



Adult-onset offenders: Is a tailored theory warranted?



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To describe official adult-onset offenders, investigate their antisocial histories and test hypotheses about their origins.

Methods: We defined adult-onset offenders among 931 Dunedin Study members followed to age 38, using criminal-court conviction records.

Results: Official adult-onset offenders were 14% of men, and 32% of convicted men, but accounted for only 15% of convictions. As anticipated by developmental theories emphasizing early-life influences on crime, adult-onset offenders' histories of antisocial behavior spanned back to childhood. Relative to juvenile-offenders, during adolescence they had fewer delinquent peers and were more socially inhibited, which may have protected them from conviction. As anticipated by theories emphasizing the importance of situational influences on offending, adult-onset offenders, relative to non-offenders, during adulthood more often had schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and alcohol-dependence, had weaker social bonds, anticipated fewer informal sanctions, and self-reported more offenses. Contrary to some expectations, adult-onset offenders did not have high IQ or high socioeconomic-status families protecting them from juvenile conviction.

Conclusions: A tailored theory for adult-onset offenders is unwarranted because few people begin crime de novo as adults. Official adult-onset offenders fall on a continuum of crime and its correlates, between official non-offenders and official juvenile-onset offenders. Existing theories can accommodate adult-onset offenders.

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It seems counterintuitive that someone who successfully navigated the volatile adolescent period crime-free would suddenly start engaging in crime as an adult. Yet, according to official data, adult-onset offending exists. Adult-onset offenders, as reported by most studies, represent a substantial portion of ever-convicted individuals (although the size of this adult-onset group is uncertain because of methodological heterogeneity among studies, see Table 1). According to projections of lifetime conviction risk, at least one-quarter of first-time convictions will occur after 30 years of age, well into adulthood (Skardhamar, 2014). Ample cautionary evidence, however, shows that individuals' age of onset of criminal behavior is overestimated by official data (Elander, Rutter, Simonoff, & Pickles, 2000; Farrington, 1989; Farrington, Jolliffe, Loeber, & Homish, 2007; Kazemian & Farrington, 2005; McGee & Farrington, 2010; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001; Sohoni, Paternoster, McGloin, & Bachman, 2014; Theobald & Farrington, 2011). As a result,

an initial official crime record during adulthood cannot necessarily be interpreted as evidence that the offender began criminal activity as an adult.

There are both practical and theoretical reasons for investigating the official age of onset of crime. Practically, adult-onset offenders represent a sizable proportion of official offenders and warrant an appropriate response from the criminal justice system, ranging from targeted interventions to increasing the age limit for processing within the juvenile justice system. Adult-onset offenders also pose challenges to life-course developmental theories, which have generally not anticipated the existence of the adult-onset offender (DeLisi & Piquero, 2011). Examination of the adult-onset offender may lead to important theoretical insights about the origins of criminal behavior (Piquero, Oster, Mazerolle, Brame, & Dean, 1999; Thornberry & Krohn, 2011).

In this study, we investigated adult-onset offending. We used data from the Dunedin Longitudinal Study which has followed a 1972–73 birth cohort for four decades in New Zealand. Based on past research (see Table 1), we anticipated finding official adult-onset offenders in the Dunedin cohort. We additionally sought to find the presence of an

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Table 1
Evidence of adult-onset offending, sources from 1998 to 2014. Updated table of Eggleston and Laub (2002).

Study name/description	Data source	Analytic sample	Followed to age	Type of crime data	Adult offenders		Juvenile-onset adult offenders		Adult-onset adult offenders	
					n	% of sample	n	% of adult offenders	n	% of adult offenders
<i>Prospective studies appearing in Eggleston and Laub (2002)</i>										
St. Louis Municipal Psychiatric Clinic Study	Robins (1966)	441 males and females in St. Louis, antisocial referrals and nondelinquent controls	43	Nontraffic arrests	233	53%	218	94%	15	6%
Glueck Study	Glueck and Glueck (1968)	880 males in Boston, one half delinquent	31	Arrests for nontraffic offenses	328	37%	266	81%	62	19%
Cambridge-Somerville Study	McCord (1978)	506 males in Massachusetts	Mid to late 40s	Serious convictions	91	18%	50	55%	41	45%
Marion County Youth Study	Polk et al. (1981)	1227 males in the 10th grade in 1964 in Marion County, OR	30	Police and court records for minor and serious offending	90	7%	35	29%	55	61%
Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development	Farrington (1983)	395 males in London	25	Nonminor convictions	107	27%	55	51%	52	49%
Swedish Project Metropolitan	Langan and Farrington (1983)	395 males in London	25	Burglary or violence convictions	55	14%	19	35%	36	65%
	Janson (1983)	7710 males in Stockholm, Sweden	26	Crimes known to police, including nonminor traffic	1639	21%	601	37%	1038	63%
Racine Cohort Studies	Kratzer and Hodgins (1999)	13,852 males and females in Stockholm, Sweden	30	All criminal convictions, including nonminor traffic	1945	14%	800	41%	1145	59%
	Shannon (1988)	633 males and females born in 1942 in Wisconsin	32	Nontraffic police contacts	242	38%	118	49%	124	51%
	Shannon (1988)	1297 males and females born in 1949 in Wisconsin	25	Nontraffic police contacts	472	36%	305	65%	167	35%
1945 Philadelphia Birth Cohort Follow-up Study	Shannon (1998)	1357 males and females born in 1955 in Wisconsin	32	Nontraffic police contacts	458	34%	236	51%	222	29%
	Wolfgang, Thornberry, and Figlio (1987)	975 males in Philadelphia born in 1945	30	Police contacts for nontraffic offenses	290	30%	176	61%	114	39%
Individual Development and Environment	Magnusson (1988)	1389 males and females in Orebro, Sweden	30	Nonminor arrests	248	18%	99	14%	149	86%
Montreal Study	LeBlanc and Frechette (1989)	1602 males in Montreal	25	Convictions for indictable crimes	172	11%	25	14%	149	86%
	LeBlanc and Frechette (1989)	470 male wards of the court in Montreal	25	Convictions for indictable crimes	339	72%	288	85%	51	15%
	LeBlanc and Frechette (1989)	196 male wards of the court in Montreal	25	Self-report offending	177	90%	150	85%	27	15%
Kauai Study	Werner and Smith (1992)	505 males and females in Kauai, HI	32	Nontraffic police records and court convictions	31	6%	21	68%	10	32%
1958 Philadelphia Birth Cohort	Tracy and Kempf-Leonard (1996)	27,160 males and females in Philadelphia	26	Police contacts for nontraffic	3617	13%	2041	56%	1576	44%

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