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<CT>The Study of Juvenile Delinquency

<Insert Chapter Outline>

**(H1) Chapter Outline**

- Understanding juvenile delinquency
- Developing and evaluating theories of delinquency
- Purposes of delinquency research
- Causal analysis

<End Chapter Outline>

<Insert Chapter Learning Objectives>

**(H1) Chapter Learning Objectives**

After completing this chapter, students should be able to:

- Understand the approach and structure of this book.
- Describe the key components of theory.
- Describe the relationship between theory and research.
- Identify the purposes of research.
- Describe the criteria for establishing cause-and-effect relationships.
- Understand key terms:
  - juvenile delinquency
  - theory
  - concepts
  - propositions

level of explanation

inductive theorizing

deductive theorizing

**<End Chapter Learning Objectives>**

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**Case in Point. Rick: A “Delinquent Youth”**

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It was one of those formative experiences. I [coauthor Jim Burfeind] was fresh out of college and newly hired as a probation officer. I was meeting with two experienced attorneys—one the defense, the other the prosecutor. Almost in unison, they turned to me and asked, “Why did Rick do this? Why did he develop such a persistent pattern of delinquency?” They wanted to make sense of Rick’s delinquency, and they wondered how the juvenile court could best respond to his case.

I had become familiar with Rick only in the previous few weeks when his case was reassigned to me as part of my growing caseload as a new probation officer. Now, meeting with the attorneys to gather information for the predisposition report, I was being asked to explain Rick’s pattern of delinquency to two legal experts who had far more experience in the juvenile justice system than I did. I was, after all, new to the job. How could I possibly know enough to offer an explanation? I also had the daunting responsibility of making a recommendation for disposition that the judge would most likely follow completely. Rick’s future was at stake, and my recommendation would determine the disposition of the juvenile court.

As I tried to respond to the attorneys sitting in front of me, my mind was flooded with questions. The answers to these questions became the basis for my predisposition report—an attempt to explain Rick’s delinquency and, based on this understanding, to recommend what should be done through court disposition. The questions with which I wrestled included the following:

- Is involvement in delinquency common among adolescents—that is, are most youths delinquent? Maybe Rick was just an unfortunate kid who got caught.
- Are Rick’s offenses fairly typical of the types of offenses in which youths are involved?
- Will Rick “grow out” of delinquent behavior?
- Is Rick’s pattern of offending similar to those of other delinquent youths?
- Do most delinquent youths begin with status offenses and then escalate into serious, repetitive offending? (*Status offenses* are acts, such as truancy and running away, that are considered offenses when committed by juveniles but are not considered crimes if committed by adults.)
- Is there a rational component to Rick’s delinquency so that punishment by the juvenile court would deter further delinquency?
- Did the fact that Rick was adopted have anything to do with his involvement in delinquency? Might something about Rick’s genetic makeup and his biological family lend some insight into his behavior?
- What role did Rick’s use of alcohol play in his delinquency?

- Are there family factors that might relate to Rick's involvement in delinquency?
- Were there aspects of Rick's school experiences that might be related to his delinquency?
- What role did Rick's friend play in his delinquent behavior?
- Did the juvenile court's formal adjudication of Rick as a "delinquent youth" two years earlier label him and make him more likely to continue delinquent offending?
- Should the juvenile court retain jurisdiction for serious, repeat offenders like Rick?
- What should the juvenile court try to do with Rick: punish, deter, or rehabilitate him?
- Should the juvenile court hold Rick less responsible for his acts than an adult because he has not fully matured?

Perhaps this list of questions seems a little overwhelming to you now. We don't present them here with the expectation that you will be able to answer them. Instead, we present them to prompt you to think about what causes juvenile delinquency and to give you an idea of the types of questions that drive the scientific study of delinquent behavior. Throughout this book, we address these types of questions as we define delinquency; consider the nature of delinquent offenses, offenders, and offending; and present a variety of theories to explain delinquent behavior.

