



# The network dynamics of co-offending careers

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the long-standing acknowledgement that crime is a group phenomenon, little research treats co-offending as a dynamic network process. This study analyses the individual and network processes responsible for long-lasting criminal relationships using co-offending dyads from eight years of arrest records in Chicago. Results from proportional hazard models suggest that homophily with respect to age, race, gender, geographic proximity, and gang identity lead to sustained partnerships. Victimization increases the probability of continued co-offending, while the victimization of one's associates dissuade continued collaboration. Supra-dyadic processes (centrality, transitivity) influence the likelihood of continued co-offending. Results are discussed regarding opportunities and turning points.

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## 1. Introduction

Most criminal offenders do not act alone. The fact that the majority of criminal events involve more than one offender has been observed in many eras and geographic regions (Breckinridge and Abbott, 1912; Carrington, 2002; Sarnecki, 2001; Shaw and McKay, 1942; Warr, 2002) and is one of the few conclusions often considered as “criminological fact” (McGloin et al., 2008). Furthermore, this group nature of crime underlies many influential criminological theories either explicitly or implicitly (Akers, 1998; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Sutherland, 1947). Despite the awareness of the importance of co-offending on crime and individual criminal trajectories, only recently have studies situated the understanding of co-offending within a formal network context to investigate its patterns, processes, precursors and consequences. (McGloin and Nguyen, 2014; Papachristos, 2011). While this line of network research has begun to explore the static effect of centrality, homophily, density, and transitivity (e.g. Grund and Densley, 2014; McGloin and Piquero, 2010; Morselli, 2009; Warr, 1996), few studies have modeled co-offending as a simultaneous product of individual characteristics, the characteristics of the ties between two offenders, the surrounding structure of these relationships, and their evolution in time.

The present study takes a dynamic approach to understand the individual and network processes influencing the co-offending partnership lifespan. Using more than eight years of data on co-offending in Chicago, Illinois, we extract samples of co-offenders from a co-offending network of more than 170,000 individuals. From this sample, we analyze the continuity of accomplices' partnership and the factors that influence the continuation of these particular relationships. Our statistical approach simultaneously considers individual, dyadic, and supra-dyadic co-variables to better understand why some co-offending partnerships are sustained while others are not. Consistent with prior research, our results suggest that co-offending partnerships are generally short-lived (Reiss and Farrington, 1991; Sarnecki, 2001; Warr, 1996). However, the continuation of co-offending partnerships appears to be driven by past experiences, homophily along age, race, gender, and neighbourhood proximity, as well as membership in the same street gang. Furthermore, supra-dyadic processes—especially node activity and transitivity—also play a key role in the sustainment of co-offending relationships. These findings shed new light on the importance of the trust required to sustain co-offending collaborations, on the criminal opportunities provided by a covert network and on traumatic events as “non-conventional turning points” in one's criminal career.

### 1.1. Stability of co-offending relationships

Offenders' criminal careers typically are comprised of a combination of solo and co-offending (Reiss and Farrington, 1991). While some scholars have found that preferences can emerge for solo

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versus group offending (Conway and McCord, 2002; Hindelang, 1971, 1976; Reiss, 1988), the study of criminal careers or life course trajectories only rarely differentiates between offending alone and offending with others. Instead, life course research tends to consider the number of offenses and the timing of an individual's criminal career, focusing on particular "turning points" in one's life that either enhance or mitigate subsequent involvement in crime (Laub and Sampson, 2003; Sampson and Laub, 1993). Turning points are considered as a change in the trajectory line of an individual that induces a modification in their social environment (Laub and Sampson, 1993). Typically, however, research tends to focus on "positive" turning points in offenders' life trajectories like marriage, military service, or employment; rarely does this research consider potential influences or turning points coming from within the criminal milieu, like prestige, violence, opportunities, and social influences (Charette, 2015).

Such a focus on conventional turning points treats the group nature of crime and delinquency as constant or stable, an especially problematic assumption given that much of involvement in crime (especially among young people) is influenced by group processes and peer influence (Hindelang, 1971, 1976) and that these processes are dynamic (Weerman, 2003). As noted by Warr (2002), "criminal events often depend not on the activities of any one individuals, but on the intersections between the criminal careers of numerous offenders" (p. 86). Moreover, many of criminology's core theories—including social learning (Akers, 1998), differential association (Sutherland, 1947), and opportunity theory (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960)—center on the role groups or group structure play on criminogenic processes (see also Papachristos, 2011). Even the conventional turning points within life course criminology are inherently defined by group processes. Marriage, for example, involves creating new network ties that might pull an individual from a criminal life-style (e.g. Laub et al., 1998). Likewise, involvement in education or employment removes an individual from the networks that got her involved in crime and places her in less criminal prone networks (e.g. Uggem, 2000).

