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Hangin'g Out and Messin'g About

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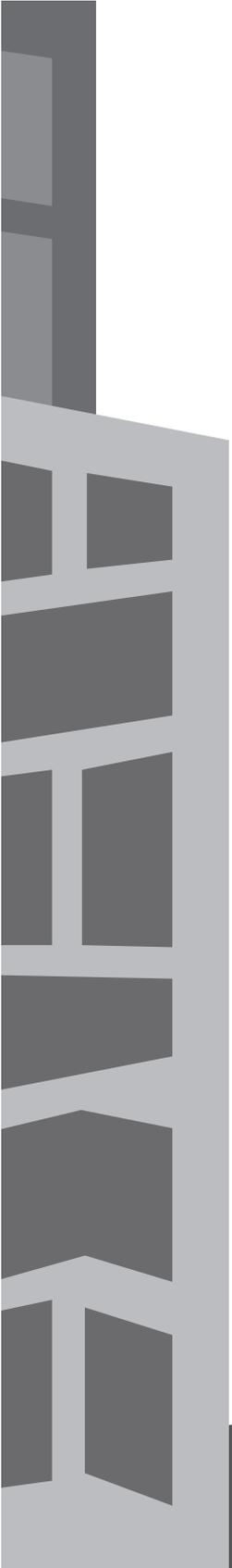
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Summary



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The phenomenon of groups of adolescents hanging out, not doing anything in particular, is a familiar occurrence across all times and all cultures. This behavior is also referred to as *unstructured socializing*. The concept of unstructured socializing, as formulated by Osgood et al. (1996), represents an activity without any structure, undertaken with peers in the absence of authority figures. Scholars have argued that adolescents' desire to meet friends away from parental supervision is part of a developmental process toward adulthood, whereby they distance themselves from their parents, discover their own identities, and develop social skills (Allen and Antonishak, 2008; Giordano, 2003; Vitaro, Boivin, and Bukowski, 2009). Nevertheless, despite these developmental advantages, involvement in unstructured socializing also makes it easier for adolescents to engage in less desirable activities, such as vandalism, shoplifting, and other forms of delinquency.

This book addresses the relationship between adolescents' involvement in unstructured socializing ('hanging out') and their involvement in delinquency. The study builds on the theory and empirical work of Osgood et al. (1996) and the stock of literature that has been published since on the relationship between unstructured socializing and delinquency. The aim of the book is to elaborate on the relationship between unstructured socializing and delinquency; theoretically, methodologically, and empirically. In order to achieve this, I examine underlying processes that *explain* the relationship, apply an innovative data collection method to better empirically *investigate* the relationship, and study situational conditions that *specify* the relationship.

Data on the time use and deviant behaviors of over 800 Dutch adolescents (aged 11 to 20, derived from the SPAN project) and over 16,000 American adolescents (aged 10 to 17, derived from the PROSPER Peers project) were used. These adolescents were recruited in their secondary schools. Two innovative data collection methods—the space-time budget method (a sort of time diary) and systematic social observation—were applied, in combination with more traditional methods, to improve the

operationalization of unstructured socializing, and to investigate situational conditions that potentially affect the unstructured socializing-delinquency relationship.

Unstructured socializing and adolescent delinquency

Since the publication of Osgood et al. in 1996, the concept of unstructured socializing has received increasing attention in sociological and criminological literature. Chapter 1 provides a theoretical and empirical overview of this literature, based on a systematic literature review. Almost all of the 74 studies that are included in this review found a positive relationship between unstructured socializing and delinquency. This speaks to the robustness of the relationship across research designs, measurement strategies, stages of adolescence, types of delinquency, and across countries. The relationship is again confirmed in the studies described in this book. Nevertheless, the review also shows a need of further investigation on at least three matters. First, little is known about factors that explain the relationship. Second, there is room for improvement in the operationalization of unstructured socializing. Third, we know little about situational factors that specify the relationship.