### **(H1) Understanding Juvenile Delinquency**

An understanding of delinquency builds upon explanations offered in theories and findings revealed in research. The primary purpose of this book is to cultivate an understanding of juvenile delinquency by integrating theory and research.

Throughout the book, we focus on the central roles that theory and research play in the study of delinquency. These two components form the core of any scientific inquiry.

Before we go any further, we must define juvenile delinquency. This definition is far more complicated than you might think. In Chapter 2, we discuss the social construction and transformation of the concept of juvenile delinquency. Here we offer a brief working definition of **juvenile delinquency** as actions that violate the law, committed by a person under the legal age of majority.

The questions that shape the scientific study of juvenile delinquency constitute attempts to *define, describe, explain, and respond to* delinquent behavior. Our exploration of juvenile delinquency reflects these four basic tasks. The first two major sections of this book are devoted to defining and describing juvenile delinquency, the third section to explaining delinquent behavior, and the final section to contemporary ways of responding to juvenile delinquency. Responses to delinquent behavior, however, should be based on a thorough understanding of delinquency. Thus, an understanding of juvenile delinquency must come first.

## (H2) *Studying Juvenile Delinquency*

The first section of this book describes the historical transformation of the concept of juvenile delinquency and the methods and data sources researchers use to study delinquent behavior. We begin by developing a working understanding of what we

commonly call “juvenile delinquency” (Chapter 2). This includes not only the social, political, and economic changes that led to the social construction of juvenile delinquency as a legal term, but also the contemporary transformations that have dramatically altered how we as a society view and respond to delinquency. We then explore how researchers “measure” delinquency (Chapter 3). We describe various methods of gathering data and doing research on juvenile delinquency, and sources of data on crime and delinquency.

### (H2) *The Nature of Delinquency*

The second section of this book presents three chapters in which we describe the nature of delinquent offenses, offenders, and patterns of offending. Before criminologists try to explain juvenile delinquency, they must first understand the problem in terms of these three dimensions. Chapters 4 through 6 report research findings that describe the nature and extent of delinquent *offenses* (Chapter 4), the social characteristics of delinquent *offenders* (Chapter 5), and the developmental patterns of delinquent *offending* (Chapter 6).

### (H2) *Explaining Delinquent Behavior*

The third section of this book presents explanations of delinquency that criminologists have proposed in theories and examined in research. These chapters are organized in terms of the major themes that run through different groups of theories. One group of theories, for example, emphasizes the importance of peer group influences on delinquency. These theories, called social learning theories, address how delinquent behavior is learned in the context of peer group relations (Chapter 10). We also consider a number of other key themes: the role of

individual factors, including biological characteristics and personality, in explaining delinquent behavior (Chapter 7); whether delinquency is a product of situational influences and the routine activities of adolescents, or whether it results from conscious choice (Chapter 8); the importance of social relationships, especially family relations and school experiences, in controlling delinquency (Chapter 9); the structure of society and how societal characteristics motivate individual behavior (Chapter 11); and the labeling perspective and critical criminologies that focus on how social inequalities shape offending and responses to it (Chapter 12).

Throughout the book, as we present theoretical explanations for delinquency, we weave together theories and the most relevant research that criminologists have conducted to test those theories.

## **(H2) *Responding to Delinquency***

The final section of this book includes two chapters that describe societal responses to delinquency. Chapter 13 addresses the contemporary emphasis on delinquency prevention and the theoretical underpinnings of such efforts. Chapter 14 describes the present-day system of juvenile justice. We have deliberately chosen to keep our discussion of juvenile justice to one chapter in order to provide an undivided view of its structure and process. The formal juvenile justice system includes police, courts, and corrections. Yet a substantial amount of juvenile delinquency is dealt with informally, sometimes by agencies outside the “system.” Juvenile justice includes efforts at prevention, together with informal and formal actions by the traditional juvenile justice system. Formal procedures, such as taking youths into custody and adjudicating them as delinquent youths, are central to the task of responding to

juvenile delinquency. But informal procedures designed to prevent delinquency and divert youths from the juvenile justice system are far more common.

