

C H A P T E R O N E

School's Potential as a Location for Delinquency Prevention

The salutary effects of school experiences are ordinarily taken very much for granted by most parents, teachers, principals, and others. . . . In the case of the . . . delinquent sample of school children who were manifesting aggressive-delinquent behavior, however, much of the school data point to a multiplicity of unwholesome, unsatisfactory, unhappy, and frustrating situations in which the delinquents were enmeshed. These data suggest that the school may be full of predisposing stimuli which elicit aggression responses on the part of the maladjusted child. (Kvaraceus, 1945, p. 135)

One of the situations in which children of all social levels come together and compete for status in terms of the same set of middle-class criteria and in which working-class children are most likely to be found wanting is in the school. . . . To the degree to which [a boy] values middle-class status, either because he values the good opinion of middle-class persons or because he has to some degree internalized middle-class standards himself, he faces a problem of adjustment and is in the market for a "solution." The delinquent subculture, we suggest, is a way of dealing with the problems of adjustment we have just described. (Cohen, 1955, pp. 112, 119, 121)

If the adolescent male fails in school or drops out, or for other reasons finds school roles unsatisfactory or unplayable, he finds himself in an institutional void. . . . A high incidence of delinquent behavior indicates a breakdown of the machinery through which the needs of different segments of the population are met through conventional institutions. (Shaw and McKay, 1969, pp. 384, 385)

Schools may prevent delinquency if they successfully socialize people to fit into the society, yet the schools cause delinquency in those who reject that socialization. If the economy and society demand that most people engage in alienating labor and exhibit obedience to authority, the schools will try

to prepare them for such a life. Those students who refuse the precast mold and react with anger, resistance, and rebellion become “delinquents.” The very refusal to fit *is* delinquency. (Liazos, 1978, p. 368)

Even without parental support, in our view, the net effect of the school must be positive. As a result of the school experience, some students learn better to appreciate the advantages and opportunities associated with self-control and are thus effectively socialized regardless of their familial experiences. One of the major school correlates of crime has always been the mundane homework. Those who do it are by definition thinking about tomorrow. Those who do not do it have a shorter time frame. One mark of socialization is considering the consequences of today’s activities for tomorrow. Homework thus indexes and perhaps contributes to socialization. (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990, p. 106)

MOST CRIMINOLOGICAL perspectives on the causes of delinquency have implicated schools. But criminologists disagree about the mechanism through which schools influence delinquency and even the direction of the influence.

Strain theorists (exemplified by Cohen, 1955) claim that delinquent behavior is a natural reaction to a system that judges all school students according to the same “middle-class measuring rod,” despite differences in students’ opportunities to achieve these standards. Youths whose behavior does not conform with teachers’ expectations feel the strain associated with failure and rebel against middle-class norms. Schools are therefore an important part of the social mechanism that creates delinquent behavior. Reorganizing schools to increase the ratio of success to failure experiences and exposure to accepting adults (Gold, 1978) should reduce delinquency.

Marxist theorists (exemplified by Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Greenberg, 1977; and Liazos, 1978) see no possible solutions *in school* to the delinquency problem as long as schools must prepare students for alienated work. Schools in capitalist societies merely socialize youths for the lives and jobs to which they are destined. Schools succeed in teaching most youths from middle- and working-class backgrounds to be obedient and disciplined and to accept their fates. Those youths who refuse the “precast mold” become delinquents. The roots of crime are found in the economic system that determines the function of schools. A socialist society in which students prepare for meaningful work would experience less delinquency.

Social disorganization theorists (exemplified by Shaw and McKay, 1969) also place the social and economic system at the root of the crime problem. When cities grow, business and industry “invade” residential areas and cause a disintegration of the community as a unit of social control. A population shift occurs, as residents with resources move toward the outskirts

of the city and new immigrant or other disadvantaged populations replace them. The rapid population shift diminishes the capacity of community organizations – including schools – to socialize the population effectively. Cultural and language barriers and relative anonymity prevent effective communication and community problem solving. According to this perspective, schools are only a part of a larger community disintegration process that allows delinquency to flourish.

