

AN INTRODUCTION TO

LIFE-COURSE CRIMINOLOGY

CHRISTOFFER CARLSSON
& JERZY SARNECKI



AN INTRODUCTION TO

**LIFE-COURSE
CRIMINOLOGY**

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

‘This is an excellent introduction to a topic of central importance for criminologists. It has the merit of being very clearly written, and the authors cover a wide range of materials – theories and data; European and American research; quantitative and qualitative studies. Throughout, they provide helpful examples from their work on the Stockholm Life Course Project. Highly recommended.’
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‘Carlsson and Sarnecki’s *An Introduction to Life-Course Criminology* captures the excitement of the life course perspective within criminology, a lens and set of preoccupations that have become increasingly central to the field. This lively and engaging volume will not only give other scholars and students alike a full appreciation of key concepts and historical roots, but open a window on what is at stake theoretically, and how recent research informs contemporary debates. Illustrations from the authors’ own important longitudinal study are especially useful, as they make tangible sometimes slippery notions (e.g., agency) and complicated pathways (the desistance process). This would be an ideal text for a class on life course criminology and an excellent supplement for more general courses, and will be an outstanding resource for researchers with interests in this area.’
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Shadd Maruna Dean, Rutgers School of Criminal Justice

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1

LIFE-COURSE CRIMINOLOGY: AN INTRODUCTION

In November 2010 Francis T. Cullen, a well-known criminologist and the then recipient of the prestigious Edwin Sutherland Award, delivered his Sutherland Address during the annual American Society of Criminology (ASC) meeting in San Francisco. In this address, he noted that 'life-course criminology is now criminology' (Cullen, 2011: 310). Cullen's intention was not, we think, to argue that all criminological inquiries are or should be informed by a life-course perspective (although an increasing number are). Rather, it was to suggest that life-course criminology is now an integral part of criminology as a whole. Indeed, although the main ideas of the field are as old as criminology itself (probably older), it did rise to fame very quickly.

The main task of this book is to unpack life-course criminology for the reader. In this first chapter, we briefly introduce the topic and questions of life-course criminology, provide a history of the research field, and outline the structure of the book. Our initial tasks are to present the field of life-course criminology and then to map the distance from the 1970s when research on crime and the life course began, to the 2010 ASC meeting when Cullen made the above remark.

Crime and the Life Course as a Field of Study

Norwegian criminologist Torbjörn Skardhamar (2010: 1) distinguishes life-course criminology from classical theories of crime in a very simple way:

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While classical theories of crime mostly discussed differences in offending *between* people (or strata of the population), DLCC [Developmental- and Life-Course Criminology] is primarily concerned with differences in offending *within* individuals over time.

For Skardhamar, what separates life-course criminology from other criminological enterprises is simply a change in perspective, from a focus on differences in criminal offending *between* people, to a focus on differences of offending *within* people. That is, life-course criminology is concerned with individuals as they move through time and place, and how criminal offending changes or continues with these movements. While the relationship between crime and age is as old as criminology itself (Quetelet, 1831), its modern relevance was mainly established in the 1970s with a study by Wolfgang et al. (1972) on the Philadelphia Birth Cohort. The central finding of this well-known publication was that a small number of offenders – between 5 and 10 percent of a given population – were responsible for the majority of crimes committed by that same population. Wolfgang et al. termed these ‘chronic offenders’, and it raised serious questions: who were these individuals? Could they be identified in advance? What could make them cease their offending?

The main task of life-course criminology has since been to understand an empirically identified paradox. In the words of Moffitt (1993: 674), antisocial behavior ‘shows impressive continuity over age, but ... its prevalence changes dramatically with age’. In other words, the best ‘predictor’ for future criminal activity, is past criminal activity (continuity). However, in any given population, the number of active offenders (prevalence) decreases with age.

The task, then, became to untangle mainly two questions: what makes some people persist in crime longer, and have more frequent and serious criminal careers than others? And, what makes people desist from crime? Today, an enormous literature has attempted to answer these questions, and related sub-questions, and we will revisit them later.

Let us linger on terminology for a bit. As the reader will soon find out, life-course criminology introduces quite a number of new terms and concepts to account for crime and deviance across the life course. Some of these are theoretical (such as life course, trajectory, and transition) while others are of a more technical nature (such as frequency, escalation, de-escalation, and duration). We will get to these in due time. For now, it is important to point out that ‘life-course criminology’ is often considered synonymous to ‘developmental criminology’ and ‘criminal career research’. Depending on the writer or speaker using the term, however, the distinction between *life-course* and *developmental* criminology can be quite significant, because some argue that there are important, underlying perspectives at work here: using *developmental*, you tend to see human life as mainly unfolding in a normative, almost given series of steps. If you use life-course, on the other hand, you

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subscribe to the life-course perspective of seeing human life as much more fluid, dynamic and unpredictable. We return to these quite complicated arguments later in this book.