Before launching into these chapters, it is necessary to lay the foundation to the book's emphasis: delinquency theory and research. Our goal is to make these often intimidating terms plain and understandable. In this way, you will be able to more easily grasp the material that follows. Theories of delinquency are no more than explanations, and research tries to provide information to either develop or test theories.

### **(H1) Developing and Evaluating Theories of Delinquency**

A **theory** is an explanation that makes a systematic and logical argument about what is important and why. Theories of delinquency try to identify and describe the key causal factors that make up the “sequence of steps through which a person moves from law abiding behavior to . . . delinquency.”<sup>1</sup> In doing so, these theories emphasize certain factors as being causally important and then describe how these factors are interrelated in producing delinquent behavior.

### **(H2) Components of Theories**

Like other scientific theories, theories of delinquency are composed of two basic parts: concepts and propositions. **Concepts** isolate and categorize features of the world that are thought to be causally important.<sup>2</sup> Different theories of delinquency incorporate and emphasize different concepts. For example, the theories of delinquency we consider in later chapters include concepts such as personality traits, routine activities of adolescents, attachments to others, associations with delinquent friends, and social disorganization of neighborhoods.

**Propositions** are theoretical statements that tell how concepts are related.<sup>3</sup> In research, hypotheses are the testable counterpart of propositions, and variables are the measurable counterpart of concepts. Some propositions imply a *positive linear relationship* in which concepts vary in the same direction. In other words, as one concept increases, another concept also increases. Or as one concept decreases, another decreases. For example, some theories propose that the number of delinquent friends is positively related to delinquency: as the number of delinquent friends increases, so does the likelihood of delinquency. In a *negative linear relationship*, concepts vary in opposite directions. For instance, one theory proposes that level of attachment and delinquency are negatively related: as attachment increases, delinquency decreases. Relationships between concepts may also be *curvilinear*. Here, too, the concepts vary together, either positively or negatively. But after reaching a certain level, the relationship moves in the opposite direction. For example, researchers have found that parental discipline is related to delinquency in a curvilinear fashion.<sup>4</sup> Delinquency is most common when parental discipline is either lax or excessive, but is least common when discipline is moderate.

Different theories may offer competing propositions. One theory may propose that two concepts are related in a particular way, while another theory may claim that they are unrelated. For example, a major issue in delinquency theory is the role of the family in explaining delinquent behavior. One major theory contends that the family is not strongly related to delinquency and that delinquent peers are most important in explaining delinquency. Another major theory proposes that family

relations are strongly related to delinquency, while peer relations are relatively unimportant.<sup>5</sup>

To summarize, a *theory of delinquency* is a set of logically related propositions that explain why and how selected concepts are related to delinquent behavior.<sup>6</sup> Theories of delinquency offer logically developed arguments that certain concepts are important in causing delinquent behavior. The purpose of theory is to explain delinquency.

### (H2) *Levels of Explanation*

Theories of delinquency operate at three different **levels of explanation**: individual, microsocial, and macrosocial.<sup>7</sup> At the *individual* level, theories focus on traits and characteristics of individuals, either innate or learned, that make some people more likely than others to engage in delinquency. The *microsocial* level of explanation considers the social processes by which individuals become involved in delinquency. Criminologists have emphasized family relationships and peer group influences at this level. Some microsocial theories also point to the importance of the structural context of social interaction, and how interaction is shaped by factors such as race, gender, and social class.<sup>8</sup> At the *macrosocial* level, societal characteristics such as socioeconomic disadvantage and social cohesiveness are used to explain group variation in rates of delinquency.<sup>9</sup> For example, poverty, together with the absence of community social control, is central to several explanations of why gang delinquency is more common in lower-class areas.<sup>10</sup>

The level of explanation corresponds to the types of concepts incorporated into theories. Individual-level explanations tend to incorporate biological and

psychological concepts. Microsocial explanations most often use social psychological concepts, but may incorporate structural concepts that influence social interaction. Macrosocial explanations draw extensively on sociological concepts. Theories can be combined to form “integrated theories” (see Chapter 13), which sometimes merge different levels of explanation into a single theoretical framework.

