CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Every time she comes she always gets mad at my grandma … like she choked my grandma before she went to jail. I'm always like, I don't want to hit her and stuff, but like I have a hammer and I sit it right next to my bed. 'Cause I know if my mom comes in messed up on drugs, she gets real violent … and she always comes up and rips the phone jack out of the wall and stuff. I just have to be ready …

[Jason][1]

We first met Jason's mother Stacy in 1982, when she was a teenager herself, in connection with a study of incarcerated juvenile offenders. We were interested in why and how girls become involved in delinquent behaviors and had been interviewing the total population of Ohio's state institution for girls and a comparable sample of delinquent boys. Over the years, we thought often about these teens, wondering what had become of that very delinquent "class of '82" (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Pugh, 1985). In 1995, we began the lengthy process of trying to locate the original study participants, who were then an average of 29 years of age and living in various locations throughout Ohio and, in some instances, the surrounding states. We were eventually able to locate and re-interview over 85 percent of the original respondents.[2] Those interviews revealed that many of these women and men had, like Stacy, experienced continued difficulties and problems with the law (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002).

[1] We have changed the names of all respondents quoted or described and any other individuals referenced in their life history accounts. We also typically changed place names, such as high schools or locations of employment, in order to assure the anonymity of the respondents.

[2] Waves 1 and 2 were funded by the National Institute of Mental Health grants.

Although the Ohio Life-Course Study (OLS) follow-up had focused on these young women and men as they made the transition to adulthood, it was impossible to ignore their children – as they crawled on the living room furniture, traipsed in and out of apartments, or appeared as important subjects within the respondents' own life histories ("After they took Kristen away…").

In 2003, recognizing that the majority of the children born to our sample members were entering the adolescent period themselves, we once again set out to find these families, but this time, the interviews we conducted focused primarily on issues of parenting and child well-being.[3] In addition to the original members of the sample, we were also able to interview at least one, and sometimes all, of their adolescent children. The book focuses on the lives of 125 families and includes analyses based on interviews with 349 parents, children, and other caregivers. The in-depth life-history narratives of these adults and children are central to the story we will tell; yet, analyses based on structured data collected over a 20-year period add to our understanding of effects on children of the parents' experiences and the nature of continuities observed across the two generations.

What is growing up like for a young boy like Jason, whose mother has been arrested over seventy times? How does it feel to see your father only on infrequent visits when he is out of prison? How does a parent's life of crime and drug abuse affect your own chances of surviving adolescence relatively unscathed and the likelihood that you will avoid getting into serious trouble yourself? And are children of female and male offenders similarly affected by their parents' problem lifestyles? This book addresses these questions, providing an up-close examination of family life as experienced by a cohort of young people, all of whom have at least one and sometimes both parents with a significant early history of delinquent involvement. In the following chapters we (i) make tangible the realities of growing up in these families; (ii) document how this cohort of children has fared – academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally; and (iii) identify specific social mechanisms connected to intergenerational continuities in substance abuse, crime, and violent behavior.

[3] The follow-up of the OLS parents and their children (wave 3) was funded by the W.T. Grant Foundation.

We also examine success stories, focusing on young people who have managed, against considerable odds, to avoid a replay of their parents' problem childhoods.

The scholarly literature contains surprisingly few studies of the so-called intergenerational transmission process. Numerous studies have documented that delinquent youth are more likely than other adolescents to report having a parent with a criminal history, and some longitudinal studies have demonstrated significant associations between parental behaviors, such as aggression, and similar behaviors in their children. However, most studies have theorized about parenting practices or genetic similarities as underpinnings of these rates of "concordance." Fewer studies have focused on the social-learning processes that may foster such behavioral continuities. While we recognize that both biological predisposition and parenting style play a significant role, the focus of this investigation is on the social dimensions of the phenomenon. Our objective is to explore in more detail direct and subtle learning influences within the family context. However, we add to the classic treatments of learning mechanisms by more fully embracing a social psychology of social learning processes. Our view is that a comprehensive understanding of intergenerational influences requires attention to the child's emotional reactions to parents' actions, as well as to the ways in which parents may transmit "definitions favorable to the violation of law" (Sutherland, 1947). Consistent with our social-psychological approach, we argue that it is critical to consider identity-formation processes, since the child's emerging identity gives added coherence to developing attitudes and emotions, eventually fostering either similarities with one's parents or a break with family traditions.