Why is unstructured socializing related to adolescent delinquency?

To start with the first gap in the literature: Why is unstructured socializing related to increased risks for delinquency? In Chapter 2, four potential explanations are formulated and empirically investigated. To formulate these potential explanations, the unstructured socializing perspective (Osgood et al., 1996) is theoretically integrated with several other theories and perspectives. First, based on routine activity theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979), it is theorized that unstructured socializing exposes adolescents to opportunities for delinquency, because of the lack of structure and absence of authority figures. Next, based on social learning theory (e.g., Akers, 1998; Burgess and Akers, 1966) and situational peer influence approaches (e.g.,

Dishion et al., 1996; Warr, 2002), it is theorized that unstructured socializing exposes adolescents to group processes that motivate delinquency, and make them increasingly tolerant toward delinquency. Finally, based on ideas about offender convergence settings (Felson, 2003) and association with conventional youth in structured activities (Eccles et al., 2003), it is theorized that involvement in unstructured socializing exposes adolescents to delinquent peers, which in turn affects their own delinquent behavior. Findings suggest that all of the proposed processes, directly or indirectly, explain the relationship. Involvement in unstructured socializing 1) exposes adolescents to temptations, i.e. perceived opportunities, to engage in delinquency; 2) exposes adolescents to delinquent peers, which subsequently; 3) increases their exposure to delinquent group processes; and 4) increases their tolerance toward delinquency. These processes together explain, for a large part, the differences and changes in delinquency among the adolescents studied.

Measuring the setting of unstructured socializing

In Chapters 3 and 4, the strengths and weaknesses of two promising research methods for capturing the setting of unstructured socializing are investigated. The first, discussed in Chapter 3, is the space-time budget method (Wikström and Butterworth, 2006; Wikström et al., 2012). This method records, retrospectively, over four days, the hourly activities and whereabouts of respondents. Because the time diary format allows for scrutinizing activities, as well as the people present in the setting, this method is particularly useful for operationalizing unstructured socializing. Moreover, the method maps adolescents' whereabouts and thereby extends the traditional focus on residential neighborhoods as sources of environmental influence.

The second method, discussed in Chapter 4, is systematic social observation (Perkins, Meeks, and Taylor, 1992; Perkins and Taylor, 1996; Taylor, Gottfredson, and Brower, 1984). This method is applied to observe and investigate physical and social disorder within street segments, which are features of the physical environment that can be related to delinquency. The study presented in this chapter is particularly concerned with observer bias. Characteristics of observers, such as whether they grew up in an urban

or rural area, may affect their perception of disorder. If the allocation of observers over different neighborhoods is not taken into account, this may affect aggregated measures of disorder. The chapter presents a model that directly controls for observer bias in ecological, i.e. aggregated, constructs. The model is a refinement of Raudenbush and Sampson's ecometrics model (1999). Application of this model has implications for the relationship between disorder in an area and police recorded crime rates.

What conditions strengthen or weaken the relationship between unstructured socializing and adolescent delinquency?

To explore which conditions strengthen or weaken the relationship between unstructured socializing and delinquency, three situational conditions are investigated. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 address, respectively, the role of the functional location (e.g., in a shopping center, on the street, at a friends' home), the role of disadvantage in the neighborhoods where adolescents spend time unstructured socializing, and the characteristics of friends with whom adolescents are engaged in unstructured socializing.