## (H2) *Assessing Theory*

We have stated that concepts and propositions are the bare essentials of theory. These components, however, do not automatically produce a valid explanation of delinquency. We can begin to assess the validity of theory—the degree to which it accurately and adequately explains delinquent behavior—by paying attention to several key dimensions of theory.<sup>11</sup> We highlight these dimensions in the following list of questions. We invite you to ask yourself these questions as you consider how well the theories we present in later chapters explain delinquency.

1. **Conceptual clarity:** *How clearly are the theoretical concepts identified and defined?*<sup>12</sup>
2. **Logical consistency:** *How well do the concepts and propositions fit together—how compatible, complementary, and congruent are they?*<sup>13</sup> *Does the theoretical argument develop logically and consistently?*
3. **Parsimony:** *How concise is the theory in terms of its concepts and propositions?* Generally, simpler is better. So if two theories explain delinquency equally well, we should favor the theory that offers the more concise explanation with the smaller number of concepts.

4. **Scope:** *What is the theory attempting to explain?*<sup>14</sup> Some theories try to explain a wide variety of delinquent acts and offenders. Others focus on particular types of offenses or offenders. *What question is the theory designed to answer?* Theories of delinquency usually address one of two basic questions: (1) How and why are laws made and enforced? and (2) Why do some youths violate the law?<sup>15</sup> Far more theories try to answer the second question than the first.<sup>16</sup>

5. **Level of explanation:** *At what level (individual, microsocial, or macrosocial) does the theory attempt to explain delinquency?*

6. **Testability:** *To what extent can the theory be tested—verified or disproved by research evidence?* It is not enough for a theory simply to “make sense” by identifying key concepts and then offering propositions that explain how these concepts are related to delinquency.<sup>17</sup> Rather, theories must be constructed in such a way that they can be subjected to research verification.<sup>18</sup>

7. **Research validity:** *To what extent has the theory been supported by research evidence?*

8. **Applicability and usefulness:** To what extent can the theory be applied practically? In other words, to what extent is the theory useful in policy and practice?

These questions reflect key concerns in assessing theory. Theory provides the foundation for the accumulation of knowledge, and is indispensable for an understanding of delinquency. However, theory must be tested through research. Together, theory and research constitute the two basic components of a scientific approach to juvenile delinquency.

## (H1) **Purposes of Delinquency Research**

Delinquency research serves two vital purposes: to generate or develop theory, and to test theory.<sup>19</sup> In Chapter 3, we discuss research methods and sources of data used to study delinquency. Here we briefly describe the two purposes of research as it relates to theory.

## (H2) *Generating Theory*

Research is sometimes used to gain sufficient information about delinquency to theorize about it.<sup>20</sup> Research findings require interpretation, and it is this interpretation that yields theory. The development of theoretical explanations of delinquency requires a long, hard look at the “facts” of delinquency (repeated and consistent findings), in order to identify key concepts and then explain how these concepts are related to delinquent behavior. Along this line, Donald Shoemaker defines theory as “an attempt to make sense out of observations.”<sup>21</sup> The difficult task of making theoretical sense of research observations is sometimes called **inductive theorizing**.<sup>22</sup> In the process of inductive theorizing, research involves collecting data and making empirical observations, which are then used to develop theory.

For example, Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, whose work we discuss in later chapters, spent their entire careers trying to uncover the most important empirical findings about delinquency. The Gluecks’ work was heavily criticized for being atheoretical, or without theory.<sup>23</sup> Their research, however, was intended to provide empirical observations that would allow for the development of a theoretical explanation of delinquency, even though they never developed such a theory.<sup>24</sup> In

recent years, their data and findings have become the basis for an important new theory called “life-course theory” (see Chapter 9).

