

# DEVIANT PEER ASSOCIATION



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## ABSTRACT

There is still a healthy debate over which comes first, delinquent bonding or illegal behaviour. On another front is the continued discussion of differential association as it relates to the age distribution of crime. This paper reviews the recent literature in the area of peer association and how it relates to delinquency and deviant behaviour. This author from personal observation of 20 years as a teacher and police officer endorses Moffitt's (1993) suggestion that there are 2 types of offenders: "life-course persistent" and "adolescent-limited" offenders. The opportunity to identify "life-course persistent" offenders early would allow for a multi-disciplinary approach which should involve police, educators, social workers, youth and child care workers, and corrections as well as practitioners and researchers.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sociological theories suggest that association with deviant peers is a necessary step on the path to early onset of delinquent behaviour, while personality theories imply that deviant behaviour will be stable from childhood to adulthood. Is it possible that they are both correct?

The past two decades have seen an abundance of research directed toward the peer system. The goal of this paper is to look at current research literature on peer association and maladjustment and identify processes and constructs that underlie psychopathology. The focus will be on "risk" research and not on the elusive concept that peer relations are essential for well-being. The study covers a diversity in research evidenced by: (a) an age range of children, adolescents and young adults; (b) a variety of settings (eg. schools, homes, prisons, camps); (c) sources of information (e.g. observations, clinical assessments, self-ratings, peer-ratings, parent-ratings and teacher-ratings); and (d) the conceptualization of links and direction between maladjustment and peer measures (ie. deviant behaviour caused by peer association or affiliation resulting from deviant behaviour).

Despite the large number of studies that have examined the effects of delinquent peers, the issue of the nature and quality of peer relationships and the linkage to delinquency is largely unresolved. Social theories suggest that delinquency results from exposure to violations of the law more than by situations favourable to keeping the law.

Sutherland's theory of Differential Association argues that persons exposed to delinquent associates are likely to acquire the same traits and that the importance of peers, the amount of time spent with them and loyalty to peers are substantial enough to exert a strong effect on behaviour of adolescents (Sutherland & Cressey, 1978).

Social Learning Theory has hypothesized that social behaviour (including deviant behaviour) is acquired through both direct conditioning and imitation or modeling of another's behaviour. In this theory, peer attachment (value of the relationship/influence) is an important conditioning variable because we are likely to imitate those we respect. (Ackers, 1985).

Hirschi's Social Control Theory espouses the ideas that members of delinquent peer groups are socially disabled persons who associate with each other because of threats from rival gangs or the lack of an alternative. Relationships in this group are "cold" and "brittle". Involvement with delinquent peers does not represent a close experience between individuals. This would suggest that the differential association/subcultural deviance theorists may have exaggerated the importance of delinquent peer group (Hirschi, 1969; Gottfriedson & Hirschi, 1987).

The Social Interactional Model seems to capture what most of research is saying and is based upon social learning principles with emphasis on the socialization process played by parental reinforcement and punishment of delinquent behaviour. In a 1985 study, Patterson and Dishion presented delinquent behaviour as the outcome of an extended process characterized by two stages. The first stage, beginning in childhood, is as a result of breakdown in family management. This turmoil produces an increase in antisocial behaviour and exposes the child to rejection. The second stage, during adolescence, is characterized by continuous disruption in parental monitoring, academic failure and association with deviant peers. These factors contribute to the likelihood of engagement in delinquent acts. In support of this theory and the belief that membership in the delinquent peer group is the strongest predictor of subsequent increases in delinquent behaviour, Patterson and Dishion et al. continued by following 206 boys and their families from 10 to 12 years of age. The following 3-stage model was presented:

- Stage 1 - Maladaptive parent-child interaction patterns.
- Stage 2 - Failure in school and in the conventional peer group.
- Stage 3 - Failing, disliked and antisocial child selects social settings that reinforce his behaviour and shape new problem behaviour.

