sharp "edge" of these older men, many of whom still think of themselves as hell-raisers. The authors adopt something of a tough-guy stance themselves, taking jabs at "Pollyannaish" criminologists (p. 292) who too quickly forget the damage such men have caused and the danger to society they represent.

Fourth, Laub and Sampson document how long periods of confinement lead to dependency and damage. While some men referred to their early punishment as a positive turning point, many recalled the brutality of reform school with chilling clarity and specificity more than a half century later.

As in their previous work, the authors emphasize marriage, employment and the military as "social controls" that result in some men avoiding crime. However, in *Shared Beginnings* they also attribute some of desisting and persisting in crime to personal choices, neighborhood culture, delinquent friends and getting caught up in the commonplace activities of everyday life.

Laub and Sampson listened closely to their respondents and provide a richly detailed and thorough treatment of the men's connection to crime over their lifetime. Of course, some of the authors' claims are open to challenge. For example, they present little statistical evidence to support their contention that marriage more often ends criminal careers than employment. Laub and Sampson may also overemphasize the "direct control" of the military, while underemphasizing how military service provided an opportunity for the men to "make good." Some readers may also challenge the interviews themselves. The 52 interviewees could represent a selective sample of the more cooperative men (perhaps real tough guys don't talk). Socially acceptable sentiments also may have led the men to highlight some turning points (such as finding a loving spouse) over others (such as getting a large loan from in-laws). Finally, as Laub and Sampson acknowledge, others will question the contemporary relevance of their sample—a group of white men born in the 1920s.

None of these minor drawbacks should obscure the remarkable contribution of *Shared Beginnings*. Laub and Sampson test some of the most compelling research questions in the field and provide a faithful rendering of the delinquent boys' voices in later life. The book will no doubt influence tra-

jectories of criminological research. As the prison population swells, great waves of ex-convicts are released to rejoin society each year. Laub and Sampson have provided the best explanation to date of how and why they will ultimately stop committing crimes.

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safeguarding students

review by *richard arum*

Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings
by Katherine S. Newman, Cybelle Fox, David Harding,
Jal Mehta and Wendy Roth.
New York: Basic Books, 2004, 399 pages.

At the start of the 21st century, 30 students are killed in U.S. public schools each year. This historically unprecedented number of school deaths—aberrant among Western nations—has often been dismissed as unremarkable by many scholars in this country. Some have been quick to point out that youth today are far safer in schools than outside them. Yet, many parents—from a quarter to a half of them, depending on how recently the media had reported on school shootings—report in public opinion polls that they fear for their children’s safety at school. Katherine Newman’s work provides a critically important dissent from the scholarly dismissal of the endemic disorder and periodic violence that has characterized many of our public schools in recent decades.

In *Rampage*, Newman and her colleagues provide the most important empirical research to date on recurring, indiscriminate public school shootings in the United States. While the public debate focuses on individual, mentally disturbed youth, Newman and her colleagues focus on the social causes of school shootings. This perspective provides a clearer understanding of what is happening in schools and can better guide policy makers’ efforts to address the violence.

Rampage makes use of multiple methods and sources of information, including government data on school violence, a systematic review of media reports and additional cases documented in a National Academy of Sciences report. The

authors analyze the influence of sex, age, grade, race, mental illness, type of school and local community character to help explain eruptions of violence. They also present two detailed case studies based on documents and extensive interviews of participants and community members three years after shootings in Heath, Kentucky and Westside, Arkansas.

Newman argues that several social factors explain “rampage” school shootings, which she defines as deadly assaults on schools by current or former students that involving multiple victims who may be shot at random or for their symbolic value. The factors she identifies include boys’ feelings of inferiority in the school pecking order, especially when their sense of masculinity is threatened; movies, television, music and news reports that provide “scripts” for how men can assert their masculinity through violence; tight-knit communities that have difficulty accepting kids who are different; widespread availability of guns (rampages happen overwhelmingly in suburban and rural communities, and in southern and western states); and the increasing inability of school administrators to identify and help troubled youth.

Newman focuses particular attention on this last development. She argues that public schools have systematically adopted practices that enforce “structural secrecy” and prevent officials from learning of troubled students who are plotting violence. At several points in the book, Newman documents how campaigns for student rights in the late 1960s and early 1970s led to these inhibitions. I have in my own work examined the legacy of *Goss v. Lopez* (1974) and other court decisions which undermined the discipline and moral authority of public school personnel. In *Rampage*, the implications of these changes in schools’ ability to safeguard students are starkly illustrated.

The primary reason administrators cannot help troubled youth, Newman argues, is their inability to share information among schools and with social and police agencies. Confidentiality and student privacy have become taken-for-granted assumptions in contemporary public schools, constraining

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