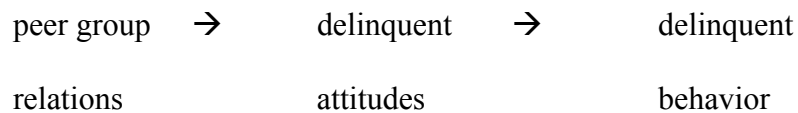
## (H2) *Testing Theory*

Research also provides the means to evaluate theory and to choose among alternative or competing theories.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to inductive theorizing, **deductive theorizing** begins with theoretical statements and then attempts to test the validity of theoretical predictions.<sup>26</sup>

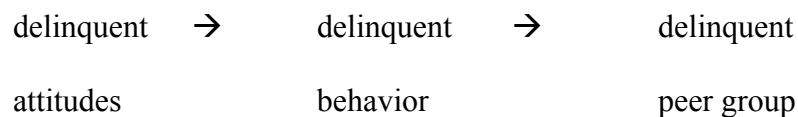
As we already discussed, theories offer explanations of delinquency in which propositions identify certain concepts and describe how they are related to delinquent behavior. These theoretically predicted relationships can be tested through research and either verified or disproved. Throughout this book, we present theories of delinquency along with the research used to test them. Thus, knowledge of the deductive research process will help you better understand the discussions in later chapters.

When testing theory, researchers first identify key theoretical concepts and determine how to measure them. In research, *variables* are the measurable equivalent of concepts. (In *Research in Action* boxes throughout this book, we offer examples of variables that researchers have used to measure various concepts.) Next, researchers develop hypotheses or statements about the expected relationships among variables, which are derived from theory. In research, hypotheses are the testable equivalent of propositions. Finally, researchers test these hypotheses by collecting and analyzing data, using research strategies we describe in Chapter 3.

Different theories often offer different hypotheses. For example, differential association theory (presented in Chapter 10) and social bond theory (presented in Chapter 9) provide competing hypotheses about the relationships between peers, attitudes, and delinquency. One proposition of differential association theory is that attitudes favoring delinquency are learned in the context of “intimate personal groups.”<sup>27</sup> The predicted relationship portrayed here is that youths develop attitudes from peer group relations, and delinquent behavior is then an expression of these attitudes:



In contrast, social bond theory contends that attitudes are largely a product of family relationships.<sup>28</sup> Delinquent attitudes result in delinquent behavior. Associations with delinquent peers then follow from delinquent behavior as youths seek out friendships with others like themselves. The relationships predicted by social bond theory are as follows:



If research findings support the theoretical propositions tested, then the theory is verified or confirmed. If research findings are not consistent with the predicted relationships, then the theory is disproved.

Although the relationship between theory and research is complex, it is clear that developing theory and conducting research go hand in hand.<sup>29</sup> Both inductive and deductive research processes involve identification of key concepts, hypothesis

development, and data collection and analysis. But the order in which these activities occur varies for the two research processes.

### (H1) Causal Analysis

At this point, we must say a few words about causal analysis. In deductive research, criminologists are testing hypotheses derived from theory about the causes of delinquency. But determining that a particular concept or variable is truly a cause of delinquency is more difficult than you might think. Certain criteria must be met before researchers can say that some factor *causes* delinquent behavior.

In a cause-and-effect relationship, the proposed cause is the independent variable, and the proposed effect is the dependent variable. Consider this simple model:

$A \rightarrow B$

In this model, “A” is the independent variable, which causes or leads to “B,” the dependent variable. “A” might be number of hours spent studying, which causes “B,” success in school as measured by grade point average. Rarely, however, does one independent variable alone cause a dependent variable.

Models depicting the causes of delinquency described in theory are far more complex. These theoretical models are difficult to test through research for at least three reasons. First, most theories propose multiple causes of delinquent behavior. Typically, multiple independent variables are measured in relation to delinquency. Second, independent variables are themselves often related in complex ways. In fact, some independent variables “cause” other independent variables, which in turn are related to delinquency. Third, it is difficult to establish cause-and-effect

relationships using social science data. Though there have been tremendous advances in data collection and analytic techniques, establishing causation remains a difficult and controversial task for social scientists.