Social control theorists (exemplified by Hirschi, 1969) assign schools a critical role in restraining delinquent behavior. Schools provide opportunities and incentives for youths to develop attachments to prosocial others and commitment to conventional pursuits. They provide instruction and reinforcement for the development of self-control. Although the family is the first and most important source of social control, the school provides an important backup system. When schools fail in their role as secondary socializing agents, youths are more likely to act on their natural impulses toward self-gratifying and delinquent behaviors.

Routine activity theorists (exemplified by Cohen and Felson, 1979; Felson and Cohen, 1980) see schools as a place where crime is likely to occur. According to this perspective, a crime is more likely to occur when a motivated offender is in the same place as an attractive target in the absence of a capable guardian. Because schools assemble large numbers of members of the most delinquent segment of the population (teenage boys) in a place in which other teenagers are displaying desirable goods (CDs, designer jackets, concert tickets, electronics, etc.), crime is likely to occur unless the place is protected by capable guardians – guards, watchful school staff, or managers.

These and other perspectives on the causes of delinquency suggest that the role of schools in the generation of delinquent behavior is complex. The schooling process might increase delinquency by alienating certain youths from sources of reward and satisfaction and decrease delinquency by providing additional sources of social control. A particular school might increase delinquency by bringing together motivated offenders in time and space without effective guardianship or decrease it by providing a watchful environment that effectively reinforces appropriate and punishes inappropriate behavior. At the very least, schools have potential as a control agent simply because they occupy large segments of time for teenagers. School environments can be structured to minimize opportunities for delinquent behavior during the school day. But schools also have the potential to influence delinquency that occurs outside of school by providing a convenient setting for prevention activities.

In this book I explain the mechanisms through which schools affect levels of delinquent behavior and suggest ways in which schools might be organized and managed to increase their potential to prevent delinquency. This chapter defines “delinquency,” summarizes what is known about the

association of these behaviors with gender and age, and examines evidence relating the status of being in school with delinquency.

Definition of Delinquency

Delinquency – broadly defined in this book as problem behavior displayed by a minor – includes such behaviors as cussing at a teacher, biting a classmate, shirking homework, being late to class, writing on school walls, cheating on tests, bullying classmates, lying, fighting, stealing, joyriding, drinking alcohol, having sex, selling drugs, assaulting or robbing others, setting fire to property, raping, and murdering. These behaviors have in common the inability or unwillingness to curb natural impulses to pursue pleasure or to relieve sources of irritation.

The narrower definition of delinquency commonly found in criminological work – behavior in violation of the law – fails to distinguish between the actual delinquent behavior and the sanction applied as a result of the behavior. Many acts are behaviorally analogous to crime in terms of their causation, and attempts to understand their causes are unnecessarily constrained when the dependent variable is restricted to illegal acts.

This perspective on the nature of delinquent behavior seems especially appropriate for the study of schooling and delinquency. In this book, I explore mechanisms through which schooling or exposure to particular school environments influences levels of problem behavior. Many of the behaviors of concern to schoolteachers and administrators are not criminal per se, but are disruptive and often harmful to the child who presents it as well as to other students. Limiting attention to school's effects on behavior specifically defined as criminal would overlook effects on younger children (whose defiance and disobedient behavior are most often not defined as criminal) and on other problematic but not necessarily illegal adolescent behaviors. In short, delinquency is defined here according to Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) definition of crime: behavior involving the use of force or fraud, acts of defiance and disobedience, and acts that deliberately cause harm to self or others.

Rates of Delinquency

All children engage in problem behavior, and most learn to limit the amount of such behavior they display as they mature. The selfish or harmful exploratory behavior displayed by very young children is usually not labeled delinquency by observers, of course. Behaviorally, however, a toddler's attempts to poke her parent's eyes with a pencil or her act of reaching out of a shopping cart in a grocery store to grab an apple and put it directly in her mouth are both clear examples of unrestrained problem behavior. Nearly all children learn to restrain themselves from displaying most of this kind of behavior rather quickly.

