

Cambridge University Press

0521481120 - Lifelines and Risks: Pathways of Youth in Our Time

Robert B. Cairns and Beverley D. Cairns

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ONE

---

*Lives in progress*

I don't have a best friend around here except for one; that's the teacher.

Jane (10 years old)

Just trying to get through one day at a time, and never – and I know there's gonna be worries. I know you've got to have pain in order to have happiness. I realize that. You've got to have pain sometimes in your life, but for the last couple of years, that's all it's been. There hasn't been very much happiness.

Jane (20 years old)

Developmental pathways evolve in time and place, so it is necessary to describe anew for each generation the trajectories of individual lives. As Jane's reports suggest, there can be lawfulness of individual development in the midst of change. Webs of influence operate across time to constrain an individual's actions, coerce choices, and create novel opportunities. Certain lifecourse patterns have enough in common to be described as developmental pathways. This book provides an account of pathways of youth in our time, the generation that came of age in the 1990s.

Common-sense beliefs are difficult to examine objectively. Attempts to tackle critically the problems of living are further handicapped by the limited methods of the science. To clarify the nature of developmental pathways in our time, we will rely upon four separate though related sources of information. Each source has its own distinctive strengths and weaknesses, and they provide a compelling story if analyzed together. And compelling it must be, since some of the conclusions we reach on pathways and how they can be modified defy both common sense and the assumptions of contemporary psychology.

Cambridge University Press

0521481120 - *Lifelines and Risks: Pathways of Youth in Our Time*

Robert B. Cairns and Beverley D. Cairns

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 *Lifelines and Risks: Pathways of Youth in Our Time*

Our primary information source is firsthand observations of 695 representative children as they became teenagers and parents themselves. Over the past fourteen years, we have seen young people like Jane through the lens provided by their schools and through the eyes of their peers, their spouses, their parents, and their grandparents. Even more important, they shared with us their thoughts of themselves as they were growing up. We became privy to their friendships, their failures, their successes, their marriages, their loves, their children, their imprisonments; in short, to the events and feelings they experienced in the course of living. Virtually all of them continued to be involved with this study through the end of high school and into their own adulthood and parenthood. Much of this volume is about lives in progress.

The second source of information is the work of colleagues who have undertaken similar investigations in other places during this time. Several longitudinal studies in Europe and North America have recently matured and these results have revolutionary implications for understanding the pathways of living.<sup>1</sup> Happily, this area of science tends to promote cooperation rather than competition. The problems are broad enough to stimulate collaboration among researchers, whose goal is to advance understanding of youth.

Over the past decade, we visited the laboratories of colleagues throughout North America and Europe to talk about their findings, discussed the problems they encountered, and studied their data in order to understand why their findings agreed or disagreed with ours. Because of the different values and standards of societies and the rate of change in these standards, researchers do not have to be embarrassed by differences that emerge across countries, regions, and time. The challenge is to understand what the differences mean.

The third information source involved studies conducted with colleagues and students. The work has been designed to replicate and extend specific findings or resolve particular discrepancies among investigations. No single study can do the job of solving the complexity of human development. The infrequency of some events demands that the researcher look to special samples in order to zoom in on particular relationships and outcomes.

Toward this end, we have been concerned with special problems encountered by youths who grow up in the 1990s in the inner cities of the United States, where there are escalating rates of homicide, violence, and substance abuse. We made observations, examining the schools and the emergency department of a major trauma center. We also became involved in a state-wide study in North Carolina of 1,300 youths who had been identified as extremely assaultive and violent. To check on the generality of the observations, we collaborated in investigations in

Cambridge University Press

0521481120 - Lifelines and Risks: Pathways of Youth in Our Time

Robert B. Cairns and Beverley D. Cairns

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Hong Kong and Taiwan with students and colleagues. Such cross-national information helps to determine which relationships and outcomes are limited to the United States, and which may be more broadly applicable.

The fourth empirical leg upon which this book rests is actuarial and epidemiological. We consulted national and international reports on education, health, and crime to clarify what “in our time” means in cold numbers. For example, the Statistical Abstract of Sweden for 1990 indicates that the majority of live births are to unmarried women. This finding is consistent with the 1990 US Census Bureau that most African-American infants are born to single mothers. A similar trend is apparent in white mothers. Such national data help account for the fact that most of the children born to teenage participants in our longitudinal sample lived with only one natural parent by the second year of life. The national and international statistics suggested that our young people were simply representative of a major shift in western societies, their norms, and expectations.