Because there are many causes of delinquency, the causal sequences leading to delinquent behavior are hard to untangle. In *Research in Action*, “Establishing Cause and Effect,” we summarize the criteria for establishing cause and effect. Keep these criteria in mind as you consider the causal processes described in various theories in later chapters.

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### **Research in Action: Establishing Cause and Effect**

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#### **(H1) Summary and Conclusions**

The scientific study of juvenile delinquency attempts to describe and explain delinquent behavior through theory and research. Theory seeks to provide a systematic and logical argument that specifies what is important in causing delinquency and why. Like other scientific theories, theories of delinquency are composed of concepts and propositions. It is necessary to assess the validity of theories. We provided a series of questions that you can use to evaluate the theories of delinquency presented in later chapters.

The second basic component of the scientific method is research. In relation to theory, research serves two purposes: to generate theory and to test theory. Research is sometimes used to gain sufficient information about juvenile delinquency so that it is possible to theorize about it. The development of theory from research

observations is called inductive theorizing. Research is also used to evaluate or test theory in a process called deductive theorizing.

The primary purpose of this book is to cultivate an understanding of juvenile delinquency by integrating theory and research. This chapter offered an overview of the key elements of a scientific approach to delinquency, focusing especially on theory. With this basic understanding of theory and its relationship to research, we can begin our study of delinquency on solid ground. The first two sections of this book present criminologists' efforts to define and describe juvenile delinquency, the third major section presents explanations of delinquency that have been offered in theory and tested in research, and the fourth section considers contemporary responses to delinquency. Throughout the book, we present theoretical explanations of delinquency together with the most relevant research that has tested those theories.

**<Insert Critical Thinking Questions>**

**(H1) Critical Thinking Questions**

1. Define theory without using the words "concept" or "proposition."
2. Why does a scientific approach to delinquency depend on theory?
3. Develop your own examples of inductive and deductive theorizing.
4. Why is it necessary to demonstrate association, temporal order, and lack of spuriousness to establish a cause-and-effect relationship?
5. As you read Rick's story at the beginning of this chapter, what factors seemed most significant to you in explaining why Rick was delinquent? Why?

**<End Critical Thinking Questions>**

<Insert Suggested Readings>

**(H1) Suggested Readings**

Agnew, Robert. 2007. *Why Do Criminals Offend? A General Theory of Crime and Delinquency*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Shoemaker, Donald J. 2004. *Theories of Delinquency: An Examination of Explanations of Delinquency Behavior*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

<End Suggested Readings>

<Insert Glossary>

**(H1) Glossary**

**concepts:** Isolated features of the world that are thought to be causally important.

**deductive theorizing:** The evaluation of theoretical statements through research.

**inductive theorizing:** The development of theory from research observations.

**juvenile delinquency:** Actions that violate the law, committed by a person under the legal age of majority.

**level of explanation:** The realm of explanation—individual, microsocial, or macrosocial—that corresponds to the types of concepts incorporated into theories.

**propositions:** Theoretical statements that tell how concepts are related.

**theory:** An explanation that makes a systematic and logical argument about what is important and why.

<End Glossary>

<Insert Endnotes>

## **(H1) Endnotes**

1. Hirschi and Selvin 1967:66.
2. Turner 1978:2–3.
3. Vold, Bernard, and Snipes 2002:4.
4. Glueck and Glueck 1950.
5. Sutherland, Cressey, and Luckenbill 1992:211–214; and Hirschi 1969:140–146.
6. Stark 1998:2; and Curran and Renzetti 2001:2.
7. Short 1998. Some argue that there are only two levels of explanation – microsocial and macrosocial – and that the microsocial level considers both individual-level characteristics and social interaction in small groups. However, we make a distinction between individual and microsocial levels of explanation because we believe that there is a significant difference in the kinds of theories offered at these two levels, and because this statement of three levels of explanation is consistent with the discussion of levels of explanation by criminologists such as James Short (1998).
8. Sampson and Laub 1993; Sutherland, Cressey, and Luckenbill 1992; and Short 1998.
9. Cohen 1966:43; Gibbons 1979:9; and Akers 2004:4.
10. Shaw and McKay 1969; Cohen 1955; and Cloward and Ohlin 1960.
11. Drawn from Cohen 1980:191–192.
12. Shoemaker 2000:9.
13. Akers 2004:6–7; and Shoemaker 2000:9.