Most young people also engage in problem behavior that is more easily recognized as delinquent. Three-fourths of high school seniors report having drunk alcohol in the last year, and half have gotten drunk. More than half of high school students have had sex. A third of high school seniors have stolen property, and 40% have been involved in a physical fight. In fact, *most* young people report behavior that everyone considers criminal: in 1976, 76% and 52% of the nation's male and female eleven-through seventeen-year-olds reported being involved in some form of delinquent behavior (Elliott, Huizinga, and Menard, 1989).

Estimates of the level of delinquency are often obtained from official records (e.g., schools, police, courts) and youth self-reports, and somewhat less often from reports of parents or teachers about youth behavior. These methods complement one another and together form the scientific literature on the prevalence and incidence of delinquent behavior.

Arrest Rates

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) show age-specific arrest rates for "index offenses" each year in the United States: serious violent index crimes include murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, aggravated assault, and robbery; serious property index crimes include burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft. Another category of crimes reported by the FBI includes drug abuse violations, which include unlawful possession, sale, use, growing, and manufacturing of narcotic drugs. Uniform Crime Reports show that arrests for all types of crimes are much higher for males than for females, and that arrests increase from low rates for young children, peak between ages 16 and 18, and then decline (U.S. Department of Justice, 1993). The peak comes earlier for property crimes (age 16) than for violent and drug-related crimes (age 18).

The relation of crime as measured by official data to age and gender appears nearly universal and has led to speculation about age-related conditions or characteristics that might produce the association. Several factors have been hypothesized, the most credible of which are declining parental supervision and control and increasing peer influence during adolescence (Farrington, 1986a).¹ Participation in school is another age-related condition that has been linked with delinquency. Evidence pertaining to this association is examined later in this chapter.

¹ Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) suggest that age has a direct effect on crime that transcends social explanations of crime. They argue that contemporary explanations for the age-crime curve are inadequate because they cannot possibly explain the similar age-crime association at other places and in other times (e.g., in England and Wales in the 1840s) when social conditions for adolescents were very different. Others (Farrington, 1986a; Steffensmeier, Allan, Harer, and Streifel, 1989) believe that subtle differences in the age-crime curve across time and space and for different types of crime are meaningful and encourage continued inquiry into age-related explanations for crime.

Juvenile arrests for serious crimes are relatively rare. Uniform Crime Reports for 1996 (Snyder, 1997) show that approximately 2,400 arrests for serious property crimes were made per 100,000 youths between ages 10 and 17, accounting for 35% of all such arrests. Approximately 465 arrests for serious violent crimes were made per 100,000 youths between ages 10 and 17, accounting for 19% of all such arrests. More than one-quarter of all juvenile arrests are for status offenses (e.g., liquor law violations, disorderly conduct, curfew violations, and running away). Offenses that result in the greatest number of juvenile arrests are larceny-theft, simple assaults, disorderly conduct, drug abuse violations, runaways, curfew violations, and liquor law violations. In 1996 these offenses accounted for 60% of all juvenile arrests.

The official crime statistics summarized so far tell us about neither the proportion of individuals at different ages who are engaged in crime nor the level of offending for those engaged in crime. These two dimensions have been separated in a comprehensive National Research Council study of criminal behavior (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, and Visser, 1986). U.S. studies using official records to measure the prevalence of arrest in particular birth cohorts (e.g., a 1945 Philadelphia birth cohort of males or a 1955 birth cohort of residents in Racine, Wisconsin) indicate that the percentage of males having some kind of nontraffic arrest or police contact prior to their eighteenth birthday ranges from 25% to 47%. The comparable prevalence rate for arrests for the more serious "index" offenses, based only on data from Philadelphia residents, is about 15% for males and about 4% for females. Rates of arrest frequency are more difficult to obtain, but one estimate (also derived from the 1945 Philadelphia birth cohort) is that active male juvenile offenders are arrested at average annual frequencies of .23 for robbery, .13 for other violent index offenses, and .41 for property index offenses, with an overall frequency for all offenses of .84 arrests per year. Farrington (1986a) decomposed the age-crime curve into portions due to prevalence and incidence (defined as the rate of individual offending). He found that for both officially recorded and self-reported crime, the peak in crime during the teenage years is due primarily to an increase in the proportion of youths engaged in crime rather than an increase in the rate of offending for those engaged in crime.