In addition, a collaborative investigation with social historian Stephen Schlossman took us into the juvenile court records of Los Angeles County to track the trends of problem behaviors of girls from the turn of the 20th century (Schlossman & Cairns, 1993). Schlossman’s work indicated that sexual promiscuity and incorrigibility were the major crimes for girls from 1910 through 1950. But the patterns of crime for juvenile females in the second half of the century are not unlike that of juvenile males, including arrests for assaults.

More generally, records of health, families, and education help plot the nature of the changing landscape in which development occurs. The obligation of research is to understand social change rather than lament it. But records are themselves fallible and their accuracy may depend upon how the characteristics are measured as much as when they are measured.

## The perspective of developmental science

The melding of these perspectives, the direct observation of individual lives, the generalizations from contemporary longitudinal investigations, the findings of modern epidemiology, and the influence of historical changes on people and society, seems necessary to tell the story of human development. Neither part is sufficient in itself. But the task of weaving together these perspectives on development has been hampered by the methods of the component disciplines. These limitations of the methods and analyses of behavioral science have been

Cambridge University Press

0521481120 - Lifelines and Risks: Pathways of Youth in Our Time

Robert B. Cairns and Beverley D. Cairns

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Lifelines and Risks: Pathways of Youth in Our Time*

infrequently discussed by those of us who employ them, but are real nonetheless.

A shortcoming of analytic procedures typically employed in modern psychology and sociology is that they usually begin with a reduction of the causes of behavior into component parts, either by experiments or by statistical models. For example, one aim of developmental psychology has been to pinpoint the causes of a given behavior, say, aggression. Is it regulated by early family experiences, genes, hormones, peer influences, deficient social perception, or association with deviant peer groups? Studies designed to address this issue indicate that all of the above variables seem to have some identifiable contributions. However, there is little information on how these factors are woven together in individual lives.

The problem is that behavior patterns like aggression represent a fusion of factors; they are determined by multiple “causes” acting together. It has become increasingly clear that any well-designed study will identify several factors that have an influence. Virtually any sane expectation will be “statistically significant” if the study is competent. The problem remains to determine how these factors are organized and weighted during the course of individual development. The task of intervention must ultimately deal with the acts of individuals, not disembodied variables.

Developmental science refers to a new synthesis across disciplines that has evolved to guide research in behavior and biology.<sup>2</sup> It brings attention to the holistic nature of behavioral study, to the role of time and timing in understanding individual functioning, to the special properties of behavior in biological adaptation, and to the correlated nature of events without and within the person. According to this perspective, the puzzles of human development will remain unsolved so long as our procedures treat problems of adaptation as if they were separate entities, unrelated to other features of each person’s life.

For instance, it has become increasingly obvious that the problems of youth tend to co-occur and that the focus must be as much upon the individual in context as upon variables, such as school dropout and teenage parenthood. We began our longitudinal focus on individual lives because our view of development demanded that we study each life as a whole. It also required that we adopt procedures that would make such an integrated view of behavior possible.

There has been a growing recognition in the physical and biological sciences that complex systems have their own laws (Gleick, 1987; Kadanoff, 1986; Lorenz, 1983). These laws may be as simple and fundamental as other laws of nature. This proposition is particularly important when the special properties of behavior are considered, because maturational, biological, and experiential factors are

Cambridge University Press

0521481120 - Lifelines and Risks: Pathways of Youth in Our Time

Robert B. Cairns and Beverley D. Cairns

Excerpt

[More information](#)

inseparably fused in development. Our task in this book is to identify the lawfulness that exists in the seeming chaos of youthful development.

## The youth

One of the paradoxes in the longitudinal study of human behavior is that investigators and participants travel together through space and time. Any serious attempt to understand the trajectory of development and change demands as large a slice of the lives of the investigators as the lives of the participants.

As a group, the 695 children and their families that we observed in conjunction with this volume represent a broad slice of American life.<sup>3</sup> They include the privileged and the poor, female and male, African American and white in about the same proportion that one would expect to find nationally.<sup>4</sup> Over the past decade, they have dispersed throughout the United States and abroad. Some were in the thick of the Iraqi war, some were in college or university, some were working or looking for jobs, and some were staying home to take care of their babies. A small number are in prison or other institutional care, and a few have died. By systematically tracking them each year, we have managed to keep contact with all of them, and have recently interviewed virtually all of the original group who are still living.

There were some persons who, as children, were judged to be headed for trouble in their adult lives. Other children by virtue of their own competence, personal dispositions, and community and family status seemed destined to have a smooth road ahead, or so it appeared until new problems emerged for them in youth. The problems took many forms, sometimes family breakup (by separation, divorce, accident, or homicide), running away, dropping out of school or being thrown out, being ostracized by peers or former friends, becoming a parent while still a child, or substance addiction. The total information set has permitted us to take a cross-sectional look into these lives at several points in time and to compare the statistical snapshots that they provided with broader national and international pictures of youth. It has also permitted us to track the emergence of problems and subsequent solutions as they occurred in these lives.

