



## The impact of adolescent risk behavior on partner relationships



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### ABSTRACT

Prior literature suggests that involvement in adolescent risk behaviors will have short- and long-term consequences that disrupt the orderly flow of later development, including impacts on patterns of partner relationships. In this study, we explore how adolescent involvement in delinquency, drug use, and sexual behavior at an early age affects the likelihood and timing of both marriage and cohabitation using a sample from the Rochester Youth Development Study. We also examine the direct effects of dropping out of high school, teenage parenthood, and financial stress during emerging adulthood as well as their potential role as mediators of the relationships between adolescent risk behaviors and partnering for both males and females. Overall, there is not very strong support for a direct relationship between adolescent delinquency, drug use, or early sexual behavior and patterns of partner formation. In contrast, the more proximal relationships, indicated by precocious transitions to adulthood and financial instability, are more consistently related to partner formation. These findings support models of cumulative disadvantage: early adolescent problem behaviors are weakly related to partner formation, but appear to set in motion cascading consequences that influence the transition to adulthood and, in turn, these more proximal variables are more consistently related to partner formation.

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The life course approach places substantial emphasis on transitions, or short-term changes in the life course. Transitions represent movement along age-graded patterns of development, or trajectories, such as family, school, work, and romantic relationships (Elder, 1994). Marriage and, in today's society, cohabitation, are

important transitions in one's life course and often influence how successful a person will be in adulthood. Understanding the origins of these transitions, therefore, is an important task for life course studies.

Trajectories do not exist in a vacuum, however. Movement along one trajectory is expected to influence movement along other trajectories. More specifically, involvement in adolescent risk behaviors which compromise adolescent development (Busseri, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2007; Jessor, 1998) can be conceptualized as their own life course trajectories (Thornberry & Krohn, 2001). As such, we would expect early involvement in these risk behaviors including delinquency, drug use, and risky sexual behavior to influence transitions into other

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trajectories such as establishing a relationship with a significant other. However, relatively little theoretical and empirical attention is given to the impact of engagement in adolescent risk behavior on patterns of partner formation (King & South, 2011). The current study addresses this issue by focusing on how adolescent risk behavior impacts the likelihood of forming an intimate relationship with a significant other and whether that relationship is formalized through marriage or is characterized by the more informal relationship of cohabitation.

## 1. Theoretical framework

Most criminological studies that incorporate some measure of partnering or the quality of partner relationships typically examine the effect of entering a romantic relationship and/or the quality of that relationship on subsequent crime (Farrington & West, 1995; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Warr, 1998). Siennick and Osgood (2008) document that the effect of marriage on desistance has received more attention than any other social bond or related life-course factor. However, exploration of the influence of deviant and criminal behaviors on partner formation is sparse (King & South, 2011).

We use Thornberry's (1987) interactional theory as a framework to discuss the potential effects of adolescent risk behaviors on partner formation. Interactional theory was one of the first to emphasize the importance of examining the effect of crime and related problem behaviors on later life course development. Thornberry and Krohn (2001) extended the original focus of that theory from adolescence to include the adult years, as well as the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Thornberry and Krohn (2001) suggest that engaging in problem or risk behavior during adolescence can set in motion a 'cascading' set of both co-morbid and future consequences that adversely affects the chances for successful life course development. In the life course literature, this is typically referred to as cumulative continuity or cumulative disadvantage (Dannefer, 2003). The process that Thornberry and Krohn (2001) describe relies heavily on their hypothesis that engaging in risk behavior during adolescence serves as a precursor or gateway to other maladaptive behaviors. These risk behaviors, which include involvement in delinquency, drug use, and risky sexual behavior including early sexual debut, often co-occur and are part of a larger manifestation for a proclivity to engage in potentially harmful or dangerous behavior that have both immediate (adolescent) and long-term (adult) consequences on development (Busseri et al., 2007; Jessor, 1998; Metzler, Noell, Biglan, Ary, & Smolkowski, 1994). This is in line with Thornberry and Krohn (2001) who argue that engaging in each of these risk behaviors increases the probability that an adolescent will experience disorderly and off-time transitions into adulthood. In other words, transitions to adulthood including stopping one's education, becoming a parent, and financial independence occur prior to the time when they would be optimal for successful entry into adult life (Rindfuss, Swicegood, & Rosenfeld, 1987; Wickrama,

Wickrama, & Baltimore, 2010). Substantiating this argument, research demonstrates that dropping out of high school or having a child during one's teenage years are precocious transitions that are empirically linked to prior involvement in adolescent risk behavior (Fagan & Pabon, 1990; Krohn, Lizotte, & Perez, 1997; Krohn, Thornberry, Collins-Hall, & Lizotte, 1995; Newcomb & Bentler, 1988).

Such precocious transitions, in turn, place these youth at a distinct disadvantage in acquiring the human and social capital necessary for successfully adopting adult roles. For instance, failing to graduate from high school and/or becoming a teenage parent contributes to a decreased likelihood of obtaining the credentials necessary for job market success and financial independence (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998; Lanctot, Cernkovich, & Giordano, 2007; Thornberry, Smith, & Howard, 1997). Because of the failure to complete high school or the acquisition of additional financial burdens associated with teenage parenthood these youth are in a disadvantageous positions to obtain employment, especially employment that is stable and well-paying (Arum & Beattie, 1999; Blomberg, Bales, Mann, Piquero, & Berk, 2011; Clausen, 1986; Elman & O'Rand, 2004; Tanner, Davies, & O'Grady, 1999). Along the same line, individuals with histories of involvement in risk behavior are more likely to experience intermittent periods of unemployment, have lower incomes, and receive some form of welfare (Bernburg & Krohn, 2003).

Of course, youth who engage in problem or risk behaviors during adolescence are also more likely to persist in maladaptive behaviors into young adulthood than youth who toe the line (Thornberry & Krohn, 2001; see also Armour & Haynie, 2007). For such youth, it is likely that their past and future problem behavior will both directly and indirectly affect their opportunities for success over the life course.

Thus, interactional theory suggests that the cumulative disadvantage generated by adolescents' participation in problem or risk behaviors increases the likelihood that they will have less educational attainment, experience teenage pregnancy and parenthood, have poorer job prospects and ensuing unemployment issues, and earn lower incomes increasing the likelihood of being on welfare or receiving some other form of financial assistance. In addition, they will be more likely to continue to engage in problem behaviors as young adults. As we will note in the next section, these characteristics do not bode well for an individuals' value on the marriage market. In other words, the cascading life course consequences of earlier adolescent risk behavior are likely to have direct effects on the formation of subsequent partner relationships and facilitate precocious transitions into adulthood that will serve as important mediators of the impact of problem or risk behaviors on patterns of union formation.

### 1.1. Deciding to partner

Traditional theory on the decision to marry has focused on how potential partners can enhance one's life chances (Becker, 1981; Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, & Lim, 1997). Becker (1981) views the process of choosing a romantic partner as the evaluation of potential mates as a "trading partner".

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