



# The juvenile sex offender: The effect of employment on offending



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** In many countries, sex offenders are treated as a special group of offenders, requiring special criminal justice responses and treatment modalities, presuming they are at high risk of re-offending. These special measures limit them in entering adult roles, especially employment. At the same time, such adult roles have been found to reduce offending risk in general offenders. We aim to investigate whether employment reduces offending rates in juvenile sex offenders' (JSO).

**Method:** Using longitudinal data on a Dutch sample of 498 JSO, we investigate employment and offending careers in JSO. A hybrid random effects model is used to investigate within-individual changes of employment quality and employment stability on offending. We also investigated whether the effects differ for child abusers, peer abusers and group offenders, who have different background profiles and for whom employment effects could be less.

**Results:** We first show that JSO enter the labor market at relatively young ages, with stagnating participation rates from age 25 on, and numerous and short-lived employment contracts. In spite of these fractured careers, employment is associated with a decrease in offending. We found no difference for offender types in the effect of employment on offending.

**Conclusions:** We conclude that for JSO, employment decreases offending. Policies aimed at guidance towards employment, or the inclusion into conventional society, may be effective for JSO.

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## Introduction

Within criminology many studies have found a similar pattern of offending over the life course. This pattern, called the age crime curve, shows a peak of offending at adolescence and a gradual decline setting in at early adulthood (Farrington, 1986). Moffitt (1993) noted that as the age crime curve is a consistent finding within criminology, it is also the least understood. Many factors are presumed to influence this decline in offending. Criminological life-course theories emphasize the importance of social events over the life course that may explain the gradual decline in offending at early adulthood. Arnett (2004) identifies several such life changing events or transitions within early (emerging) adulthood that may explain this decline. These life events (getting married, having children, buying a house, getting a steady job) comprise the taking on of adult roles as well as embeddedness in conventional society. These transitions lead to an increase in responsibility, not only for the self but also for others. Delinquency will then become less appealing since it impairs these newly gained responsibilities and embeddedness in society (see also Hirschi, 1969). Sampson and Laub (1993) similarly

argue in their age-graded theory of informal social control that life events facilitate important changes in the criminal career. They emphasize that persons who have strong ties to conventional institutions are more likely to reduce or desist from offending. Prior research into social events or transitions has found a substantial amount of support for Sampson and Laub's model for general offenders (Savolainen, 2009). For special groups of offenders less is known.

Getting a steady job is one of the most important transitions in the emerging adulthood that may cause a decline in offending. Nearly all general criminological theories emphasize this negative relationship between employment and offending (Uggen & Staff, 2001), although they provide us with different explanations as to how and why the causal effect of employment on crime exists. Merton's anomie theory (1938) argues that employment decreases delinquency if the benefits of employment are greater than the benefits of delinquency. This type of theory fits economic crime models, in which individuals are regarded as rational beings who weigh the costs and benefits of crime (Becker, 1968). According to the routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), employment reduces delinquency because of a reduction in unstructured time: when engaged in a job, time and possibilities to offend will be limited. This instantaneous effect is therefore caused by the structure that employment brings in everyday life, thus limiting criminal opportunities. Lastly, commitment to a job will, according to Sutherland and Cressey's differential association theory (1978), create

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social embeddedness as employees will learn social values from job culture. Although different mechanisms for the effect of employment on offending are postulated by these theories, they all state that employment has a negative effect on delinquency (Uggen & Staff, 2001).

Previous research has shown that the criminal career of juvenile sex offenders resembles the age-crime curve for general (juvenile) offenders (e.g. van den Berg, Bijleveld and Hendriks, 2011; Lussier et al., 2012) with a peak at adolescence and a decline in early adulthood. Yet, juvenile sex offenders are often regarded as a special kind of offender: they have fewer antisocial peer contacts, less substance abuse and a less extensive criminal history than non-sex offenders (Seto & Lalumière, 2010). They are also reported to often have psychological disorders, low IQ and limited social skills (Hendriks, 2006).

The question is therefore, whether the decline in offending in early adulthood that has been shown for juvenile sex offenders can be explained by employment in the way employment has been shown to reduce offending in general offenders. On the one hand, this seems a plausible expectation given the similarity in the shape of criminal careers and re-offending rates of sex- and non-sex offenders (van den Berg, Bijleveld and Hendriks, 2011; Lussier et al., 2012; Zimring et al., 2007; 2009; Letourneau & Miner, 2005; Caldwell, 2002). On the other hand, their more troubled and socially isolated profile may actually make transitions less likely or less beneficial. In addition, (juvenile) sex offenders are treated with specific criminal justice responses and face legal barriers to obtain certain jobs. This special treatment has indeed been shown to generate difficulties in finding employment, housing, a partner, and generally decreases levels of social support (Lasher & McGrath, 2012).

