



## Overlapping crime: Stability and specialization of co-offending relationships



Thomas Grund<sup>a,\*</sup>, Carlo Morselli<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University College Dublin, School of Sociology, Ireland

<sup>b</sup> Université de Montreal, CICC, Canada

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### ABSTRACT

Dyadic analyses of relationships between criminals have mostly ignored the multiplex nature of criminal ties. This study attempts to provide a more complete assessment of co-offending networks by incorporating the different types of crime that relate individuals with each other. Drawing on a large dataset of arrests in Quebec between 2003 and 2009, we focus on co-offending stability and specialization and illustrate how co-offending networks based on different types of criminal activities overlap. We portray a pattern of co-offending, which extends debate of criminal specialization/versatility to the dyadic level. Our study illustrates the ways in which the frequency and spectrum of crime include a relational component. More generally, the article emphasizes the need to consider the semantics of network ties, and further, the association between different types of networks, which ultimately offers a reassessment of social structure.

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A large amount of crime is committed by pairs of individuals or by groups. At the same time, research that explicitly investigates how such co-offending affects individuals remains at the fringes of criminology (for some exceptions see [Warr, 1996](#); [Warr, 2002](#); [Bouchard and Spindler, 2010](#); [Svensson and Oberwittler, 2010](#); [Andresen and Felson, 2010](#); [Carrington, 2002](#); [Piquero et al., 2007](#); [van Mastrigt and Farrington, 2009](#)). Research on co-offending is heavily influenced by [Reiss \(1986, 1988\)](#) (see also [Reiss and Farrington, 1991](#)), who found that half of all burglaries and robberies are committed by two or more offenders. While Reiss focused on specific types of crime and revealed a strong prevalence of co-offending, more recent research on general crime finds less co-offending. Studies using large official records suggest that co-offending varies between 10 and 20 percent across crime events ([van Mastrigt and Farrington 2009](#); [Hodgson, 2007](#); [Stolzenberg and D'Alessio, 2007](#)), i.e. 80–90 percent of all criminal offenses are committed by single individuals. Looking at crime involvement, the percentage of individuals taking part in co-offending varies between 20 to 45 percent; i.e. more than 55 percent of all criminals only commit crime alone. Using Canadian arrest records, [Carrington \(2002\)](#) found that 24 percent of offenders are linked to co-offending events. Furthermore, this proportion is much higher amongst youths (44 percent) than among adults (20 percent) ([Carrington](#)

[2002](#)). Other research reveals similar patterns. For example, [van Mastrigt and Farrington \(2009\)](#) found that 30 percent of offenders are involved in co-offending, [Hodgson \(2007\)](#) found that 35 percent of offenders co-offend with others, and [McCord and Conway's \(2002\)](#) study of youth patterns reveals that 40 percent of young criminals co-offend with others. Much of the discrepancy between these recent studies and Reiss' seminal research can be attributed to the types of crime under investigation. Reiss focused on criminal activities that are more likely to require a co-offender (e.g. burglary and robbery). Many of the less serious types of crime and violent crime, however, is committed by solo offenders (e.g., vandalism, shoplifting, assault). The importance of co-offending as a crime commission enhancer, however, is accepted by most researchers in the field. [Tremblay \(1993\)](#) provides the general statement that continues to drive this field of research: "In a variety of situations, the probability that a given violation will occur will partly depend on motivated offenders' ability to find 'suitable' co-offenders" (p.17).

Early research on co-offending stresses the need to study, for example, the recruitment in co-offending circles ([Reiss 1986](#)). Reiss suggested that high-rate offenders "frequently change co-offenders" and that they "may actually be composed of sub-populations of 'joiners' and 'recruiters'" (p.142). This specific joiner/recruitment distinction was subsequently refuted by [Warr \(1996\)](#), who demonstrated the more transient nature of such roles in co-offending settings. The same observation was substantiated by [McGloin and Nguyen \(2012\)](#), who found some evidence for offending instigation across types of crime. Most of these

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [thomas.grund@ucd.ie](mailto:thomas.grund@ucd.ie) (T. Grund).

studies are consistent with Tremblay's (1993) argument that the co-offending process is not so much determined by the behavior of the more frequent offenders, but by the level of co-offending opportunities that are available in any given criminal opportunity structure. Hence, individuals could conceivably shift from one co-offender to the next (and back to past co-offenders), while taking on transient instigator or joiner roles across a sequence of crime events. What matters most is the availability of co-offenders within a wider network.

The current article follows Tremblay's general statement and focuses on stability and specialization/versatility issues in co-offending. We begin this article by reviewing past research in this specific area and present the data and analytical framework for this research. Our results, general argument, and conclusions reflect our conceptualization of co-offending relationships as a multiplex network built around dyadic dynamics.

