
Active Maturation: Why Crime Falls in Early Adulthood*

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In this short paper, I summarise some initial findings from the qualitative part of the Sheffield Desistance Study.

The Sheffield Desistance Study, which I co-direct with Joanna Shapland, is a prospective empirical study of recidivist male offenders [1]. The fieldwork began in 2003, deliberately working with a sample of men born in 1982, 1983 and 1984, whose average age at first interview was 20 years 9 months. Previous research shows that even those who have been prolific offenders in adolescence often reduce their criminality markedly in their early twenties (e.g. Laub and Sampson 2003, p.86). We wanted to focus the research on recidivist offenders in that age-range, in order to try to understand more fully why crime falls in early adulthood.

There were 113 offenders in the sample, and it was not practicable to include females (Bottoms and Shapland 2011), but there was a high level of criminal experience. At the time of the first interview, offenders in the sample had on average been convicted on *eight separate occasions* for a 'standard list' offence; and 82 per cent of the first

interviews took place either in a prison or a young offenders' institution.

The aim of the study was to track the progress of these young men over a period of about three years. The research interviews averaged about 90 minutes, and the intention was to speak to each participant on four separate occasions, some 9-12 months apart. The re-contact rates were good for a recidivistic sample of this kind: 87% at the second interview, and 78% at both the third and fourth interviews. Fortunately, too, those who completed the fourth interview had very similar characteristics to those who did not, so there was no significant bias in the study due to people choosing not to participate.

We found that four-fifths of the sample (80%) had at least one further conviction during the follow-up period, but for most men there was a definite reduction in the frequency of recorded offending. Self-reports also showed more men reducing their offending than increasing it, though in a minority of cases there was a high self-reported frequency at the end of the study. Statistical analysis showed that

later criminality was particularly associated with two main factors: first, the total amount of prior criminality at the time of the first interview (the more prior crime, the less likely was the participant to stop); and secondly, the current social circumstances of the offender's life.

It seems, therefore, that the past is important, but not necessarily decisive. Sometimes even those with extensive prior criminality start to desist; but a great deal seems to depend on their wider social circumstances, which frequently contain both opportunities and risks. Note however that the previous sentence says 'start to desist' rather than 'desist'; that is because very few had put crime completely behind them in the three years that we studied them, but many had taken significant 'steps towards desistance' (Bottoms and Shapland 2011).

Two sources of evidence show that most of the men in the Sheffield study did not want to continue in a life of crime. First, at each interview we asked each participant to identify which of a series of written statements most closely described his current attitude towards future offending. Even at the first interview, 56% said they had made 'a definite decision to try to stop', while 37% said they 'would like to stop' but they were not sure whether this was practicable (Bottoms and Shapland 2011, p.57). Secondly, at the beginning of the study we asked an open-ended question, inviting respondents to describe 'what kind of person you would like to become?' – in other words, asking them to describe what Paternoster and Bushway (2009) have subsequently called the 'desired self'. The responses were surprisingly conventional: most said they would like 'go straight', 'be drug-free', 'live a normal life', 'be a good person', 'be a family man' and so on (Shapland and Bottoms 2011, p.262).

The picture that has emerged is, therefore, of young men fairly deeply involved in crime, most of whom would like to stop, and indeed to 'live a normal life'. Yet most of them were reconvicted during the follow-up period, although many took steps towards desistance. Clearly, some complicated paths are being trodden by sample members. It was the purpose of the qualitative dimension of the research to try to understand these paths with a view to explaining how offending begins to decline in the early twenties.

THE QUALITATIVE STUDY

The qualitative study has two aspects. First, in the final interview we asked a number of open-ended qualitative questions, designed to assess the men's own understanding of what had happened to them in the past three years. Secondly, in eighteen cases ('the qualitative sample') we were able to carry out a detailed qualitative analysis of the transcripts of all interviews.

Table 1 provides results from three open-ended questions in the fourth interview, all of which asked participants to look back over the period since the study started. In section A, respondents were asked whether they saw themselves as different from three years ago. Then, secondly, they were asked whether their general thought and behaviour patterns were now different (section B); and finally, they were asked to identify any good things that had happened to them over the last three years (section C).