We hope this book will be useful to students and researchers who focus on the causes of crime, as well as to family scholars and readers who are interested in gender. The findings from this in-depth portrait also have policy implications. For example, a number of practitioners are understandably concerned about the significant challenges faced by the children of incarcerated parents. Yet we gain substantially from a broader life-course treatment and from giving additional attention to the child's own point of view. Thus, while prior work has focused heavily on negative effects of separation while the parent is

incarcerated, the children we interviewed frequently did not narrate this as the most traumatic of their experiences. Jason's narrative, quoted at the outset, provides an initial illustration of a more complicated perspective on incarceration's effects.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Chapter Two situates the study within several research traditions. We focus first on what is known about the intergenerational transmission of crime and related problem outcomes. Because offenders' own adult circumstances undoubtedly influence the character of their children's experiences, we also consider research that has offered a life-course perspective on criminal involvement. One of the unique features of this sample is that over 50 percent of the respondents we followed in this longitudinal investigation are women; thus it is also important to consider prior research on women and crime that explores the uniquely gendered aspects of these life-course processes. Finally, our review encompasses studies and programmatic efforts that have focused specifically on the children of incarcerated parents. We conclude the chapter with a short overview of our social-psychological theoretical perspective, developing a symbolic interactionist approach to intergenerational transmission in more detail in Chapter Six.

Chapter Three, on methods, describes our research odyssey as we attempted to locate these highly disadvantaged respondents and introduces the reader to these adults and their children. Our goal is not only to describe their general characteristics (i.e., gender, age, race/ethnicity) but also to depict the marginal living circumstances in which we found many of them. This general background is useful for understanding the adult and child outcomes we elaborate on in subsequent chapters. In addition, we outline our interview procedures at each of the three interview waves and describe related study samples we relied upon for purposes of comparison.

Chapter Four develops a more complete portrait of the OLS respondents as adults, based on both quantitative and qualitative data. It is impossible to gain an adequate appreciation of the character of the children's lives (and, in turn, the mechanisms linking

the two generations) without considering the realities of the parents' own backgrounds and current circumstances. The chapter presents aggregate data about the parents' crime, violence, and drug-abuse patterns, but it also highlights significant variations within this sample. For example, the sample contains women and men whose lives are characterized by a pattern of what appears to be complete "desistance" from crime, those whose difficulties are more intermittent, and others who have evidenced a pattern of sustained involvement in criminal behavior. This portrait of the parents also includes attention to their lives beyond the levels of criminal activity. Thus, we also investigate marriage and childbearing experiences, levels of educational and occupational attainment, and the emotional well-being of these original respondents. Finally, we focus on the parenting experiences of these women and men. We compare our results to those obtained in connection with a related adult follow-up study and another survey of over 1,000 randomly selected parents of adolescents.

Chapter Five explores the key question: on average, how have these children turned out? Providing an adequate answer requires multiple comparisons and considering effects, or "legacies," that go beyond the child's own involvement in delinquency or lack thereof. We present basic data on the instabilities and victimization experiences that characterize many OLS children's lives, and we subsequently document how these children compare to a random sample of youths on a range of outcomes, including delinquency, substance use, violence, contacts with the law, academic achievement, difficulties in school, involvement with delinquent peers, sexual risk-taking, and psychological distress.[4] As in Chapter Four, we develop a portrait that depicts the realities of the children's circumstances, but from the child's vantage point. Our study design also permits a unique set of comparisons between these children's reports and those provided by the parents when they were teens. The final section of Chapter Five examines variations in delinquency within the sample of OLS youth and the parent and child factors that are associated

[4] The study of Toledo teens that we use for comparison purposes, the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS), was funded by The Eunice Kennedy Schriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

with these variations in victimization experiences and self-reports of delinquency involvement.