### Variations in dyadic stability in crime

Co-offending relationships almost certainly evolve. As in most social contexts, relationships emerge, disappear or change their nature in time. DeLisi and Piquero (2011) identified the need to situate co-offending more explicitly in criminal careers research. Such is potentially important as it helps to illuminate whether co-offending is simply a characteristic of criminal events or whether there are distinctive trajectories for co-offending relationships, which ultimately determine the structure and organization of criminal groups. The issue of specialization/versatility in offending takes an important role in criminal careers research. Yet, previous work almost exclusively focuses on individual offenders and excludes co-offending relationships from the analyses. As noted by Sullivan et al. (2006), there is a respectable amount of studies on offender specialization. Several researchers find low levels of specialization among offenders in the long run. Individuals seem to do all sorts of crime over the course of their criminal careers (Brennan et al., 1989; Farrington et al., 1988; Kempf, 1987; Lattimore et al., 1994; Simon, 1997). At the same time, methodological concerns about the way this previous research aggregates measures over time and over individuals have been raised (Sullivan et al., 2006) and led to increased use of individual-level diversity measures instead (Mazerolle et al., 2000; McGloin et al., 2007; Piquero et al., 1999; Sullivan et al., 2006). Several studies (Mazerolle et al., 2000; Piquero et al., 1999) put the issue in developmental context and find that age brings about a decline in the amount of crime versatility. Older offenders are more specialized. Similarly drawing on individual-level measures, others (Osgood and Schreck, 2007; Sullivan et al., 2006; Sullivan et al., 2009) find more specialization than previous studies suggest. Surprisingly, the empirical and theoretical debate on specialization/versatility of offending has not been held on the dyadic level yet. Are co-offending relationships specialized or versatile? In general, criminal careers research neglects the life-span and trajectory of co-offending relationships. Although, a large amount of crime occurs in pairs or groups, this has not been adequately considered in this context. DeLisi and Piquero (2011) identified the need to establish co-offending more explicitly in criminal careers research. McGloin et al., 2008 examined youth co-offending with a Philadelphia-based longitudinal dataset and found that co-offending relationships are generally short-term; co-offending partners are not reused. They also offered an initial assessment of co-offending stability, i.e. the reuse of co-offenders in subsequent criminal incidents.<sup>1</sup> They propose a 'co-offender sta-

bility measure' (CSM), which is derived on the individual-level. It takes the value "zero" when there is no overlap and individuals co-offend with different individuals in repeated criminal incidents. In contrast, the measure takes the value "one" for individuals who co-offend with specific alters all the time. While theoretical focus rests on co-offending relationships, the actual CSM measure is still calculated on the level of individuals. A more sophisticated approach, however, would include this individual-level information on a higher level in a cross-classified model where the actual co-offending dyad (or actor pair) remains the unit of analysis. In line with previous work (Reiss and Farrington, 1991; Sarnecki, 2001), McGloin et al. (2008) find only little evidence for co-offender stability. At the same time they acknowledge that some individuals repeatedly co-offend with each other. Another important study was conducted by McGloin and Piquero (2010), who examined the link between non-redundant networking and offending versatility. Using egocentric density as a main indicator of network redundancy, they found that individuals with lower density (or less redundancy) in their personal networks are more likely to be versatile in their group offences. Such a finding was consistent with other research on criminal networks that demonstrated the benefits of brokerage for increasing offenders' earnings (Morselli and Tremblay 2004) and reputation (Morselli 2009). Lantz and Hutchison's (2015) extended McGloin et al.'s research to address stability patterns in co-offending groups over time and examined how co-offending ties impact individual criminal careers. They found that the duration of co-offending relationships increases if they were drawn from larger groups with more dispersed offending structures, once again reiterating the importance of low density network structures, while also nuancing the importance of considering the types and mix of crimes in which offenders take part.

Some studies indicate substantive differences in types of criminal activities and co-offending patterns. One recent study, for example, demonstrated the importance of simply gauging the size of a co-offending group in order to estimate the events that are related to organized crime in a specific region (see Hashimi et al., 2016). Another research examined how crime involvement and frequency vary within a co-offending population and found that a) offenders with more co-offenders (the core segment of the population) are more involved in crime, b) those who are directly co-offending with this core (the peripheral segment of the population) are also more criminally active, and c) dyadic stability amongst co-offenders is more prevalent than initially expected (Morselli et al., 2015).

The current study builds on this past research and focuses on the stability and specialization of co-offending relationships. We conceptualize co-offending in a multiplex way, where individuals are related with each other repeatedly and commit different types of crime. First, co-offending stability investigates the way in which individuals reuse previous co-offenders in subsequent criminal incidents. Are co-offending relationships stable or do individuals disregard previous co-offending partners? Second, co-offending specialization examines the nature of those relationships where individuals co-offend with each other more than once. Do individuals commit the same type of crime with specific co-offenders and develop specialized relationships? By answering these two questions, we extend the debate on specialization/versatility in crime to the dyadic level and infuse criminal network studies with developments in criminal career research. At the same time, we highlight the importance of group processes and co-offending for crime.

<sup>1</sup> McGloin et al. (2008) refer to this as "co-offender stability" and distinguish it from "stability of co-offending", which has a slightly different meaning in their study and simply assesses whether a particular individual keeps committing crime

together with others (no matter with whom). We find the latter definition less fortunate as co-offending, in our opinion, explicitly refers to specific dyads (pairs of actors). Instead, we mean the reuse of specific co-offenders when we talk about co-offending stability.

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