

# Companions in Crime

*The Social Aspects of Criminal  
Conduct*

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## Introduction

On a warm, clear Sunday morning, I walked out onto the deck at the rear of my house to read the morning newspaper. The house sits atop a high, steep hill that looks down upon a nearby street lined with homes on either side. As I sat engrossed in the events of the day, the air was suddenly punctuated by the sound of loud and garrulous voices wending up from below. Glancing down, I saw four young males walking together up the steep slope of the street. Judging from their size and dress, they appeared to be about fourteen or fifteen years of age, though it was difficult to estimate their age with any certainty from the distance at which I was observing.

As they ambled up the street, these young men turned abruptly to one side of the road and climbed up onto the foundation of an expensive new home under construction near the edge of a narrow, precipitous gorge. Trees surrounding the construction site allowed only fleeting glimpses of the boys, but the nature of their activity was evident from the sounds emanating from the site. The crack of splintering wood, the explosive impacts of bricks and other materials being hurled down the hill, the sound of concrete bags tearing open, all testified to the damage these boys were inflicting on the home, damage that probably amounted to many thousands of dollars. A few short minutes later, the boys abruptly quit the scene and disappeared up the street, leaving me once again to myself and the peaceful calm of the morning.

To a sociologist and criminologist, the general features of this event were not remarkable. Indeed, they were almost boringly predictable. The offenders were in the “crime-prone” age group (middle teens to young adulthood); they were males; they were in a group; the event was brief; and, judging from the circumstances, it was not contemplated or planned in advance. In all likelihood, the incident was not reported to the police, nor were the offenders arrested or charged with a criminal offense.

The larger and less easily answered question raised by the event, however, is: Why did it happen? Consider a few of the possibilities. Clearly the *opportunity* for a crime (an attractive and unguarded target) existed, and opportunity is a necessary – though not sufficient – condition for crime. Just as clearly, these boys were not under the supervision of their parents or any other adults at the time the event took place, nor were their moral reservations (if any) about the damage they were inflicting sufficient to prevent the offense.

Aside from such inhibitory factors, however, what about the matter of motivation? What exactly prompted these individuals to engage in such conduct, conduct they surely knew to be illegal? Perhaps they were under the influence of alcohol or some other substance at the time of the event. Given the time of day and their demeanor, however, that seems unlikely. Perhaps they were influenced by the stresses and strains of economic deprivation, or simply felt they had nothing to lose. Yet they were nicely dressed and lived (evidently) in a neighborhood of expensive homes and late-model cars. Maybe the boys suffered from some character disorder or neurophysiological deficit that was present from an early age and of which this event was merely one of many manifestations. Perhaps so, but would one expect *all* of these boys to have that disorder or deficit?

No single event, of course, can establish patterns or causes of behavior. Science is the study not of the unique, after all, but of the general. Nevertheless, even an isolated event can provide tantalizing clues to more general processes. In this instance, the event described here serves to illustrate one of the central issues of this book. Of all the features of this event that might have causal significance, the single

most important or determinative feature may have been the simple fact that it was committed by a *group* of individuals acting together. In other words, something about the presence of companions during the event provided the motivation, and perhaps the means, to carry out the crime.

If one were to distill the results of criminological research over the past century, only a few conclusions could be stated with great confidence. As noted earlier, for example, no contemporary criminologist would dispute the contention that criminal behavior is disproportionately committed by the young, or that it is more common among males than among females. The evidence for these phenomena is simply too extensive to be denied (see Chapter 5). Yet there is even stronger evidence for another conclusion: Criminal conduct is predominantly social behavior. Most offenders are imbedded in a network of friends who also break the law, and the single strongest predictor of criminal behavior known to criminologists is the number of delinquent friends an individual has (see Chapters 3 and 4). Furthermore, most delinquent conduct occurs in groups; the group nature of delinquent behavior is one of its most consistently documented features (see Chapter 3).

These facts are known to all criminologists, but for reasons that remain elusive, some fail to appreciate the tenacity of these findings or to recognize their potential implications. Worse yet, some vigorously deny those implications but offer little or no empirical evidence for their position. The general public, for its part, seems to be well aware of the social nature of crime. One of the most powerful signals prompting fear of crime in everyday life is the sight of a *group* of young males (Warr, 1990), and the idea of peer influence as a cause of crime seems to be well entrenched in the folklore of crime. More than half of respondents in one national survey attributed teen violence to “peer pressure” (Maguire and Pastore, 1996).

Confronted with overwhelming evidence of the social character of crime, any honest social scientist would seek answers to certain unavoidable questions: Is the group nature of criminal behavior merely incidental, or does it have etiological significance? If peer influence does operate in criminal events, what exactly is its nature? What



does the group nature of crime imply about criminal careers, the prevention of crime, and the plasticity of criminality as a personal trait?