Average frequency rates mask an important feature of offending: a small percentage of offenders is responsible for a disproportionate number of offenses. In the Philadelphia study 6% of the boys was responsible for 52% of the police contacts found for the entire study population (Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin, 1972). The distribution of self-reported crimes across individuals is also lopsided. Elliott, Huizinga, and Menard (1989) found, for example, that the 8.6% of the total sample identified as "serious" offenders was responsible for 62% of all general offenses reported and over 75% of the reported index offenses.

Self-Reports

A more complete understanding of the prevalence of delinquent behavior can be obtained from self-reports. One useful source is the survey of U.S. high school seniors, Monitoring the Future (MTF; Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley, 1993), conducted annually by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. Table 1.1 shows the percentage of 1993 U.S. high school seniors admitting involvement in various delinquent activities during the preceding twelve months. As with the official records, the least-serious problem behaviors are the most prevalent: 88% of high school seniors fought with their parents in the past year, 32% engaged in minor theft; and 26% trespassed. More serious transgressions are relatively rare: fewer than 10% of youths reported that they engaged in arson (3%), hit an instructor or supervisor (4%), strong-armed a person (5%), or took a car without permission (6%); 18% of the youths engaged in serious fighting, with 13% admitting to hurting their victims badly; between 11% and 15% of youths reported crimes involving major theft and property damage; and only 10% reported being arrested. The self-reports also show males to be far more active than females in every form of delinquent behavior except arguing with parents.

Table 1.2 shows prevalence rates for alcohol and substance abuse by adolescents (Johnston, O'Malley, and Bachman, 1994). These data also come from MTF, but, unlike the delinquency data shown in Table 1.1 for students in grade 12, substance use data were also collected for students in grades 8 and 10. Table 1.2 shows that the use of all substances except heroin increases with age. Also, the more harmful and more addictive drugs are far less prevalent than alcohol and marijuana. Approximately the same percentage of females and males reported using alcohol, and only a slightly higher percentage of males reported using marijuana. Gender differences are noticeable for the more exotic substances but never reach the magnitude observed for other criminal behaviors.

Table 1.3 shows prevalence rates for several health-risk behaviors reported in a nationally representative sample of students in grades 9 through 12 in 1993 – the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) Survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1995). This survey shows that fighting is common among high school students (42% engaged in physical fighting in the preceding year), and that weapon *carrying* is higher than suggested in other surveys that asked only about weapon *use*: 22% of students reported carrying a dangerous weapon in the past thirty days, and 8% reported carrying a gun. Risky sexual behavior for adolescents is common: 53% reported they are sexually active, and 19% reported having had four or more sex partners in their lifetime. Only slightly more than half of sexually active students reported using a condom during their most recent sexual intercourse. Males engage in health risk behaviors more

Table 1.1. Percentage of High School Seniors Reporting Involvement in Selected Delinquent Activities in Past 12 Months, Class of 1993

Delinquent Activity	Males (N = 1,294)	Females (N = 1,321)	Total (N = 2,770)
<i>Interpersonal</i>			
Argued or had a fight with either of your parents	84.5	92.0	87.9
Hit an instructor or supervisor	5.7	1.7	3.8
Gotten into a serious fight in school or at work	21.6	13.0	17.7
Taken part in a fight where a group of your friends were against another group	29.0	14.5	22.2
Hurt someone badly enough to need bandages or a doctor	21.4	5.0	13.4
Used a knife or gun or some other thing (like a club) to get something from a person	8.1	1.0	4.6
<i>Property</i>			
Taken something not belonging to you worth under \$50	40.1	23.5	32.1
Taken something not belonging to you worth over \$50	17.5	4.4	11.3
Taken something from a store without paying for it	37.6	23.3	30.7
Taken a car that didn't belong to someone in your family without permission of the owner	8.8	3.8	6.4
Taken part of a car without permission of the owner	12.5	2.1	7.3
Gone into some house or building when you weren't supposed to be there	34.1	17.5	26.3
Set fire to someone's property on purpose	5.9	.9	3.4
Damaged school property on purpose	22.3	7.2	14.7
Damaged property at work on purpose	11.5	2.0	6.4
<i>Other</i>			
Been arrested and taken to a police station	14.5	4.5	9.6