Functional location

With regard to the functional location (Chapter 5), the expectation is that unstructured socializing is more strongly related to delinquency if it occurs at locations where social control is low. The extent to which social control is exerted at locations depends on the extent to which people feel responsible for those locations. People generally feel responsible for what happens in their homes (private space) but much less so for what happens on the street (public space). To hypothesize which locations are specifically crime conducive, we integrate Felson's classification (1995) on responsibilities of places with the unstructured socializing perspective (Osgood et al., 1996). In line with the hypotheses, findings indicate that unstructured socializing in private spaces is less strongly related to delinquency than unstructured socializing in semi-public and public spaces. In particular, unstructured socializing in public entertainment facilities, on the streets, and in open spaces is related

to increased adolescent delinquency, more so than unstructured socializing in shopping centers, public transportation, and other semi-public settings, such as schools and sports clubs. These findings are potentially explained by the supervision exerted by shop owners, employees at facilities for public transportation (e.g., a tram conductor), and employees at the other semi-public settings (e.g., concierge), who are assigned responsibility for a location as their primary job. Although this remains speculation, it is possible that such employees interfere when a nearby group of adolescents becomes too rowdy or noisy, or when they show signs of initiating delinquent behavior.

Disadvantage in the neighborhood

Is 'hanging out' in disadvantaged neighborhoods more strongly related to delinquency than hanging out elsewhere? To address this question, in Chapter 6, the unstructured socializing perspective is theoretically integrated with social disorganization theory (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls, 1997; Shaw and McKay, 1942) and broken windows theory (Wilson and Kelling, 1982). According to social disorganization theory, disorganization in a neighborhood reflects the inability or unwillingness of residents to establish social control in their neighborhoods. It follows then that, in neighborhoods with high levels of disorganization, residents are less likely to supervise groups of adolescents who are hanging out in that area. Adolescents may therefore feel less restricted in their behavior, which will possibly translate to participation in delinquency. Similarly, signs of disorder can be viewed as cues that inappropriate behavior is tolerated in that area, that 'nobody cares' (Wilson and Kelling, 1982). Signs of disorder thereby provide signals that deviant acts will likely go unpunished. In this study, seven indicators of social disorganization are investigated, socioeconomic status, ethnic heterogeneity, residential mobility, family disruption, population density, structural density, and collective efficacy, along with an indicator expressing the level of physical disorder. Of these indicators, collective efficacy, i.e. social trust and social control among neighborhood residents, appears to be the only one to affect the unstructured socializing-delinquency relationship: Unstructured socializing in neighborhoods with low levels of collective efficacy is more strongly related to delinquency than unstructured socializing in other neighborhoods. This implies that when adolescents hang out in

neighborhoods where residents are unable or unwilling to exert supervision, such activity is more strongly related to delinquency.

Delinquent peers

Does 'hanging out with the wrong crowd' indeed facilitate delinquency and substance use? The role of peers with whom adolescents engage in unstructured socializing (Chapter 7) is theorized based on situational peer influence approaches (Dishion et al., 1996; Warr, 2002), and the literature on co-offending (e.g., Warr, 1996). It is theorized that peers who are present in an unstructured socializing situation may encourage an adolescent to commit delinquent acts by 1) responding affirmatively to delinquent talk or behavior, and thereby providing positive reinforcement for delinquency; 2) by instigating a delinquent act; 3) by threatening his or her status and thereby provoking a (violent) response; or 4) by merely being present and thus providing a group setting that "deflects, dilutes or supplants moral responsibility" (Warr, 2002: 70). Furthermore, it is theorized that the peers who are more likely to reinforce, instigate, or provoke delinquent behavior, are those peers who are delinquent, risk seekers, tolerant toward rule breaking, or the peers who are older than the respondent. Findings suggest that it is particularly relevant whether peers are involved in delinquency: Unstructured socializing with substance using, stealing, vandalizing, and violent peers enhances adolescents' risk for engagement in similar behaviors. The other peer characteristics investigated (risk seeking, attitudes, and age) are deemed to be of less importance.

Concluding

In disentangling the underlying processes and scrutinizing the conditions that strengthen the unstructured socializing-delinquency relationship, this book enhances our knowledge about *why* and under *what conditions* 'hanging out' is related to delinquency. Thereby, this book makes an important contribution to advancing our understanding of why we should be concerned about adolescents *hanging out and messing about*.