The guiding premise of this book is that the social nature of criminal behavior is not merely an incidental feature of crime, but is instead a potential key to understanding its etiology and some of its most distinctive features. A secondary premise is that the age distribution of criminal behavior and the social nature of crime are not independent or isolated phenomena, but are instead closely connected to one another. It is for that reason that a substantial portion of this book is devoted to understanding the phase of life between childhood and adulthood that we call adolescence. Both of these premises may be incorrect, of course. But if so, it is important to know that they *are* incorrect, for they form the foundation for a good deal of research and theoretical speculation in criminology.

The organization of the book is simple and straightforward. The following chapter reviews the scientific evidence on adolescence and the role of peers during that complex period of life. Chapter 3 discusses the group nature of delinquency and the organization (or lack thereof) of delinquent groups. Chapter 4, the most extensive portion of the book, considers the possible mechanisms by which peer influence may promote or encourage delinquency. Chapter 5 examines the relative influence of two powerful institutions in adolescents' lives – parents and peers – and considers whether peer influence can explain some of the most persistent and controversial features of criminal behavior. The concluding chapter offers a summary and analysis, and suggests some avenues for research on peer influence.

## **PRELIMINARY ISSUES**

Before we can embark on an investigation of peer influence, several antecedent issues must be confronted. The first concerns the meaning of the term “group.” When referring to group delinquency, criminologists have traditionally had in mind any delinquent event that

involves two or more offenders, or “co-offenders,” in Reiss’s (1986) terms (see Klein, 1969). That conception surely stipulates an essential element of groups – multiple actors – but some sociologists and social psychologists would insist on additional elements, including an established role structure, shared norms, a shared identity, and common goals (e.g., Theodorson and Theodorson, 1979). As we will see later, however, some of those features are precisely what delinquent groups often lack. Nevertheless, for purposes of historical consistency, and because it is preferable to treat most features of groups as variables rather than as definitional attributes, the former, more liberal definition of a group will be employed throughout this book. Accordingly, the phrase “delinquent group” will be used to refer to any group that includes illegal behavior among its activities, regardless of how frequent or serious that behavior may be, and regardless of how long the group itself persists through time.

Another important issue pertains to the distinction between “groups” and “gangs.” The twentieth century produced a rich ethnographic literature on gangs, from Thrasher’s (1927) early account of Chicago gangs to more recent descriptions of ethnic gang life in American cities (e.g., Jankowski, 1991). The point at which a group becomes a “gang,” however, has been debated for decades in the gang literature (e.g., Miller, 1974; Ball and Curry, 1995; Short, 1997) with no sign of imminent closure. Still, there is general agreement, supported by empirical evidence, that gangs constitute only a small fraction of delinquent groups, and that a ganglike structure is not a prerequisite for delinquent behavior (see especially Morash, 1983; Stafford, 1984). A focus on group as opposed to gang delinquency is therefore eminently defensible, but it is important to emphasize that the discussion of group delinquency throughout this book is not intended to exclude gangs. Gangs are merely institutionalized groups, which is to say that they persist in time as *identifiable* social units, even as their membership changes constantly over the months and years. By all indications, what is true of delinquent groups – unclear and shifting role assignments and role definitions, predominantly same-sex composition, constantly changing

membership – is ordinarily true of gangs as well. Even the size of gangs, which seems clearly to differentiate them from most delinquent groups, is misleading, because gangs are often loose aggregations of smaller, age-segregated cliques (see Klein and Crawford, 1967; Sarnecki, 1986). In the end, of course, gangs *are* groups, and the issues to be examined in this book are no less pertinent for gangs than for other groups.

Some other matters require clarification as well. For those who value precision in language, the term “influence” (as in “peer influence”) is something of a weasel word, connoting a rather amorphous variety of possible mechanisms of social influence. Nevertheless, that term is used regularly in this book. My defense to the crime is necessity; the actual operative mechanisms of peer influence are not clearly understood, and one of the very purposes of this work is to clarify and narrow the meaning of that phrase.

A few things, however, can be said at this point about the meaning of influence. The idea of peer influence is not unfamiliar to most adults (certainly not to experienced parents), but lay conceptions of peer influence often rest on some vague notion of attitude or value transmission. “Bad” kids influence “good” kids, in other words, by changing their moral standards or other beliefs and attitudes. That is a possibility, to be sure, but everyday experience teaches us that people sometimes conform their behavior to that of others without actually agreeing with them (e.g., children conform to their parents, best friends to one another, employees to their coworkers or boss, and individuals to their leisure, church, sporting, neighborhood, or professional associates). That is why social psychologists often distinguish between *compliance* and *private acceptance*.

