

The Relationship between Age and Crime

Developed by Garner Clancey

Introduction

There have been numerous attempts to explore the relationship between age and crime over the years. Some of the research in this area suggests that there are ‘crime-prone years’ in the life course:

- “Official records and ‘self-report’ studies ... show that individuals more often break the law when they are young. The ‘peak’ ages at which they are most likely to be found guilty or cautioned are between 15 and 19. Criminal involvement typically starts before the age of 15, but declines markedly once young people reach their 20s”ⁱ
- “According to data from the United States and other industrialised countries, rates of property crime and violent crime rise rapidly in the teenage years to a peak at about ages 16 and 18, respectively. The overrepresentation of youth crime has been demonstrated using multiple sources of measurement – official arrest reports, self-reports of offending, and victims’ reports of the ages of their offenders. It is thus generally accepted that, in the aggregate, age-specific crime rates peak in the late teenage years and then decline sharply across the adult life span”ⁱⁱ
- “... the level of offending is related to a young person’s age. This is demonstrated in a number of ways:
 - Offending rates for particular offences peak during the teenage and early adult years – depending on the type of offence – and then decline dramatically.
 - In general terms, offending rates are much lower the younger the age of the person.
 - A large proportion of juvenile offenders stop offending as they get older – that is, they ‘grow out of crime’”ⁱⁱⁱ

Exercise

1. What are some of the challenges in conducting research into these issues?

2. What are some potentially divergent policy implications of these research findings?

Explaining the Age-Crime Relationship

There have been various attempts to explain these findings, some are outlined below:

- Felson and Boba suggest the following changes as critical to explaining the age-crime curve:
 - “Changes in ... occupational structure to highly specialised jobs requiring more years of schooling and experience means that young, strong adults have fewer opportunities for work
 - Changes from the 1960s onward, in particular when more women went to work, meant that the lives of teenagers were transformed with the lack of supervision
 - Extensive transportation systems increase risks that young people will be involved in crime and delinquency, whether as offenders or as victims
 - Modern life puts young people in a bad position, taking away their historical roles in work and family life. However, it puts them in a good position for escaping parental supervision”^{iv}
- “The available evidence ... indicates that the adolescent brain is under relatively constant change. In the frontal cortex, gray matter increases with the onset of puberty. It will decline throughout the rest of adolescence and into adulthood ... Adolescents, moreover, may not fully realise the social consequences of their behaviours, nor may they understand completely how their negative or unpredictable attitudes and emotional outbursts affect those around them ... Unlike rational actors who weigh the costs and benefits of any action, adolescents may, under certain circumstances, simply act without regard to the costs”.^v

Exercise

1. Critique the explanations provided for the age-crime curve.

2. What other reasons might explain the age-crime curve?

3. What crime prevention strategies might be advocated based on the explanations provided here for the increased involvement of young people in crime?

Young People as Victims of Crime

Young people are not just over-represented as perpetrators of crime – they are also over-represented as victims of crime. While attention is often given to reporting that young people are engaged in offending, less attention is given to their experiences as victims of crime.

Data on victims of crime repeatedly show that young people are over-represented as victims (both in numbers of incidents and rate of victimisation). Australian Bureau of Statistics data reveal that the following age groups were the greatest victims of the identified offences in Australia in 2009:

- 10-14 year olds were victims of sexual assault more than any other age group
- 10-14 year olds were victims of kidnapping/abduction more than any other age group
- 15-19 year olds were victims of robbery more than any other age group^{vi}

Previous data also suggests that young people aged between 15 and 24 years are also over-represented as victims of assault.^{vii}

ⁱFarrington, D. (1996) **Understanding and Preventing Youth Crime**, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.

ⁱⁱSampson, R. J. and Laub, J. H. (1993) **Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points through Life**, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, page 6.

ⁱⁱⁱCunneen, C. And White, R. (2007) **Juvenile Justice: Youth and Crime in Australia**, 3rd Edition, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, page 68.

^{iv}Felson, M. and Boba, R. (2010) **Crime and Everyday Life**, 4th Edition, Sage, Los Angeles, page 113.

^vWright, J.P.; Tibbetts, S.G. and Daigle, L. E. (2008) **Criminals in the Making: Criminality Across the Life Course**, Sage, Los Angeles, pages 245-249.

^{vi}Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) **Recorded Crime – Victims Australia**, 4510.0 2009, ABS, Canberra.

^{vii}Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007) **Recorded Crime – Victims Australia**, 4510.0 2006, ABS, Canberra.