Modern criminology was mainly sociological in its origin. The well-known theorists discussed in most textbooks include people such as Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, Edwin Sutherland, David Matza, Travis Hirschi, and many others. These researchers form part of the history and theoretical core of criminology, and they all approached crime and delinquency as a sociological phenomenon. In contrast, life-course criminology is often considered *interdisciplinary*, where insights from biology, psychology, sociology, economics, and political science converge. In this introductory book we mainly consider the intersections of psychology and sociology, as these approaches have been the most influential so far, but we also include biology (see Chapters 3 and 5). Here we alert the reader to our own background, since no introduction to such a broad research field can be completely unbiased and non-selective. We are trained in the sociological strand of criminology. That being said, we attempt to give the reader an introduction to the field as an interdisciplinary enterprise, and reflect the strengths of the psychological and biological approaches, as well as highlighting the limitations of the sociological branch of the field.

An Imagination for Studying the Life Course

The development of life-course criminology is contingent on life-course studies in a more general sense. The idea that human development occurs in stages, with the latter stages of development based on the previous ones, first appeared in psychology. Developmental psychology had undergone a rapid development in the early 1900s by such scholars as Sigmund Freud, who focused on human psychosexual development, and Jean Piaget, who outlined the different stages of human cognitive development.

In sociology, this approach began in the 1970s, with the work of Glen H. Elder, Jr. In *Children of the Great Depression* (1974) Elder traced the lives of a group of children who grew up in Oakland, California under the Great Depression. Beginning in 1931, fifth graders from five schools, and their parents, were measured on a number of topics. Follow-up studies were conducted in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. This mode of inquiry made it possible for Elder to study the contingency of having grown up during the Great Depression, and how that impacted on the future lives of those children. It also led the way toward a more sophisticated, conceptually clear notion of the life course than had previously been the case.

When we speak of the *life course*, we do so in a quite specific way. By life course, we mean the 'age-graded sequence of roles, opportunities, constraints, and events that shape the biography from birth to death' (Shanahan and Macmillan,

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2008: 40). 'Age-graded' is important here. It means, plainly, that the roles we enter and the events that happen to us in life tend to occur in quite predictable ways. This does not mean that there is not any room for variation, only that what happens to us tends to happen to other people too, and at roughly the same age.

Two central concepts are embedded within the notion of the life course: *trajectories* and *transitions*. A *trajectory* is 'a pathway or line of development over the life span', such as education, work, or criminal behavior (Sampson and Laub, 1993: 8). *Transitions*, in turn, are life events, such as one's high school or college graduation, first job, or first marriage. They are embedded within trajectories and tend to mark the exit from one social role (e.g. 'student') and the entry to another (such as 'worker'). Trajectories and transitions tend to unfold in a normative pattern, as we noted above. They are, moreover, embedded in the social institutions of education, work, family life, and so on. One's biography is thus tied to the social structure of society. There are certain features of life that are natural – i.e. we are born, we age for some time, and we die – but how our lives are constructed along that path is historically specific. That is, they are dependent on time and place and the result of specific forms of social organization.

Within sociology, one of the great, famous research programs was outlined by C. Wright Mills in his seminal work *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). In this work, Mills argues that the social sciences need to be relevant and sensitive to the lives of the people those same sciences claim to study. The study of human behavior should begin with humans, their behavior and the social situation in which this behavior occurs – not with highly abstract concepts that have little or nothing to do with the people and their situations. The intersection of human biographies and social structures form the starting point, 'the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two' (Mills, 1959: 7). The person who has trained him- or herself to develop a sociological imagination, Mills continues on the same page, will 'understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of intersections of biography and history within society'.

In connecting the ideas of person, time, and place, Mills' program is a powerful and important predecessor to the life-course perspective, which in greater detail may be said to try and answer some of the questions Mills never did, such as: *how* do we do that? What is the importance of *age* at the intersection of biography and structure? What makes most people have unique, biographical elements in some ways, and what makes most of them still follow very similar trajectories and go through the same transitions?