While Chapter Five is largely concerned with the extent of intergenerational transmission, Chapter Six explores how and why it occurs. In this chapter, we rely primarily on the qualitative data. We move beyond prior work on specific parenting practices by developing a revised social learning perspective on the transmission process. This symbolic interactionist perspective highlights not only what is learned, and how this learning occurs, but also incorporates the child's reactions to what is taking place within the confines of these families. In short, our overarching goal is to illuminate unique aspects of navigating childhood with antisocial, violent, and/or drug-involved parents, as contrasted with a more generic focus on parenting styles or levels of attachment to parents.

Chapter Seven follows from the previous discussion of mechanisms, but focuses specific attention on the more successful youths within this sample. We discuss prosocial influences found in prior research on resilient youth (individual and social factors that are generally recognized as protective), but again our primary interest is in adaptations that are relatively specific to success in navigating this type of risk environment. As in our discussion of cross-generational continuities, we highlight the role of identity formation processes in shaping these more favorable outcomes. As will be evident from Chapters Five and Six, it is important to measure success in relative terms, as very few of these children have excelled using traditional markers such as high levels of academic performance. Thus, we also view success as simply managing to avoid major legal contacts, in addition to the specific adaptations unique to this type of sample, such as taking on the parent/caregiver role within the family.

Chapter Eight discusses the importance of our major findings for theories of intergenerational transmission, and then concludes by exploring policy implications for future work with offenders and for programs aimed at positively influencing the well-being of their children.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

While it is intuitive to expect that parental criminality will have an influence on children's behavior (the apple doesn't fall far from the tree), surprisingly little research has focused directly on the intergenerational transmission *process* itself. Most of what we know about patterns of crime over two generations is based on retrospective studies: researchers have shown that delinquents are more likely than conforming youth to have a parent with a criminal history. Parental criminality is thus a well-accepted *risk factor* for juvenile delinquency. Follow-up studies pose a related but less often researched question: when we track juvenile delinquents through their transition to adulthood, what happens to their children? *Prospective studies* of this type are not as plentiful, if only for practical reasons, that is, it takes a long time for the young people originally studied to mature, find romantic partners, have children, and then for their children to reach an age when their own delinquent acts begin to occur.

Several recent longitudinal studies have been underway long enough to incorporate assessments of the behaviors of the children of the original respondents, and both the classic risk-factor studies and these more contemporary prospective investigations provide a useful background for the current study. While both kinds of studies have documented links between the behavior of one generation and of the next, we conclude from our review of the literature that our understanding of the mechanisms underlying intergenerational transmission is nevertheless markedly less than complete. It is also important to consider the theory and research from the *life-course*

tradition, as our intergenerational study also fits under this broader conceptual umbrella. Although life-course investigations usually focus on the patterning of crime and other experiences for a given set of focal respondents rather than their children, what we know about juvenile delinquents' lives as adults is clearly key to an understanding of the family environments their children must navigate. The basic emphases of the life-course approach have also influenced our theoretical emphasis, particularly since, in addition to continuity, this perspective underscores the importance of attending to the dynamic processes associated with change.

Many criminologists working in the intergenerational and life-course traditions have focused their research on male respondents. This stems from the reality that many of the classic longitudinal investigations started with samples of boys, which was consistent with boys' generally higher rates of delinquency. Yet every jurisdiction includes a small number of girls whose behavior is deemed sufficiently serious to warrant official intervention, and even studies based on general population samples document variations in the delinquency levels of girls and boys. Thus, while long-term follow-ups of "problem" girls are uncommon, an expanding literature on issues of *gender and crime* adds further background to the current study.

Finally, we review the expanding literature on *children of incarcerated parents*. This literature overlaps considerably with our interests here and forges the link to policies and programs designed to assist children with backgrounds similar to those of the OLS children. We conclude this review and critique of prior work by introducing the key dimensions of our own theoretical perspective.