For sex offenders, the effect of adult transitions such as employment on offending has to our knowledge not been studied. Given the special treatment that sex offenders get in many countries, such knowledge is warranted. If indeed they are a special group, it is possible they do not benefit from life events such as employment like general offenders do and special measures might be needed for the reduction of re-offending. If, however, they do benefit from transitions such as employment then special criminal justice responses and treatment modalities could perhaps be replaced with programs to better integrate them in the labor market. In fact, in that case, society might generate additional risk by barring them from finding and continuing employment.

Using longitudinal data on a Dutch sample of 498 juvenile sex offenders, this study will investigate employment rates in juvenile sex offenders as well as the effect of employment on their general offending levels over time. With a rich dataset of registered information on offending, employment and incarceration, this study will describe the employment career of juvenile sex offenders for a relatively long follow-up period. Furthermore, since it has been long recognized that juvenile sex offenders are a heterogeneous group of offenders (e.g., Groth, 1977; Hunter, Figueredo, Malamuth, & Becker, 2003) we will disaggregate our findings for different types of sex offenders: the child abuser and the peer abuser (both solo offenders) and group offenders (who committed the sex offense with at least one co-offender).

## Theory

Within life-course criminology there is an ongoing debate on whether employment is responsible for the decrease in offending over time, or if the effect is just an artifact of the general desistance from crime with the coming of age. On the one hand, the age-graded theory formulated by Sampson and Laub (1993) stresses the importance of successful transitions in the process of desistance from crime. Sampson and Laub labeled the mechanism responsible for this effect “social capital” and explain that social capital can be produced by employment as employment creates responsibility and embeddedness in conventional society. However, not all employment generates the same amount of social capital: the quality of the job is important. This quality can be dependent on for instance: how satisfactory the job is

to a person, or if the person is content with the payment, or whether there are any prospects on advancement within the company. As such, temporary jobs may for instance be assumed to generate less social capital due to their limited prospects for growth or promotion. Another measure of quality is job stability (or continuity); if a person is employed for a longer period at the same company, it can be expected that the social capital generated is greater because of the stronger embeddedness within the company. Conversely, a longer span of a contract may be a marker for greater job satisfaction.

On the other hand, Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime embodies the so-called heterogeneity perspective. This theory states changes in offending are not brought about by changes in people's situation such as employment, but that it is pre-existing differences between people that cause or prevent delinquency. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi's theory, low self-control is a pivotal factor as it causes delinquency and reduces the chances of being employed. Low self-control is stable over the life course, consequently, any association between employment and offending is spurious according to this theory. Sampson and Laub (1993) however stated that over and above such effects, ‘good’ things can happen to ‘bad’ people (Laub et al., 1998) and therefore lead to desistance from crime. In other words, if the transition towards (good quality) employment is successful, even people with a criminal predisposition can experience a positive effect from employment on offending (Bushway & Reuter, 2002).

The empirical evidence for the effect of employment on offending is mixed. Firstly, the majority of previous studies on the effect of employment on offending cannot be used to infer causality due to the cross-sectional nature of these studies (Uggen & Wakefield, 2008). A number of studies in which careful control methods were used did find a negative effect of employment on offending in various population samples (Sampson & Laub, 2003; Thornberry & Christenson, 1984; Savolainen, 2009). van der Geest (2011) and Verbruggen, Blokland, and van der Geest (2012) found a negative effect of employment on offending even in samples with problematic backgrounds, with fairly extensive criminal careers in adulthood. However, some studies found no link between offending and employment (Horney et al. 1995; MacKenzie & De Li, 2002). Other studies found the effect to be dependent on age (Uggen, 2000; Paternoster et al., 2003), employment stability (Crutchfield & Pitchford, 1997) or job quality (Apel et al., 2006; van der Geest, 2011). In light of these mixed results, it appears the relationship between employment and offending may be conditional (on age, job quality and employment stability).

To our knowledge, no studies have been conducted to investigate the extent to which employment reduces offending in sex offenders. Yet, within clinical practice, it is hypothesized that certain life events and social connections can reduce offending. The Good Lives Model is a rehabilitative framework that assumes (sex) offenders require certain ‘primary goods’, like health, knowledge, excellence in employment, friendship and community. These ‘goods’ can when obtained enhance psychological well-being and reduce offending (Laws & Ward, 2011). However, empirical support is scarce, and the Good Lives Model mainly serves as a framework designed to supply practitioners with an overview of treatment options (Fortune, Ward, & Willis, 2012).

Apart from the studies by van der Geest (2011) and Verbruggen et al. (2012), very few studies have addressed the extent to which employment can reduce offending in high-risk or vulnerable groups. (Juvenile) Sex offenders are generally regarded as a chronic and specialized type of offender, at high-risk of re-offending. van den Berg, Bijleveld and Hendriks (2011) and Lussier et al. (2012) previously showed that juvenile sex offenders' adult criminal careers contain relatively few sexual offenses, and resemble those of general offenders. In an American birth cohort, Zimring and colleagues (2007; 2009) found that juvenile sex offenders are just as likely as juvenile non-sex offenders to commit another sex offense. These findings are consistent with other studies on recidivism, thus suggesting that juvenile sexual offending does not predispose to specialized or chronic criminal careers (Letourneau & Miner,

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