The three questions yielded different emphases in the answers:

- In section A ('changes in yourself'), only seven respondents (8%) said they had not changed, while four (5%) identified changes in a negative direction. Thus, the overwhelming majority (88%) identified positive change in themselves; and in describing these positive changes, the dominant words used as a first response (with no prompting from interviewers) were 'more mature', 'more responsible', 'nicer person' and 'calmer'.
- In section B only five respondents said they had not changed in their thought and behaviour patterns. Some again gave 'maturity' answers, but the dominant - and most interesting - response was that 54 offenders (61%) said either that 'I think before I act now', or that 'I think more about the future'. Thus, there is a self-perception of less impulsive and more considered behaviour.
- In section C, as many as 14 respondents (16%) were unable to identify any good things that had happened to them. Of the remainder, the main emphasis was on relationships that were seen as valuable: thus, 50 participants (57%) identified a relationship with a girlfriend, the importance of a child (or children),

reconciliations with parents, or other family events, as the primary 'good thing' recently in their lives .

Taken together, the responses in *Table 1* tell an interesting story. This was a group selected because they were recidivist offenders; yet we find them looking back after three years and talking particularly about being 'more mature', about thinking more often before they act, and about the

importance of relationships in their lives. These are male respondents in their early twenties, and some of these themes (for example, acting more maturely, and the importance of girlfriends) would almost certainly be replicated in general surveys of young men of a similar age. It seems clear, though, that criminologists need to consider more fully how these themes might intersect with the criminality of the respondents.

TABLE 1

Fourth Interview: Self-Reported Perceptions of Events in the Last Three Years†		N
A. 'Do you see yourself as any different from three years ago?'		
No		7
Yes: more mature, more responsible		32
Yes: nicer person, feel better about self		13
Yes: now not on drugs/not drinking		4
Yes: other positive comments (e.g. calmer; thinking more)		19
Yes: 'prison is getting to me'		2
Yes: other negative comments		2
Yes: other comments		9
		88
B. 'Do you think and behave in a different way than three years ago?'		
No		5
Yes: I think before I act now		44
Yes: I'm more mature/calmer		12
Yes: I think more about the future		10
Yes: I respect others more		3
Yes: I'm worse now		10
Yes: other comments		3
		88
C. 'Good things in the last three years'		
None		14
Relationship with girlfriend		20
Child(ren)		16
Making up with parental family		5
Events in extended family (marriages, births, etc)		9
Being in work		8
Good accommodation		4
Getting off drugs		2
Other items		10
		88

† All questions were open-ended, and multiple responses were allowed. For simplicity, only the first response from each respondent is given, as most respondents gave only one response. Adding the other responses does not materially alter the results.

That issue was illuminated, in our study, by analyses of transcripts from the qualitative sample, but space precludes detailed discussion here. In headline terms, however, what emerges from these analyses is a series of processes whereby offenders move gradually towards a less offending life: they become more aware of others' views; they try to take more responsibility for themselves and other people; they try to think before they act; and they find themselves obliged to work out the specifics of 'learning to live another life, often with less money and less excitement' (Shapland and Bottoms 2011, p. 275). It seems reasonable to summarise this – as many of our respondents did (see Part A of Table 1) as a process of 'maturation' or 'growing up'. But this is an active, not a passive maturation: it requires effort, and – given the offenders' past criminality and social deficits- it is often difficult.

Some findings are specific to the age-group involved in the study. A good example concerns the complicated three-way relational changes often evident in the sample, and involving (i) important new relationships with girlfriends (and sometimes children); (ii) reconciliations with parents; and (iii) a move away from former delinquent friends. Given age-specific data of this kind, it seems reasonable to be suspicious of what seems to be a growing tendency in the desistance literature to search for a general (age-neutral) theory of desistance. Instead, I would argue that explaining the crime drop in early adulthood requires us, among other things, to understand more fully how criminal careers are shaped by the broader aspects of the experience of young adulthood. As Britta Kyvsgaard (2003, p.241) put it, when studying desistance we need to pay attention 'to the subjective aspects of maturation in terms of personal philosophy or one's place in the world'; and as everyone knows young adulthood is – for offenders and non-offenders alike – a time when such matters are especially important. It can, I think, reasonably be argued that these and other results from the Sheffield study have potentially important implications for policymakers and probation staff when considering policies and practice for this transitional age-group.

NOTES

* This paper summarises parts of a plenary lecture given at the Annual Congress of the Netherlands Society of Criminology (NVK) in Leiden in June 2011. A fuller version of the lecture, with illustrative cases, has been published in Dutch (Bottoms 2011).

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