Source: Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley, 1993.

Table 1.2. *Percentage of Students Reporting Substance Use in Past 12 Months, by Gender and Grade, 1993*

Substance	Grade 8			Grade 10			Grade 12		
	M (N = 8,600)	F (N = 9,200)	T (N = 18,300)	M (N = 7,300)	F (N = 7,800)	T (N = 15,300)	M (N = 7,500)	F (N = 8,200)	T (N = 16,300)
Alcohol ^a	51.8	52.3	51.6	68.9	69.6	69.3	75.9	76.0	76.0
Been drunk ^b	17.8	18.8	18.2	38.6	36.9	37.8	53.4	46.1	49.6
Marijuana	10.5	8.0	9.2	21.2	16.9	19.2	29.0	22.4	26.0
Cocaine	1.9	1.5	1.7	2.5	1.6	2.1	4.0	2.3	3.3
Heroin	.8	.5	.7	.9	.4	.7	.7	.3	.5

Notes: The number of cases for each group appears at the head of each column. M = male, F = female, T = total.

^aData based on one of two questionnaire forms for eighth and tenth grades and on three of six forms for the twelfth grade. N is one-half of N indicated for all grades.

^bTwelfth grade only: data based on five of six questionnaire forms. N is five-sixths of N indicated.

Source: Johnston, O'Malley, and Bachman, 1994.

Table 1.3. *Percentage of High School Students Reporting Involvement in Risk Behaviors in Past 12 Months,^a 1993*

Health Risk Behavior	Males (N = 8,441)	Females (N = 7,855)	Total (N = 16,296)
Carried a weapon such as a gun, knife, or club in past 30 days	34.3	9.2	22.1
Carried a gun in past 30 days	13.7	1.8	7.9
In a physical fight at all	51.2	31.7	41.8
Injured in a physical fight	5.2	2.7	4.0
Had sexual intercourse ever in lifetime	55.6	50.2	53.0
Had four or more sex partners during lifetime	22.3	15.0	18.8
Condom use during last sexual intercourse, among sexually active students	59.2	46.0	52.8

^aUnless otherwise indicated.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1995.

than females do, but the differences for sexual behaviors, like those for alcohol and other drug use reported here, are not as great as for crimes against persons and property.

These surveys provide hints about how delinquent behaviors change with age. MTF shows sharp increases between grades 8 and 12 in all forms of substance use except heroin, which is extremely rare for all age groups. But the YRBSS shows decreases in fighting and weapon carrying between grades 9 and 12 (e.g., among ninth and twelfth graders 25.5% vs. 19.9% carried a weapon and 50.4% vs. 34.8% were in a physical fight). In cross-sectional studies of school populations such as these, differences in prevalence rates across age groups may be confounded with differences in absenteeism and dropout rates. They also fail to separate age effects from cohort effects.

The National Youth Survey (NYS; Elliott et al., 1989) is useful for separating these confounding effects.² This study initially surveyed a single cohort between ages 11 and 17 in 1976, then again in 1980 and 1983.

² Of course, age effects are confounded in this panel study with period effects. That is, changes in crime rates may be due to either the aging of the cohort or the influences specific to a particular time period. Farrington (1986a) examined crime rates as a function of age, period, and cohort and found that although period effects are clearly present (in England between 1961 and 1983), age effects are larger. Regardless of the period examined, crime rates increased from age 10 to 14.