



# Early onset of delinquency and the trajectory of alcohol-impaired driving among young males<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Building upon the literature in developmental and life-course criminology, the present study assesses the possible association of age onset of delinquency with the trajectory of alcohol-impaired driving using data collected from the three waves of the Buffalo Longitudinal Survey of Young Men (BLSYM). It is argued that as a unique form of delinquency, alcohol-impaired driving among adolescents may be better understood in a broad context of adolescent delinquency involvement. The study adopts the general approach for the analysis of early onset of delinquency and criminal careers in developmental and life-course criminology and hypothesizes that early onset of delinquency is associated with a higher growth of alcohol-impaired driving over time among adolescents when age onsets of alcohol-impaired driving, drinking, and drug use are controlled. Our analysis with the HLM growth modeling method provides support for the hypothesis. Respondents who had an early start in delinquency were likely to have a faster growth of alcohol-impaired driving over the three waves of BLSYM, which implies that these respondents were likely to have a longer path of alcohol-impaired driving in their transition to adulthood. The implication of this finding is discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Alcohol-impaired driving among young people is still a serious public concern in the United States. The [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration \(2008\)](#) reported that in 2007 more than two-thirds of drivers in fatal crashes who had a BAC (Blood Alcohol Content) level of .08 or higher were young drivers at ages 21 to 35 (35% at ages 21 to 24 and 29% at 25 to 34, respectively). Because alcohol-impaired driving involves drinking behavior, a number of studies have examined association of adolescent daily drinking patterns with the risk of alcohol-impaired driving (e.g., [Barnes & Welte, 1988](#); [Berger & Snortum, 1986](#); [Bingham & Shope, 2004](#); [Calvert & Bucholz, 2008](#); [Copeland, Shope, & Waller, 1996](#); [Donovan, 1993](#); [Lapham, Baca, McMillan, & Lapidus, 2006](#); [Usdan, Moore, Schumacher, & Talbott, 2005](#); [Valencia-Martin, Galan, & Rodriguez-Artalejo, 2008](#)). Some studies have also assessed the possible effects of other drugs such as marijuana and smoking on alcohol-impaired driving (e.g., [Bingham & Shope, 2003](#); [O'Malley & Johnson, 2007](#); [Sabel, Bensley, & Van Eenwayk, 2004](#)). The

common wisdom is that drinking, drug use, and smoking may be different types of substance use that could be interrelated as significant factors in alcohol-impaired driving.

However, alcohol-impaired driving *per se* is criminal behavior and both drinking and driving have legal limits. Underage drinking or driving is illegal. Therefore, alcohol-impaired driving as a delinquent or criminal behavior may be associated with other delinquent or criminal acts. It may be part of a large syndrome of antisocial behavior. Studies have indicated that offenders tend to be versatile in delinquent or criminal acts ([Farrington, 1991, 2003](#)). Given these considerations, it may be strategic to study alcohol-impaired driving among young people in a larger context of their delinquency involvement when they are making a transition to adulthood.

The present study is aimed to assess the possible association of early onset of delinquency and the trajectory of alcohol-impaired driving among young males using data collected from the Buffalo Longitudinal Survey of Young Men (BLSYM). Because both drinking and driving have legal limits and their implementation largely depends on available resources and related skills, alcohol-impaired driving commonly start later than other delinquent acts among adolescents. It would be important to examine whether early onset of delinquency affects the pathway of alcohol-impaired driving in understanding the developmental trajectory of alcohol-impaired driving among young people.

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**Table 1**  
Brief demographic characteristics of respondents at Wave 1.

Background variable	Frequency	%
Age		
16	180	28.8
17	159	25.4
18	155	25.8
19	131	21.0
Race		
White	290	46.4
Non-White	335	53.6
Education		
Less than High School Graduate	105	16.8
Enrolled in High School	348	55.7
High School Graduate	68	10.9
Enrolled in Post High School Trade	27	4.3
Enrolled in College	77	12.3
Family on Welfare		
No	488	78.0
Yes	137	22.0

Notes: N = 563 at each wave.

## 2. Early onset of delinquency and the pathway of criminal careers

Developmental and life-course criminology has paid attention to age onset of delinquency and its relationship with the pathway of criminal careers (Farrington, 2003; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2007). As Piquero et al. (2007, p. 30) noted, theories in developmental and life-course criminology “take as their starting point two key facts: the relationship between age and crime and the relationship between prior and future criminal activity.”