Despite the importance of groups for criminal careers, we still know very little about how co-offending patterns evolve over time. Setting aside more formally organized criminal groups (street gangs, crime syndicates, drug dealing crews, and so on), most co-offending groups tend to be small in size, lack any formal organizational structure or leadership, and contain members who are similar along social and demographic dimensions (see, Warr, 1996 for a review). In particular, co-offending between any two individuals tends to be short-lived with only a small percentage of co-offending dyads enduring over time (Reiss and Farrington, 1991; Warr, 1996). For example, in a sample of young delinquents in Stockholm, Sarnnecki (2001) found that only 2.5% of the co-offending relationships persisted for more than 6 months.

Rather than focus on the dissolution of co-offending, our study examines why co-offenders continue to offend together. Building on research from both life-course criminology and social network analysis, we posit that the decision to remain in co-offending relationships with past partners is determined by a mix of individual (e.g., race, age, and gender), dyadic (e.g., homophily or residing in nearby neighborhoods, being in the same gang), and supra-dyadic factors (e.g., centrality, or triadic closure among friends). Prior research offers some insights into some of the potential factors that lead to the sustainment of co-offending relationships.

Age, race, and criminal history may play an important role in the sustainment of criminal partnerships. In general, co-offending appears to more closely follow the "age-crime" curve in that rates of co-offending decreases with age and with offenders changing from co- to solo-offending as they grow older (Carrington, 2002; Conway and McCord, 2002; Piquero et al., 2007; Reiss, 1988; Reiss and Farrington, 1991). Similarly, McGloin and Piquero (2010) observed

that offenders engaged in co-offending tend to desist from crime earlier than solo offenders. Race and ethnicity may also play a role in co-offending. In a study of juvenile offenders from Philadelphia, McGloin et al. (2008) found that co-offending stability was greater for white offenders as compared to non-whites. Finally, criminal history may also play a role in co-offending stability. When analyzing which offenders are more likely to re-offend with the same partners, McGloin et al. (2008) observed that more frequent offenders also had a greater stability in their co-offending patterns. In other words, high-volume offenders were the most likely to maintain co-offending relationships.

Outside of such individual level characteristics, our study also considers the extent to which the sustainment of co-offending relationships relates to non-conventional turning points within criminal careers: opportunities/social capital, specialization/versatility, and victimization.

## 1.2. Social capital and trust

The decision to co-offend in general is a partial function of the total pool of potential co-offenders one knows. A larger pool of potential co-offenders means that one might have a greater range of possible co-offenders from which to choose. In contrast, those with smaller pools of potential co-offenders would be more likely to re-offend with the same partners. Accordingly, McGloin et al. (2008) observed that individuals with a larger social network were more likely to change collaborators when committing crimes.

But the availability of potential co-offenders alone does not determine with whom you may offend (Tremblay, 1993). Given the inherently risky nature of criminal offending—both the risks inherent in the crime itself (such as victimization) as well as the risk of detection by the police—offenders do not pick partners like random draws from a pool (McCarthy et al., 1998). Rather, as noted by Weerman (2003), the selection of co-offenders should reduce the risk related to offending, not increase it. Fundamentally, "the decision to cooperate is a decision of trust" (Burt and Knez, 1995, p. 257). But how to know if someone is trustworthy?

One way to ensure trust is through experience. If you already had experiences with an individual, then you can assess her trustworthiness. However, learning by experience is itself a risky bet as it might entail a lot of failures. Another way to evaluate trust would be to rely on people that are similar to you, a process often referred to as homophily. Homophily can be observed in conventional social networks according to race, age, religion, education, occupation and gender (McPherson et al., 2001). Homophily has been shown as an explanation of why cooperative behaviors are localized in social space (Mark, 2003). Co-offending networks have also been shown to be homophilous in terms of age (Kleemans, 1996; Reiss and Farrington, 1991; Warr, 1996), gender (Warr, 1996), and race (Grund and Densley, 2014; Reiss, 1986).

Another way to ensure trust would be to rely on one's interpersonal connections, i.e., social capital. Dense and strong networks can facilitate the development of trust, simplifying the attainment of communal goals (Coleman, 1988). However, these dense relationships rapidly become redundant as they are not able to supply new opportunities (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973). An ideal situation would be when one can be considered as a trustworthy bridge bringing new opportunities between isolated parts of a network (Burt, 1992). A good balance between these two structures would forge a personal network that combines trust and the possibility to reach new opportunities. In the same way, the search of a suitable co-offender becomes a balance of weak and strong ties (Tremblay, 1993). While strong ties generate trust, they also increase visibility, which lead to higher risks of denunciation by one's peers (Morselli, 2009). Studies in criminology have shown that an efficient network structure helps to bring new opportunities (McGloin and Piquero,

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