

Peer Delinquency, Attachment to Friends and Deviant Behaviour

Peer influence and peer pressure are considered crucial in the development of delinquent behaviour. Nearly all researchers agree that an individual is more likely to show delinquent behaviour when his or her peers engage in such activities.

A recent study examining the relationship between attachment to peers, peer delinquency and delinquent behaviour supports this finding. This study also found that males with higher levels of delinquency had lower levels of trust in, and respect for, their friends. Review of Research Most research has found delinquency more likely among individuals with strong, rather than weak, attachment to their peers. Some research, however, discovered that as attachment to peers decreased, delinquency increased.

Some of the most detailed and interesting research on the nature of relationships among delinquents comes from studies of gangs. In contrast to the majority opinion among researchers on individual delinquent behaviour, the research on gangs tends to find little or no attachment among gang members.

Adolescents may resort to joining a gang because they lack the social skills necessary to develop close, personal relationships. Indeed, some research has found that loyalty within delinquent gangs is externally created. Relationships within a gang were so poor that the gang would not stay together without outside pressure from, for example, other gangs or the police. Methodology This study examined the association between peer delinquency, attachment to peers and self-reported delinquency. Data was taken from the Seattle Youth Study, conducted at the University of Washington. Information was collected on 847 white males from questionnaires and interviews.

The study used Hirschi's index of self-reported delinquency which asks such questions as "Have you ever banged up something that did not belong to you on purpose?" Responses to these questions were broken out into the following categories: no delinquent acts, one delinquent act, and two or more delinquent acts. Unfortunately, this categorization meant that individuals who committed dozens of delinquent acts were included in the same category as those who committed only two offences.

In examining the nature of relationships between respondents and friends or peers, the study distinguished between items measuring the respondent's relationship with a single best friend and those assessing relationships with friends (or "best friends") in general. Findings Consistent with virtually all previous research, peer involvement in delinquency was associated with self-reported delinquency. That is, significantly more individuals who had committed delinquent acts, as opposed to those who had not, had friends who were also delinquent.

Among those who said that at least one of their best friends had been picked up by the police, 89.1% reported having committed two or more delinquent acts. Only 56.6% of those whose best friends were not delinquent reported having committed two or more delinquent acts.

As to delinquency involvement of the best friend, more than 90% of those who said that their single, best friend had been picked up by the police reported having committed two or more delinquent acts. This compares with about 66% of those who claimed that their best friend had never been in police custody.

Next, the study looked at the link between attachment to peers and delinquency. Four measures of attachment were used, two assessing attachment to a best friend and two assessing attachment to friends in general. These measures were: identification with best friend, sharing of feelings with best friend, trust in friends and respect for friends.

Attachment to a single, best friend was not significantly associated with delinquency while attachment to friends in general was.

More specifically, both trust in, and respect for friends (not a best friend) were related to lower delinquency rates. Those who agreed with the statement that friends could be trusted to tell the truth were significantly less likely to have committed two or more delinquent acts than those who disagreed (71.9% versus 82.2%).

Respondents were also asked to agree or disagree with the statement "I have lots of respect for my friends." Eighty-five percent of those who disagreed, compared with 76.4% of those who agreed, reported having committed two or more delinquent acts.

Attachment to peers seemed to have a modest, inhibiting effect on delinquency.

The study then examined the consequences of attachment to peers through a closer analysis of the relationship between peer delinquency, individuals' own delinquency and attachment to peers. Four such analyses were done.

The first two analyses looked at the relationship between peer delinquency, self-reported delinquency and attachment to friends in general. As expected, a significant relationship was found between self-reported delinquency and peer delinquency.

When delinquency of peers was accounted for, no significant relationship was found between an individual's attachment to friends and that individual's delinquency.

However, attachment to peers and peer delinquency were significantly associated. That is, only about half (51.4%) of those with delinquent friends said they trusted their friends. This compares with about two thirds of those who had no delinquent friends. Similarly, fewer of those with delinquent friends (18%), compared to those with non-delinquent friends (24.7%), claimed they had "lots of respect for [their] friends."

From these findings, it appears that delinquents have less trust or respect for one another than non-delinquents.

The last two analyses looked at the relationship between peer delinquency, self-reported delinquency and attachment to a single, best friend. These analyses gave the same results as the previous ones, with one major difference: no significant relationship was found between attachment to a best friend and delinquency of that best friend (peer delinquency). It is interesting to note that attachment to a best friend did not seem to be affected by that friend's delinquency or non-delinquency. This may be because a best

friend is by definition the object of a close, personal relationship, sometimes regardless of that best friend's behaviour. Summary Consistent with prior research, the study found that delinquency of peers was strongly and positively associated with an individual's own delinquency.

Attachment to peers was less strongly associated with delinquency. Specifically, attachment to a single, best friend was not significantly related to an individual's own delinquency.

However, delinquency seemed to go with weak attachment to friends in general. Those who trusted and respected their friends reported lower levels of delinquency. Furthermore, those with higher levels of respect and trust for their friends were less likely to have friends who were delinquent.

D. Brownfield and K. Thompson, "Attachment to Peers and Delinquent Behaviour," *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, January (1991): 45-60.