

“Cool or Hot Decisions? A Multi-Level Analysis of Youth Crime in the United States”

Anastasiia Timmer

Abstract

Adolescent violence and delinquency continue to be major societal and public health problems as reflected in the occurrences of school shootings, cyberstalking, teenage cruelty, and other types of youth crime. While researchers recognize the vulnerability of individuals during the adolescent life period, they have primarily focused on adolescents as passive actors and did not comprehensively address the complex problem of adolescent crime in contemporary society. Drawing from several novel integrated criminological perspectives, this project seeks to address the problem of youth crime in today’s society on different levels. On an individual level, it explores how the effect of adolescent rationality (i.e., ‘cool’ thinking) on crime is altered by various ‘hot’ triggers such as family stress, alcohol use, emotionality, and other related factors. Further, this study contextualizes youth decision-making and investigates how youth environments (e.g., school deterrent characteristics), alone and in interaction with agency-related factors, shape youth involvement in crime. To examine these effects, I have constructed a dataset combining data from recently conducted multi-level survey of over 2,000 middle and high school students from 40 schools in several metropolitan areas in the U. S. (ISRDC, Wave III), the National Center for Education Statistics as well as supplemental data from the US Census and American Community Survey. To assess individual-level and multi-level effects on youth crime, I employ negative binomial regression and multi-level overdispersed Poisson regression, respectively. The findings of this dissertation suggest the need to move towards an integrated theory of juvenile criminal behavior with a more nuanced understanding of the interrelationships between different aspects of individual agency and contextual dynamics. This study also provides recommendations for novel juvenile justice policies and programs focused on youth crime prevention.