This study highlights two processes that may account for deviant peer association: (1) there is limited social reinforcement in schools for disliked children and (2) rejected children are more tolerant, even encouraging, of antisocial behaviour and that children seek settings that provide maximum social reinforcement for the minimum social energy. This research also provides some perspective relevant to educators and social agencies: (1) the role of the peer group may be important earlier than adolescence and (2) academic failure may be linked with deviant peer association in the tendency of schools to group children with similar academic skills into the same classroom. In these classroom settings, problem behaviour and discouragement of academic pursuit may be supported by the emerging peer relationships (Dishion et al., 1991). Pursuit of stages, pathways or continuities between early disruptive behaviour and later antisocial delinquent behaviour has resulted in a vast amount of research (Dishion, 1990; Farrington et al., 1990; Fergusson & Horwood, 1996; Keenan et al., 1995; Moffitt, 1993; Pabon et al., 1992; Patterson & Dishion, 1985). The results of this research indicate a consensus that chronic antisocial behaviour generally starts early in life and that there is a continuity between early behaviour and later adjustment.

Within the research literature of the last ten to fifteen years there have emerged four areas of interest that overlap but form a pathway that link early behaviour and later delinquency or offending behaviour. They are parent/child interaction, rejection, disruptive behaviour/academic failure and peer association. It is not my intent to flesh out or focus in on any one of the first three areas but merely to show the linkages to the fourth area of deviant peer association.

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## **PARENT / CHILD INTERACTION**

There is a strong emphasis on the impact of repeated failures by parents to react supportively to the prosocial behaviours of the child. Other important components are the parents' failure to discipline when antisocial behaviour occurs. The parents' monitoring practices contribute to their failure to discipline delinquent and antisocial behaviour and to their lack of control over the child's association with delinquent peers (Patterson & Dishion, 1985). If parental attachment is high, adolescents are less attached to delinquent friends, spend less time with them and receive fewer rewards from them (Agnew, 1991). Gottfriedson & Hirschi, 1990 noted that the key inhibitor to offending is self-control which is dependant on parental child-rearing methods rather than on genetic or biological factors. The key external inhibitor is the likelihood of negative consequences (legal punishment, parental disapproval) and internally it is the conscience (moral principles rather than biological impulses). A strong conscience is built up if parents exercise close supervision over their children and if they punish socially disapproved behaviour using love-oriented discipline. Children exposed to poor parental child interaction may be likely to offend because they have not built up internal controls over antisocial behaviour (Farrington, 1993). Antisocial tendency can also be inhibited by empathy which develops from parental warmth and loving relationships. Children exposed to attitudes and behaviours favouring offending will model the same, especially if the models are family members or peers (Ellis, 1982). The modelling, and indeed heritability, of certain factors is well documented and parent child interaction is the critical setting where childrens' behavioural problems develop. Blaske (1989), in his study of assaultive offenders, found that their family relations were characterized by rigidity and low cohesion. The intergenerational transmission of severe antisocial behaviour was documented in a study of three generations and 600 subjects. The stability of aggressive behaviour from age 8 to 30 was exceeded by the stability of aggression from grandparent to parent to child (Huesmann et al.,

1984). Parents of children who are difficult to manage are often lacking in psychological and physical resources to cope constructively (Snyder & Patterson, 1987). This suggests that parents of children whose angry outbursts and hyperactivity, which might be curbed by discipline, will often be inconsistent disciplinarians. Vulnerable children are often subject to adverse homes and neighbourhoods because their parents are also vulnerable to problems (Moffitt, 1993). One can readily see that there are a number of psychological, social and environmental combinations that would produce a chain of failed parent child encounters.