PARENTAL CRIMINALITY AS A RISK FACTOR

An influential British study, the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, has contributed to the literature as both a "risk-factor" study and as a prospective longitudinal investigation (for an excellent review of major results of this 40-year study, see Farrington, 2003). The Cambridge study, which focused on 411 young boys from south London, is distinguished by interviews with and other data on these respondents that spans the ages of 8 to 46. For our purposes,

a singular asset of the study was the ability to track the conviction histories of parents, siblings, and other relatives through a centralized registry of official arrests and incarcerations. Early in the study, Farrington and colleagues found that the delinquent youths in their sample were significantly more likely to have a convicted parent. While convictions of the father especially, appeared to raise the odds of the child's delinquent involvement, having delinquent older siblings, mothers, and even younger siblings was also associated with a greater likelihood of delinquency. The authors have concluded that "having a convicted parent (mother or father) was consistently among the best childhood predictors of juvenile offending and antisocial behavior in the study males" (Smith & Farrington, 2004: 230–231). Since the investigators tracked the young men over a considerable period of time, they were also able to document that having a convicted parent was significantly associated with antisocial behavior at ages 18 and 32, as well as a pattern of chronic offending. Related to this basic finding, they observed that "the concentration of offending in a small number of families was remarkable in the Cambridge Study. Less than 6% of the families were responsible for half of all convictions of all family members (fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters) of all 400 families" (2003: 150).

While the Cambridge study thus highlighted parental criminality as a strong risk factor in child delinquency, the authors did not emphasize social-learning processes, arguing instead that parenting processes were key to an understanding of such cross-generational links. As evidence, Farrington (2003) pointed out that it was actually quite rare for fathers and sons to co-offend with one another and, in addition, that they had uncovered "no evidence convicted fathers directly encouraged their sons to commit crimes or taught them criminal techniques. On the contrary, convicted fathers condemned their sons' offending" (p. 150). Farrington also noted that the risk of parental criminality was not influenced by *when* the fathers offended (i.e., the conviction could have occurred prior to the birth of the child or while the child was very young). In short, the authors concluded that there was "no direct behavioral influence of criminal fathers on delinquent sons" (p. 150). Instead, their data uncovered much evidence of "maladaptive parenting" including "poor supervision,

inconsistent discipline, parental conflict, and lack of affection and support" (Smith & Farrington, 2004: 232).

Studies conducted in the United States accord with the results of the Cambridge study. Evidence of parental criminality typically emerges in these studies as a strong correlate of the child's delinquency involvement. This appears to be the case whether the research designs focus on general youth samples or include incarcerated or other high-risk youth, often viewed in comparison to a control sample (Glueck & Glueck, 1950; McCord, 1977). It is also important to note that unlike the Cambridge study, some of the U.S. samples reflect greater diversity. For example, Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber (1986), relying on data from the Pittsburgh Youth Study, showed that the association is similarly strong for African American and for white males in their sample group. In addition, the association appears to be robust across different historical eras (see, e.g., Burt, 1925; Healy & Bronner, 1926).

PROSPECTIVE STUDIES

If one were to walk into a juvenile institution and query the young people incarcerated there about their family backgrounds, it is likely that many reports of parental criminality would be recorded (along with evidence of broken homes, lax supervision, and child abuse). However, it is a different matter to follow up these youths as they have made the transition to adulthood and to observe the extent of cross-generational continuity reflected in the delinquent behavior of their children. While the number of truly prospective studies of parental criminality is not large, such studies, in general, document significant but less dramatic effects than have been revealed through the risk-factor or retrospective approach. A number of studies have focused broadly on aggression rather than on delinquency/criminality, but these studies are nevertheless generally relevant and consistent in their findings. For example, in a study of 600 respondents who were drawn from Columbia County, New York, and followed prospectively, Huesmann et al. (1984) found that the respondents' aggression at age eight predicted later reports of aggression on the part of their children. Farrington also found continuity in bullying behaviors over