14. Akers 2004:6–7; and Curran and Renzetti 2001:3.
15. Akers 2004:2–6. Renowned criminologist Edwin Sutherland defined criminology as the study of law making, law breaking, and law enforcement (Sutherland, Cressey, and Luckenbill 1992:3).
16. Akers 2004:4. Gibbons (1994:9–11, 73–76) describes two key criminological questions: “Why do they do it?” and “the rates question.” The first question addresses “the origins and development of criminal acts and careers,” and the second question addresses “organizations, social systems, social structures, and cultures that produce different rates of behaviors of interest.” See also Gibbons 1979:9; Gibbons and Krohn 1991:85–86; and Short 1998:7.
17. Akers 2004:7.
18. Stinchcombe 1968.
19. Cohen 1980:vii, 10; and Stark 1998:3.
20. Stark 1998:3.
21. Shoemaker 2000:7.
22. Stark 1998; Glaser and Straus 1967; and Babbie 1998:4, 60–64.
23. Gibbons and Krohn 1991:83–84.
24. Laub and Sampson 1991; and Sampson and Laub 1993.
25. Cohen 1980:10.
26. Babbie 1998:4.
27. Sutherland, Cressey, and Luckenbill 1992:88–89.
28. Jensen 1972; Hepburn 1976; and Hirschi 1969.
29. Gibbons 1994:7.

**<End Endnotes>**

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## **Case in Point**

### **Rick: A “Delinquent Youth”**

The youth court “adjudicated” Rick, a 14-year-old, a “delinquent youth,” for motor vehicle theft and placed him on formal probation for six months. He and a good friend took without permission a car that belonged to Rick’s father. They were pulled over by the police for driving erratically—a classic case of joyriding.

Rick was already a familiar figure in the juvenile court. When Rick was 12, he was referred to the court for “deviant sex” for an incident in which he was caught engaging in sexual activity with a 14-year-old girl. The juvenile court dealt with this offense “informally.” A probation officer met with Rick and his parents to work out an agreement of informal probation that included “conditions” or rules, but no petition into court. Not long after this first offense, Rick was taken into custody by the police for curfew violation and, on a separate occasion, vandalism—he and his good friend had gotten drunk and knocked down numerous mailboxes along a rural road. In both of these instances, Rick was taken to the police station and released to his parents. Even though Rick’s first formal appearance in juvenile court was for the auto theft charge, he was already well-known to the police and probation departments.

Rick was a very likable kid; he was pleasant and personable. He expressed a great deal of remorse for his delinquent acts and seemed to genuinely desire to change. He had a lot going for him; he was goal-directed, intelligent, and athletic. He interacted well with others, including his parents, teachers, and peers. His best

friend, an American Indian boy who lived on a nearby reservation, was the same age as Rick and had many similar personal and social characteristics. Not surprisingly, the boy also had a very similar offense record. In fact, Rick and his friend were often “companions in crime,” committing many of their delinquent acts together.

Rick was the adopted son of older parents who loved him greatly and saw much ability and potential in him. They were truly perplexed by the trouble he was in, and they struggled to understand why Rick engaged in delinquent acts and what needed to be done about it. Rick, too, seemed to really care about his parents. He spent a good deal of time with them and apparently enjoyed their company. Because Rick was adopted as an infant, these parents were the people he considered family.

Rick attended school regularly and earned good grades. He was not disruptive in the classroom or elsewhere in the school. In fact, teachers reported that he was a very positive student both in and out of class and that he was academically motivated. He did his homework and handed in assignments on time. He was also actively involved in sports—football, wrestling, and track and field.