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## **REJECTION**

Much of the recent literature on adjustment to adolescence and adulthood has centered on peer rejection and aggression. There is a growing body of research linking childhood peer rejection to poor school adjustment as well as internalizing and externalizing problems (Burks et al., 1995; Coie et al., 1995; Kupersmidt et al., 1990). There are two perspectives on the relationship between early rejection and later disorder. The first views rejection as a negative social stressor that limits socialization experiences and therefore leads to negative outcomes. The second asserts that rejection is an indicator of an underlying process. Burks et al., 1995 found that the stressful effects of rejection for boys resulted in both short and long-term internalizing problems. Girls, however, showed no significant difference regardless of exposure to rejection. In a study of boys in elementary school from the third to tenth grade, childhood peer rejection was the only predictor of stable disorder as reported by parents (Coie et al., 1995). In a study at the Oregon Youth Centre at Eugene, two factors remained as significant predictors of early adolescent involvement with antisocial peers: academic failure and peer rejection (Dishion et al., 1991). This group of researchers also suggested that aggressive and rejected children seek delinquent peer groups. They cite a progression from negative parent-child interaction leading to behavioural problems which place the child at risk for peer rejection and this peer rejection then increase the likelihood of deviant peer association.

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## **DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR / ACADEMIC FAILURE**

Children with low intelligence may be more likely to offend because of failure in school and inability to achieve goals legally. Impulsive children may be more likely to offend because they do not consider long-term consequences of their actions (Farrington, 1989). Disruptive elementary school children have been shown to become the greatest risk of becoming delinquent adolescents and criminal adults (Huesmann et al., 1984; Tremblay et al., 1995). Moreover, there appears to be a path toward delinquency beginning with disruptive behaviour in kindergarten, to aggression between ages 10 and 12, and to the onset of delinquency between the ages of 11 and 13 (Tremblay et al., 1995). In a recent report on childhood behaviour, gathered during a 16 year longitudinal study of New Zealand children, the findings suggest that children who are prone to early onset conduct problems show clear tendencies to associate with delinquent peers in adolescence (Fergusson & Horwood, 1996). There are consistent correlations found between academic failure and antisocial behaviour. Polk (1975), in a random sample of 309 high school sophomores reports that 54% of those with low academic grade had a court record of a previous arrest, whereas only 23% with high grades had any evidence of police contact.

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## PEER ASSOCIATION

A step on the pathway linking early behavioural adjustment to later offending involves adolescent peer association. There is substantial evidence suggesting that adolescents associate with like-minded peer groups (Dishion, 1990; Farrington et al., 1990; Fergusson & Horwood, 1996; Keenan et al., 1995; Moffitt, 1993; Pabon et al., 1992; Patterson & Dishion, 1985; Tremblay et al., 1995). Furthermore, differential association with deviant peers acts to reinforce current behaviour and sustain the continuity toward delinquent behaviour. There has often been noted the reciprocal nature of peer association and offending behaviour in that, on one hand, a predisposition to offending may influence peer association while at the same time peer affiliation may influence predispositions to offending (Fergusson & Horwood, 1996; Keenan et al., 1995; Menard & Elliott, 1994; Moffitt, 1993; Warr, 1993). Perhaps the most consistent finding in the literature on the causes of delinquency is that adolescents with delinquent peers are themselves more likely to be delinquent. Other than previous delinquency, the only other independent variable to have a profound effect on subsequent delinquency is association with delinquent peers (Agnew, 1991; Elliot et al., 1989).

There are three main reasons offered as to why having delinquent peers would cause an adolescent to engage in delinquency: attachment, contact and modelling delinquent patterns.

1. Attachment - Association with deviant peers may lead the adolescent to internalize definitions favourable to delinquency. When attachment is high, deviant peers will have a greater effect by: (a) having more sanctioning power over the adolescent; (b) being more attractive as a role model; and (c) being more effective as socializing agents (Agnew, 1991). It should be noted that attachment may be partly hinged on the prior reinforcement history of the child and may be affected to the extent to which delinquent peers have sanctioned the child in the past (Conger, 1976).
2. Amount of Contact - The greater the contact with delinquent peers, the more the peers will be able to monitor and sanction behaviour, function as role models and transmit delinquent values (Agnew, 1991).
3. Modelling Delinquent Patterns - The quality of the reinforcement may be dependant on how the patterns provide rewards for the adolescent. The attraction of these actions and the extent of involvement by the adolescent with the peer group will determine the level of association (Agnew, 1991).