Much of this volume will cover phenomena and outcomes that seem as if the story could end no other way. That would be a mistake, however, because *most* young lives today have twists that are as subtle and complex as the roles described by Dostoevski in *The Adolescent*. While one of our conclusions is that we are much closer to explaining these phenomena than has been recognized, we have had plenty of

Cambridge University Press

0521481120 - Lifelines and Risks: Pathways of Youth in Our Time

Robert B. Cairns and Beverley D. Cairns

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Lifelines and Risks: Pathways of Youth in Our Time*

opportunity to be surprised. It is from errors in expectations that we can learn the most.

### Looking ahead

Our aim is to describe a new way to understand children and youths who are at risk from serious problems of living. Toward this end, we bring together information about developmental changes in the person with developmental changes in the social and physical context in which she or he lives. This simultaneous focus on person and context is something we do every day. We accomplish the feat automatically and unconsciously in creating views of ourselves and of others. But the methods of the social and behavioral science have traditionally led in a different direction. The dominant research strategy has been to remove the person from the environment, then dissect each into separate variables and elements. The problem of how to recombine the elements to represent adaptive, resilient, living people continues to beguile. The Humpty-Dumpty problem is at the core of modern behavioral study.

Our solution has emerged because of new trends within modern developmental science. Accordingly, the study of individual development is a holistic science. That means that its study requires an integration of methods ordinarily assigned to the separate disciplines of sociology, psychology, epidemiology, social ecology, and psychiatry. The work has taken longer than we anticipated because the science is still in its formative stage. Where appropriate methods and analyses were unavailable, we had to revise existing techniques or invent new ones. One of the advantages of this new orientation is that the facts on the development of people should be clear enough to be accessible to anyone who is interested. Looking ahead, we have three objectives in preparing this book.

First, we describe some of the major behavioral and psychological risks of youth and what are the lifelines. By risks, we mean the events or characteristics that have the potential to produce serious and permanent impairment of psychological and emotional development, or injury or death. The specific risks that we will consider include violence, deviant social groups, school dropout, suicide, threats to self-esteem, and substance abuse. By lifelines, we mean the events or opportunities which potentially lead to changes from pathways associated with deviant or destructive outcomes. The lifelines may emerge externally as people (parents, friends, teachers, spouses, lovers, relatives, or children) and opportunities, or internally through shifts in values, beliefs, and biophysical status.

Cambridge University Press

0521481120 - Lifelines and Risks: Pathways of Youth in Our Time

Robert B. Cairns and Beverley D. Cairns

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

*Lives in progress*

7

Second, we describe the “hidden competence” that exists in virtually all children and adolescents.<sup>5</sup> Certain resilient teenagers succeed, despite the odds against them. But exceptional cases should not be divorced from an understanding of the normal trajectories of development, lest exceptions be taken for the rule.

Third, we will outline how normal development is achieved in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Accordingly, the “biological lottery” of adolescence will be described, along with the adaptations in early adulthood.<sup>6</sup> In the following chapters, we evaluate the role and functions of self-esteem, the freedom of youth, the buffers of early experience, aggressive and violent behaviors, and the capacity for resilience.

Cambridge University Press

0521481120 - Lifelines and Risks: Pathways of Youth in Our Time

Robert B. Cairns and Beverley D. Cairns

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## TWO

---

*Taking a long look*

How did you find me here? I just can't believe you found me. I know you said you would, but I didn't really believe you. Will you find me again next year . . . promise?

Melissa (5th grade)

Melissa was crying when she said it. She had just lived through a miserable, wretched year that seemed more like 19th century Dickensian England than near-21st century America. She and her brother had been abandoned by their mother, placed in a foster home, removed from it to live with their mother again, then rejected again by the mother after three weeks, placed in an emergency home care center for sixty days, then in an orphanage. In the course of these moves, she had been assigned a different surname from the one we knew her by in the 7th grade, and moved to a different part of the country. She was honestly puzzled as to how we had located her. We found her over the next several years as well. By the time she was in the 10th grade, her life had changed for the better, due in large measure to the acceptance and support of her original foster parents who had re-entered her life.

Descriptions of procedures are usually presented in fine print for the eyes of experts, as if the methods were too esoteric for nonscientific readers. That is an illusion. In point of fact, the techniques adopted in research are the heart and soul of the science. If the measures are weak, misapplied, or inappropriately coded, the statistical analyses will necessarily yield trivia. Even behavioral observations are never "mere records". Filters exist at several levels, from the lenses of the observers to the syntax of the recording scheme and the statistical transformation of the data.