Rick’s six months of formal probation for auto theft turned into a two-year period as he continued to get involved in delinquent acts. Through regular meetings and enforcement of probation conditions, his probation officer tried to work with Rick to break his pattern of delinquency. Such efforts were to no avail. Rick continued to offend, resulting in an almost routine series of court hearings that led to the extension of his probation supervision period. The continuing pattern of delinquency included a long list of property and status offenses: minor in possession

of alcohol, numerous curfew violations, continued vandalism, minor theft (primarily shoplifting), and continued auto theft, usually involving joyrides in his father's car.

Rick's "final" offense was criminal mischief, and it involved extensive destruction of property. Once again, Rick and his best friend "borrowed" his father's car, got drunk, and drove to Edina, an affluent suburb of Minneapolis. For no apparent reason, they parked the car and began to walk along France Avenue, a major road with office buildings along each side. After walking a while, they started throwing small rocks toward buildings, seeing how close they could get. Their range increased quickly and the rocks soon reached their targets, breaking numerous windows. The "fun" turned into thousands of dollars worth of window breakage in a large number of office buildings.

Because of the scale of damage, Rick faced the possibility of being placed in a state training school. As a potential "loss of liberty case," Rick was provided with representation by an attorney. This time, the juvenile court's adjudication process followed formal procedures, including involvement of a prosecutor and a defense attorney. In the preliminary hearing, Rick admitted to the petition (the formal legal statement of charges against him), and the case was continued to a later date for disposition (sentencing in juvenile court). In the meantime, the judge ordered a predisposition report.

The predisposition report is designed to individualize the court's disposition to "fit the offender." The investigation for the report uses multiple sources of information, including information from the arresting officer, parents, school personnel, coaches, employers, friends, relatives, and, most importantly, the

offending youth. The predisposition report tries to describe and explain the pattern of delinquency and then offer recommendations for disposition based on the investigation. In Rick's case, the predisposition report attempted to accurately describe and explain his persistent pattern of property and status offending, and it offered a recommendation for disposition. Finding no information to justify otherwise, the probation officer recommended that Rick be committed to the Department of Corrections for placement at the Red Wing State Training School. Depending on one's viewpoint, the state training school represented either a last ditch effort for rehabilitation or a means of punishment through restricted freedom. Either way, Rick was viewed as a chronic juvenile offender, with little hope for reform.

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### **Research in Action. Establishing Cause and Effect**

In *Delinquency Research: An Appraisal of Analytic Methods*, Hirschi and Selvin discuss the methods of scientific analysis used to study delinquency. They offer three criteria for establishing cause and effect.

**1. Association:** The cause and effect are empirically associated. This means that change in one variable is related to change in another. The statistical measure of this associated change is correlation. Though correlation does not prove causation, it is an important first step in establishing a causal connection between an independent variable and a dependent variable.

**2. Temporal order:** The cause precedes the effect in time. The independent variable must precede the dependent variable. As simple as this sounds, it is sometimes difficult to establish which variable occurs first. It is often proposed, for example, that drug use causes delinquency. However, research has established that delinquent acts usually occur before drug use, failing to support the temporal order of the proposition (Elliott, Huizinga, and Ageton 1985; Elliott, Huizinga, and Menard 1989).

**3. Lack of spuriousness:** The relationship between the proposed cause and effect cannot be spurious, or explained away by the influence of some other factor that causes both. Babbie (1998:74–75) offers this illustration: “There is a positive correlation between ice cream sales and deaths due to drowning: the more ice cream sold, the more drowning, and vice versa. The third variable here is season or temperature. Most drowning deaths occur during summer—the peak period for ice

cream sales. There is no direct link between ice cream and drowning, however.” The correlation between ice cream sales and drowning deaths is spurious because both are related to temperature. Following the same logic, some have proposed that the relationship between drug use and delinquency is spurious because other causal factors, such as having deviant peers, influence both drug use and delinquency (Elliott et al. 1985; Elliott et al. 1989).

Source: Hirschi, Travis and Hanan C. Selvin. 1967. *Delinquency Research: An Appraisal of Analytic Methods*. New York: Free Press.

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