Some investigators cite deviant peers as the single most important causal factor in the development of delinquency (Elliot et al., 1989). There is some difference of opinion on the process of association. The difference is in whether aggressive children actively seek out peers that accept their deviant behaviour (Patterson & Dishion, 1985), or do peers teach and encourage group members to engage in delinquent acts (Keenan et al., 1995; Moffitt, 1993). Although the question has not been definitively answered, there are other research findings linking delinquent activity clearly to deviant peer association. In an inner city study measuring effects of peer influence on boys in grades one, four, and seven in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Keenan et al., 1995 studied deviant peers in the context of three delinquent categories. In authority conflict they reported that those boys whose peers had disobeyed or talked back to an authority figure were twice as likely to engage in the same behaviour themselves. Boys who reported that most of their peers had stolen, damaged property or taken drugs (covert activities) were 4.3 times as likely to engage in similar behaviour themselves. Finally, boys who had reported that most of their peers had assaulted or used a weapon against another individual (overt activities) were 3.4 times more likely to engage in similar behaviour.

In a study of 1,726 persons between the ages of 11 and 21 in the National Youth Survey (NYS), Warr (1993) discovered that the social character of crime and the age distribution of crime may be closely related. This finding supports Sutherland's theory of Differential Association in that persons exposed to delinquent associates are likely to acquire the same traits. The evidence points to several conclusions:

1. The role of peers is transitory, following the age distribution of crime, rising and following quickly during a brief period of life.
2. The relevance of peers in the lives of young people reaches a peak in the mid to late teens.
3. Age-related changes in the importance of peers, the amount of time spent in their company, and loyalty to peers can be expected to exert profound effects on adolescents' behaviour.

There are three other factors to consider in the correlation between deviant peer association and delinquency:

1. Delinquency is more strongly correlated with behaviour of current friends; therefore recency, not priority of delinquent friends, affects delinquent behaviour at a particular age. Thus those teenagers who have made recent friendships with delinquent peers are more prone to delinquency.
2. Those who acquire delinquent friends are more likely to retain them and those who acquire such friends at a younger age (greater priority) tend to have longer histories of delinquent friendships. This is referred to as the "sticky friends" phenomenon and is an indicator of a special comradeship that evolves from sharing illicit experiences (Warr, 1993).
3. Adolescents lock themselves out of friendships with "straight" kids through the friendships with delinquent kids.

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## **ADOLESCENCE-LIMITED AND LIFE-COURSE-PERSISTENT ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR**

Enter a theory that can bridge the gap between Control Theory and Differential Association, between two incongruous facts about antisocial behaviour. The facts are (1) antisocial behaviour shows impressive continuity over age, but (2) its prevalence changes dramatically over age, increasing almost 10-fold during adolescence. This would suggest that there may be two distinct categories of individuals. The theory proposes two qualitatively distinct types of persons:

1. Life-Course-Persistent describes a small group that engages in antisocial behaviour at every life stage and exhibits a pathological personality that is bent toward career criminality.
2. Adolescence-Limited pertains to a larger group, antisocial only during adolescence and temporarily or situationally delinquent (Moffitt 1993).

In the theory of life-course-persistent antisocial behaviour, there is an interaction between childhood neuropsychological problems and a criminogenic environment. These childhood neuropsychological problems are partly environmental given the potential for poor prenatal care, drugs and alcohol used during pregnancy and neglected nutritional needs of infants, children with these problems evoke a challenge to the most loving parent. As noted earlier, these children are not often born into functional environments and it is the combination of the difficult child with an

adverse child-rearing context that spells risk for the life-course-persistent pattern of antisocial behaviour (Moffitt 1990).