Compliance refers to overt behavior which becomes more like the behavior that the group wishes its members to show. The term refers to outward actions without consideration of the private convictions of the actor. When we speak of “compliance only,” we mean that the person is behaving as the group wants him to but does not really believe in what he is doing. That is, he is going along with the group without privately agreeing with the group. (Kiesler and Kiesler, 1970: 3)

Private acceptance, on the other hand,

means a change in attitude or belief in the direction of group attitudes and beliefs. In this case, the person may not only act as the group wishes, but changes his opinions so that he believes as the group believes. (Kiesler and Kiesler, 1970: 3–4)

There is reason to believe that compliance and private acceptance occur under different circumstances (Kiesler and Kiesler, 1970), but my purpose here is merely to emphasize that, when it comes to delinquent behavior, peer influence does not necessarily entail private acceptance of the behavior by all (or even *any*) members of a group (see Chapter 4). Still, the idea that behavior mirrors attitudes is so intuitively appealing that what is undeniably the most famous theory of peer influence in the history of criminology – Sutherland’s (1947) theory of differential association – was built squarely on the idea of private acceptance. However, Sutherland’s theory, which predated modern social and behavioral psychology, has faltered in important respects when subjected to empirical test (see Chapter 4).

On a different matter, it is important to differentiate between two concepts that routinely appear in the literature of criminology – “peer influence” and “group delinquency.” These concepts refer to overlapping but not necessarily identical phenomena. Most delinquent behavior is committed by groups of adolescents, and some accounts of delinquency stress this fact to explain the onset of delinquent events (see Chapters 3 and 4). However, it is reasonable to suppose that adolescents can be influenced by peers who are not actually present during a delinquent event (including occasions when an offender acts alone), or even by peers whom they have never actually encountered (e.g., teenage celebrities, television actors, role models at school). From time to time, adolescents may also find themselves in groups with persons they do not know at all and whose influence on them, if any, is purely situational and transitory. To complicate matters further, the behavior of adolescents is presumably affected not only by their *current* friends but also by persons they have known in the past.

“Peer influence” and “group delinquency,” therefore, are not necessarily analogous concepts. They may entail different etiological

processes (see Chapter 4), and adolescents may be affected by persons outside the immediate circle of co-offenders who accompany them on any given occasion. Despite these differences, it appears that, in real life, the sets of associates specified by these two concepts are far from mutually exclusive. Adolescents who engage in delinquency ordinarily do so with their friends (Warr, 1996), and those friends appear to be the same persons with whom they associate when *not* engaged in delinquency. In interviews with two birth cohorts of males living in Racine, Wisconsin, Lyle Shannon (1991) asked these young males whether the persons who had accompanied them during delinquent events were “the people that you usually ran around with.” The overwhelming majority of respondents (90 percent for the first reported offense in the Racine sample) answered affirmatively. As for the impact of past associates, the behavior of adolescents at any particular point in time more closely matches that of their *current* friends than that of their prior friends (Warr, 1993a).

This evidence suggests that those persons who are the primary source of delinquent influence upon an adolescent at any given time are the very persons most likely to be present during actual delinquent events, even if one or more may be absent during any particular event. If this is indeed so, then it helps to considerably narrow the range of relevant actors who require attention from investigators and practitioners. Still, it scarcely begins to resolve a host of unanswered questions about peer influence that require attention (see Chapters 3 and 4).

Turning to one final preliminary matter, the terms “crime” and “delinquency” are often used interchangeably in this book to avoid monotony. In a legal sense, of course, the terms are not identical. Delinquent offenses are those committed by minors, whereas criminal offenses are, by definition, committed by adults. However, with the exception of status offenses (acts like smoking and curfew violation that are illegal only for minors), the terms “crime” and “delinquency” refer to the same class of behaviors. Furthermore, because adult offenders ordinarily begin committing crimes as juveniles (Wolfgang, Thornberry, and Figlio, 1987; Shannon, 1988), the terms frequently apply to the same *people*, albeit at different life stages. For these reasons,

some criminologists regard the distinction as wholly arbitrary, at least from a behavioral point of view. I share that view; but where age is a relevant consideration in the present discussion, I have tried to make that fact apparent either explicitly or through context.

This initial discussion gives some idea of the conceptual and empirical complexity surrounding the notion of peer influence, and such complexity may be one reason that criminologists have failed to examine the issue as thoroughly as one might expect. Beneath the apparent complexity of the world, however, often lies an elegant simplicity, and it is with that vision in mind that we proceed to examine the role of peers in the lives of adolescents.