We will also report how the longitudinal investigations are conducted. This will include an examination of the "dirty bathwater"



Cambridge University Press

0521481120 - Lifelines and Risks: Pathways of Youth in Our Time

Robert B. Cairns and Beverley D. Cairns

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Taking a long look*

9

of research, including the stuff that gets tossed out before a cleaned-up version is published. To understand what the findings mean, raw accounts of how the research is done can be more important than exhaustive statistical data analyses.

## On longitudinal design

Longitudinal research is a design of choice from the developmental perspective. In behavioral investigation, *longitudinal* refers to a temporal dimension rather than a spatial one. It designates investigations where persons have repeatedly participated in measurements over a significant span of their lifetimes. Textbooks usually contrast longitudinal research designs with *cross-sectional* designs (where people of different ages are seen on one occasion in order to make comparisons of various age groups). It can also be contrasted with *retrospective* designs, where investigators ask subjects to recall earlier experiences and thereby reconstruct the temporal dimension through the mind of the subject. Or it can be compared with *social history analyses*, where information about a person recovered from some institution (e.g. school, hospital clinic, police, factory) is linked to that individual's current functioning. Compared to these alternatives, longitudinal designs are inevitably more expensive for participants and researchers alike in terms of time, cost, and commitment.

But what is the difference between studying groups of people at 10, 15, and 20 years of age and, say, studying a group of persons for each of the 10 years between 10 and 20 years of age? In both cases, one would have reliable information on the average changes that occurred over the ten-year period. The advantages of cross-sectional procedures seem obvious in terms of economy and lack of measure contamination by repeated assessment. However, age-related averages are only part of the story of development. Jacob Wohlwill (1973) and William Kessen (1960) have observed that longitudinal investigations are required to go beyond age-related descriptions and clarify individual processes of development and change. Longitudinal studies are necessary to identify individual difference predictability from one age to another, their stability over time, and the rates and types of individual change. Perhaps most important for our consideration of lifelines and risks, longitudinal information is required to identify the periods of greatest risk and phases most susceptible to change in youth. Moreover, longitudinal information is required to identify the permanence or instability of interventions introduced.

Cambridge University Press

0521481120 - *Lifelines and Risks: Pathways of Youth in Our Time*

Robert B. Cairns and Beverley D. Cairns

Excerpt

[More information](#)

One alternative to the laborious study of people over time is simply to ask individuals to recall critical events in their past. After all, each of us should know what happened in the past as well as anyone. This use of the subject as an autobiographer seems not only efficient, it permits people to participate actively as expert witnesses on their own lives. While this use of self-reports seems attractive and inexpensive, the evidence indicates that personal retrospection provides an extremely shaky foundation for science. In this regard, modern studies of human memory provide robust evidence on the fallibility of personal recall (Ross, 1989). Memories of personal life experiences tend to be selective, projective, and inventive. Memories represent in varying measure an amalgam of the person's present concerns and his/her constructions of the past. Typically they provide more information about present circumstances and attitudes than those of the past.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier hospital, school, work, or arrest records provide a way to transcend the limitations of personal recall. But objectivity in scientific measurement must also be concerned with the use of official records that were collected for a different purpose. Given the burden for service, for example, emergency department physicians must sometimes choose between careful paperwork and careful operations. Small wonder that backward analyses of historical records sometimes yield information as inaccurate and incomplete as personal recall, but the shortcomings arise for different reasons.

Longitudinal designs are not without pitfalls. Some of them have been summarized in Kessen (1960) and more recently in Magnusson and Bergman (1990a) and Loeber and LeBlanc (1990). The problems range from the issue of data quality and confounding to the problems of biased sampling in selective attrition. There is also the time and age factor. Usually the effective lifetime of the investigation extends beyond the effective lifetime of the investigator. People who had the foresight to initiate the project and design the measures are often not the ones to complete the major analyses and interpretations. Then there is the possible problem of the people being studied getting to know the assessments and researchers too well. This problem can show up in such ways as anticipating questions and tests, to covering up critical information because it is embarrassing. When there is slippage between the aims, the measures, and the secondary analyses and interpretations, errors may increase.

There is the special problem of mistaking temporal sequence with causality. This is the error of assuming that events which occur before a given outcome may be safely interpreted as causes of the outcome. That is an illusion.

Subject loss and lack of cooperation loom as a special problem in longitudinal studies of aggressive and antisocial behavior. People who