Among 536 boys in the New Zealand longitudinal study, the 75 boys who had both low scores in neuropsychological tests and adverse home environments had a mean aggression score more than 4 times than that of boys with either adverse homes or neuropsychological problems. The antisocial behaviour documented as conduct disorder shows a stability across time and situations and begins long before it is reflected in police files (Keenan et al., 1995). Continuity is the hallmark of the life-course-persistent antisocial individual; the pattern across time may manifest itself by biting and hitting at age 4, shoplifting at age 10, selling drugs and stealing cars at age 15, rape and robbery at age 20 and fraud and domestic assault at age 30. The pattern cross-situationally may be evidenced by cheating at school, lying at home, stealing at work and fighting in bars (Farrington, 1993; Tremblay et al., 1995). The prognosis for this individual is not bright: drunk driving, spouse abuse, erratic work histories, unpaid debts, multiple unstable relationships, child abuse and serious criminal acts. This is predicted across the lifespan but allows for change dependent upon age and social circumstances. Although these life-course-persistent types decrease their number of arrests after age 40, the antisocial disposition may be expressed in other areas such as family violence. Farrington and West (1990) in the Cambridge longitudinal study found that half of the persistent offenders self-reported having hit their spouses prior to age 32. Research is needed that follows this group into late adulthood.

The stability of antisocial behaviour is closely linked to its extremity. The extreme frequency of crime committed by a few people (males) is evidenced by the fact that 5-6% of offenders commit more than 50% of the crime. Early arrest (i.e. pre-teen) is the best predictor of recidivism and again we see that about 6% of boys are arrested as pre-teens (Moffitt and Silva, 1988). The same percentages (4-6%) emerge when discussing men with antisocial personality disorder. Conduct disorder has an absolute positive link with adult antisocial personality disorder (Robbins, 1985). Elliott, Huizinga and Menard, 1989 discovered through longitudinal studies of self-report delinquency that only 1-4% of males commit their first criminal offense after age 17 and that life-course-persistent style is fixed by age 18. Their study, along with studies by Farrington, Loeber and Van Kammen (1990) and Moffitt (1990) have shown that multiple behaviour disorders predicts persistent illegal behaviour over years and a high resistance to treatment of any kind.

As continuity is the hallmark of the life-course-persistent antisocial individual, discontinuity is the hallmark for the adolescence-limited antisocial type. These individuals representing the majority of deviant peers in adolescence, have no notable history of conduct disorder in childhood and no prediction of criminal behaviour in adulthood. Adolescence-limited antisocial behaviour is learned from antisocial models who are mimicked. Social mimicry occurs when the mimic adopts the behaviour of another, who is seen as a more successful individual, to obtain access to a valuable resource. In this situation, delinquency must be a social behaviour that allows access to the desirable resource of status which is accompanied by power and privilege. Likewise, adolescence limited delinquents are also able to abandon antisocial or delinquent (Moffitt 1993) behaviour when prosocial styles are more valuable or rewarding.

Exposure to peer models, when coupled with puberty, is an important determinant of adolescence-onset cases of delinquency. From an adult perspective, we might ask "why would that nice kid want to hang around with those losers" but from within contemporary adolescent culture the freedom and autonomy of life-course-persistent youths becomes a coveted asset. Healthy adolescents can notice that the style of the life-course-persistent resembles adulthood and maturity as evidenced by them making their own decisions and rules relatively free of family restraints. Life-course-persistent youths have opportunity and possessions obtained by theft or vice otherwise inaccessible to teens. They are more experienced sexually and live on the fast track taking risks and doing dangerous things that appeal to the youth wanting to break away from parental restraint. Moffitt (1993) describes the life-course-persistent youth as a magnet for novice delinquents during adolescence and serving as models and trainers for recruits within

deviant peer networks. Social mimicry of delinquency can range from an active education of recruits to motivated learners observing antisocial models from a distance. (It is my view that this distance can include the medium of television, but that is another discussion.)