When we focus on the life course, we thus focus on the way people's behavior, feelings, and thoughts continue and change with age, as they go through various transitions and experiences, and move along trajectories. As might be suspected, at this general level it's not really a theory of anything, but rather a way of thinking and seeing human lives and how they develop, unfold, and take expected and unexpected turns over time.

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To take just one example, as researchers, in our occupational trajectory we typically go through a transition from being graduate students to PhDs, and from there on to associate professors and (hopefully!) full professors. We also have other trajectories, however, for example, a residential trajectory: we have grown up in our childhood families and homes, then move out, get our own apartments, and so on. In Stockholm, where we are living and working, getting the apartment you want can be quite expensive and it is more likely that you will get a loan from a bank if you are an associate or full professor, than if you are a graduate student, because as a professor you have a higher salary and a more stable form of employment. Residential transitions, in turn, are likely to be somewhat dependent on what happens in still other spheres of life, such as family life. Thus, trajectories and transitions interlock, connect, and become partly contingent on one another; social arrangements tend to mesh together and what happens in one sphere of life can impel or obstruct processes of continuity and change in other spheres. These processes are all, of course, intersected by different forms of social stratification, such as class (in Sweden, researchers tend to belong to the middle-class segment of society, and this fact impacts on all the trajectories and transitions we briefly outlined above).

As the life-course perspective emerged, so did a number of 'core principles' (Elder, 1998) of the perspective. While life-course criminology tends to subscribe to these principles, they may be more usefully thought of as guidelines. Principles suggest firm and static rules for how research should be done and what features should be considered. In practice, they are more often used as guidelines, or, in a sense, tricks – they are useful ways of thinking about the unfolding of human lives, and also suggest what we as researchers should be sensitive and attentive to as we go about our research:

1. The historical nature of time and place.
2. The timing of human lives.
3. The linking of human lives.
4. Human agency.

These four guidelines are interconnected, but for the purpose of clarity we go through them separately below.

1. The Historical Nature of Time and Place

Everything has to occur somewhere, and sometime, and where and when something happens is important for understanding that very 'something'. Human development is dependent on social and historical conditions and processes: where and when we live impacts on *how* we live and *how* our life course unfolds (Elder, 1998). Some social conditions change very rapidly, such

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as the Great Depression of the 1930s, the outbreak of World War II in Europe in 1939, or the fall of Communism in the late 1980s. Those changes rapidly and severely rearrange social life. Consider, as an example, education and work during and after the Great Depression. During the Depression, many people went through the transition from being a student to a worker, only to find that there was little meaningful employment to be found. As a result, many experienced negative employment patterns through adulthood (Elder, 1974). For those who were slightly younger and graduated only some 10 or 15 years later, however, things looked very different: World War II was over and the economy was expanding in an extremely rapid, drastic way and opportunities to find work were everywhere to be found. Compared to the older group of graduates, this younger group had drastically different trajectories.

Now, these are very drastic and dramatic social changes (for a Swedish example, see Nilsson et al., 2013). Economic recessions and world-altering wars are extremely rare events. These days, in our part of the world, most of the time social life changes much more slowly and gradually, but the general guideline of being sensitive to time and place is still as valid. For example, take the early 21st century's capacity to heavily reduce the amount of manual labor that is needed for a society's economy to function. Today, most occupations require advanced education and vast technical skills. This means that today's young people need to delay their entry into employment to a greater extent than those who were young 40 years ago, because they need to pursue higher education. This has consequences for the everyday life of people, but also for their long-term trajectories when it comes to education, employment, and – perhaps – family formation. It is also likely that the situation might differ between, say, metropolitan and rural areas. If we compare the trajectories of those born in the countryside in the 1960s to those born in big cities during the 1990s, the important transitions are likely to differ, which supports the overall guideline: where and when you live matters. To give an additional example, think about the phenomenon criminologists often term opportunity structure. Both the extent and nature of criminal activity such as theft is affected by the amount of possible objects to steal, and in Western societies during the 20th century, the opportunity structure for crimes of theft increased dramatically (von Hofer, 2008). Today, as far as we know, theft decreases in many parts of the Western world, while crimes related to the Internet are increasing rapidly (perhaps a consequence of what Cohen and Felson [1979] called a change in routine activities).

Similarly, consider the impact of changes in social control, especially social control of the young. Here we have moved from a society characterized by vertical (i.e. superior adults control the young) to horizontal control, where social control is primarily exercised among equal peers, which influence the character of crime and people's criminal trajectories (Sarnecki, 2005).