One prominent theory in developmental and life-course criminology is Moffitt's (1993) development taxonomy. Her theory classifies offenders into two distinct groups in terms of the age curve of crime among adolescents. One group is categorized as “adolescence-limited” and the other is designated as “life-course-persistent.” The adolescence-limited group is assumed to have a later start in delinquency, engage in criminal activities only during adolescence, and mature out of delinquency in their transition to adulthood. In contrast, the life-course-persistent group is hypothesized to have an early start in delinquency and develop a criminal career into adulthood.

Patterson and Yoerger's (1999) theory also divides offenders into two groups. The first group consists of offenders who have an early onset of delinquency and the other is comprised of offenders who have a late start in delinquency. For their theory, offenders in the early starting group have encountered permanent failure of socialization in the early childhood because of inept parenting practices. Consequently, the early starting offenders tend to have a high risk for chronic offending and continued criminal careers into adulthood. Offenders in the second group do not experience the failure of socialization. They engage in delinquent acts mainly because of their association and interaction with delinquent peers. They still possess the social characteristics and skills that allow them to mature out of delinquency in their transition to adulthood.

All these theories suggest that age onset of delinquency is associated with the later development of delinquent pathways during the adolescence period and into adulthood. Adolescents who have an early start in delinquency are likely to have a longer pathway in crime and have a high risk to become chronic offenders throughout the life-course.

Most studies in this research line have provided strong evidence for the relationship between age onset of delinquency and criminal careers. They show that an early age of onset of delinquency predicts a relatively long criminal career and chronic offenders commonly have an early onset of delinquency (DeLisi, 2006; Farrington, 2003; Farrington et al., 1998, 2003; Farrington, Lambert, & West, 1998; Kazemian & Farrington,

2006; LeBlanc et al., 1991; LeBlanc & Frechette, 1989; Leve & Chamberlain, 2004; Piquero et al., 2007; Piquero & Chung, 2001; Stattin & Magnusson, 1995; Thornberry, 2005).

Although alcohol-impaired driving is commonly considered a form of delinquency, it has a different developmental trajectory. It starts relatively late (between ages 15 and 18 for the BLSYM data) than other minor or general delinquent acts and peaks at ages 21 to 24 (Hingson & Winter, 2003; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2008; Usdan et al., 2005; Williams 2006). In contrast, other delinquent acts start earlier (typically between ages 8 and 14) and have a peak at ages 17 to 18 and then sharply decline (Blumstein, Cohen, & Farrington, 1988; Farrington, 1986; Flanagan & Maguire, 1990; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1993; Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972). Also, alcohol-impaired driving involves two types of behavior — drinking and driving which both have legal limits. It depends more on available resources, related skills, and situational factors than many other types of delinquent acts. Given these differences, it would be interesting to assess whether early onset of delinquency is associated with a longer path of alcohol-impaired driving among adolescents. The assessment would bring insights to the research on criminal careers and make contribution to the literature.

## 3. Current study

Using the HLM growth curve modeling method, the present study is to assess the relationship between early onset of delinquency and the trajectory of alcohol-impaired driving with the data collected from the three waves of the Buffalo Longitudinal Survey of Young Men (BLSYM). Building upon the study of age onset of delinquency and criminal careers in the developmental and life-course criminology, our main hypothesis is that adolescents who have an early onset of delinquency are more likely to have a higher growth rate of alcohol-impaired driving than those who have a late onset.

For our analysis, alcohol-impaired driving is the dependent variable which is regressed on respondents' ages to generate the average growth rate of alcohol-impaired driving across the three waves of BLSYM. The main independent variable is the age onset of delinquency. Age onsets of alcohol-impaired driving, drinking, and drug use are included as control variables in analysis. Race and family SES at Wave 1 are also control variables. For a purpose of comparison, the same analytical model is used to assess the relationship between early onset of delinquency and the trajectory of delinquency over the three waves.

## 4. Data and methods

### 4.1. Data

The data used for the present study came from the three waves of the Buffalo Longitudinal Survey of Young Men (BLSYM) conducted from 1993 to 1997. The BLSYM was a panel study of adolescent substance use and delinquency with a probability sample of 625 males aged 16–19 from the Buffalo area, New York. The sample was recruited by random digit dial, with screening by a brief questionnaire to over-sample young men at risk for delinquency. Those who scored 3 or more items in the delinquent direction were always invited to participate; the others were recruited a random 1/3 of the time. The sample contains the full range of individuals in the general population, and oversampling those prone to problem behaviors is merely a method to assure enough problem behaviors for adequate statistical analysis. Face-to-face structured interviews were conducted by trained interviewers at the Research Institute on Addictions. The interviews for the first wave took place in 1993. The time interval between waves was 18 months. The sample attrition rate was 4.6% for the second wave and 7.6% for the third wave. These sample attrition rates have no substantive effect on the representativeness of the sample (see Table 1 for a brief demographic description of the sample).

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