The ability of the adolescence-limited group to desist delinquency after several years can be a combination of two things: (1) healthy youths can respond to change in an adaptive manner and can be engaged in prosocial behaviour if the change brings rewards, (i.e. marry a prosocial spouse) and (2) functional and loving child rearing practices will equip a child with a prosocial attitude and healthy respect for others though set aside for a period of time. Although the verse in the Bible "train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it" has a context of spiritual learning it is very applicable to the discussion (Proverbs 22:6). The maturity-gap theory states simply that this adolescence-limited group act to lessen the gap between physical and social maturity and now when the aging delinquents attain some of the privileges they coveted as teens, the consequences of their illegal behaviour shift from rewarding to punishing. There is now not the need to strive for maturity, it has arrived and persisting in antisocial behaviour could now result in sanctions and deficits (ie drug abuse to loss of employment; impaired driving to loss of privilege; bar fights to loss of relationship) (Moffitt, 1993). Commitment costs are weighed at this time and these range from conviction penalties (more serious in adult court) to disapproval by family. There are expectations inherent upon individuals as they move into adulthood. Society is less tolerant of the boy who burps in your face at 17 years of age than the baby who does this at 17 months. We expect to see a 19 month old child in a play pen but at 19 years of age we are not as amused. So then society expects teens to leave high school, get a job, marry a prosocial spouse and so most of the adolescence limited types assume adult roles and desist criminally. Other factors to consider are the prosocial models of adults, the availability to alternatives to crime, and most importantly, the disintegration of deviant peer groups.

Desistence is more gradual than criminal initiation. Many adolescence-limited youths fall into snares that entangle the life-course-persistent persons (i.e. drug addiction, incarceration, teen pregnancy) and this requires extra time and effort to desist. The adolescence-limited youths are relatively free from personality disorder and cognitive deficits and in general have adequate social skills, academic achievement, and intelligence level so they are better able to form close relationships than their life-course-persistent counterparts. "At the crossroads of young adulthood, adolescence-limited and life-course persistent delinquents go different ways. This happens because the developmental histories and personal traits of adolescence-limiteds allow them the option of exploring new life pathways. The histories and traits of the life-course-persistents have foreclosed their options, entrenching them in the antisocial path" (Moffitt, 1993, p. 691)

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## CONCLUSION

The data indicate that the impact of delinquent friends on delinquency is strongly conditioned by the measures of peer interaction. There have always been endeavours to increase the ability to resist peer pressure and this should be continued in the following proactive ways:

1. Increasing the awareness of parents to their key role in nurturing and disciplining children. The term "quality time" is only valid within the context of "quantity time". In other words there should be quality time in large quantity. The research almost indicates that there is a tug of war between the role modelling of parent-child and that of the deviant peer group and child.

2. There should be a differentiation in the research between "best friends" and significant peers so that a better determination can be made of who exactly has the influence on the adolescent and is the influence as a result of an emotional closeness or a social mimicry.
3. In order to understand better the profile of the adolescence-limited type offender it would be advantageous to identify subgroups of boys who may be more responsive, or suggestible to the influence of peers. This research might also look at farther reaching issues such as Induced Psychotic Disorder (Folie à deux) or Psychosis of Association.

This research highlights or "spotlights" a group of people (5% of the population) identified here as life-course-persistent types that demand our consideration. If we believe that antisocial modelling occurs and is in fact a prime factor in the formation of deviant peer groups and if we recognize that these "models" commit over 50% of crime and if these "models" actions account for the majority of violent crime as well as crimes committed in late life, then perhaps this group should be targeted. This group should be targeted first of all for research into early detection and profiling for "dangerousness". Secondly, they should be targeted for early intervention (prior to age 8). Finally, they should be targeted for sanction in the form of longer incarceration. This would call for a multi-disciplinary approach which should involve police and corrections with practitioners and researchers.

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