

Age-Crime Curve & Trajectory Groups

Crime and the Life Course
SOC 401

Hirschi and Gottfredson. 1983. "Age and the Explanation of Crime." *American Journal of Sociology* 89:552-584.

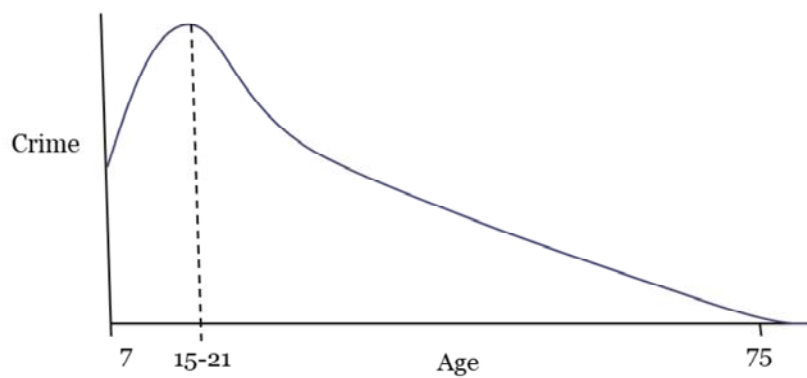


Travis Hirschi



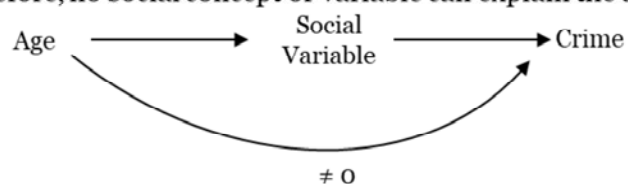
Michael Gottfredson

The Age-Crime Curve



Hirschi and Gottfredson

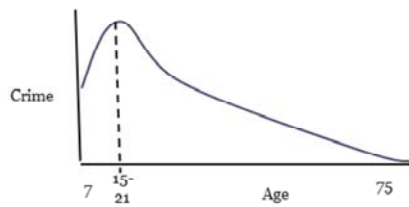
- The age crime curve is invariant across all social groups, all historical periods, all societies.
- Therefore, no social concept or variable can explain the age effect.



- Do not evaluate social theories on whether or not they can explain the age effect; they cannot.

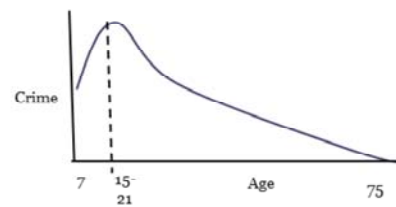
Hirschi and Gottfredson, con't

- The age-crime curve is invariant across any social variable.
- Social class (or any other social variable) cannot explain the age effect.



High Social Class

(or high on any other
social variable)

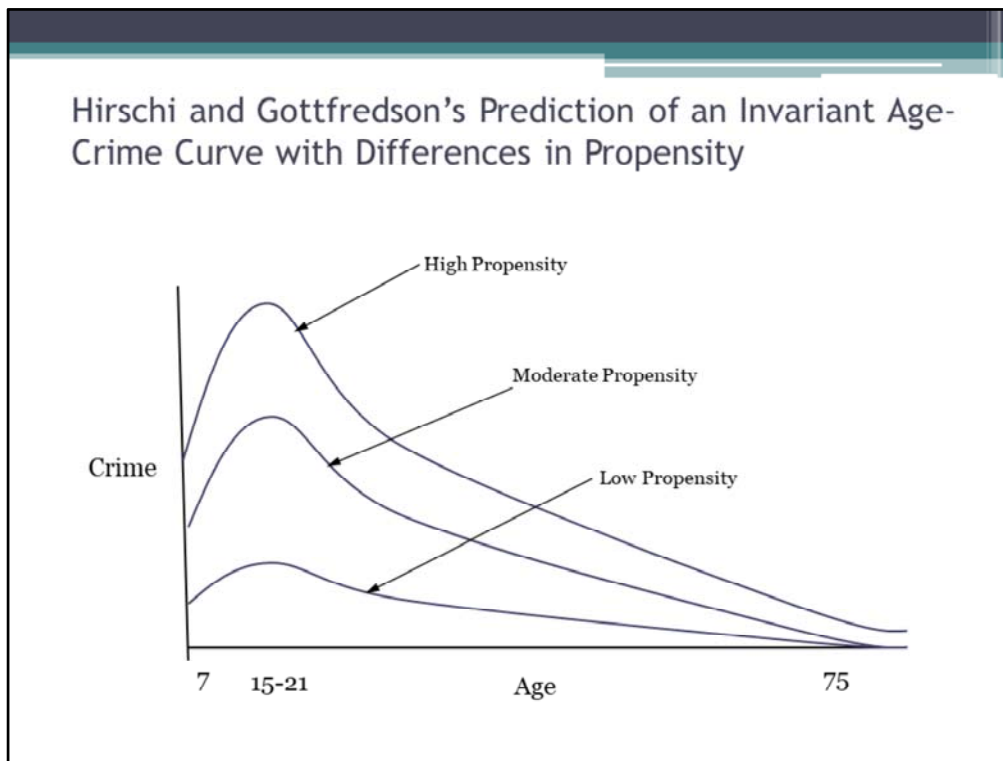


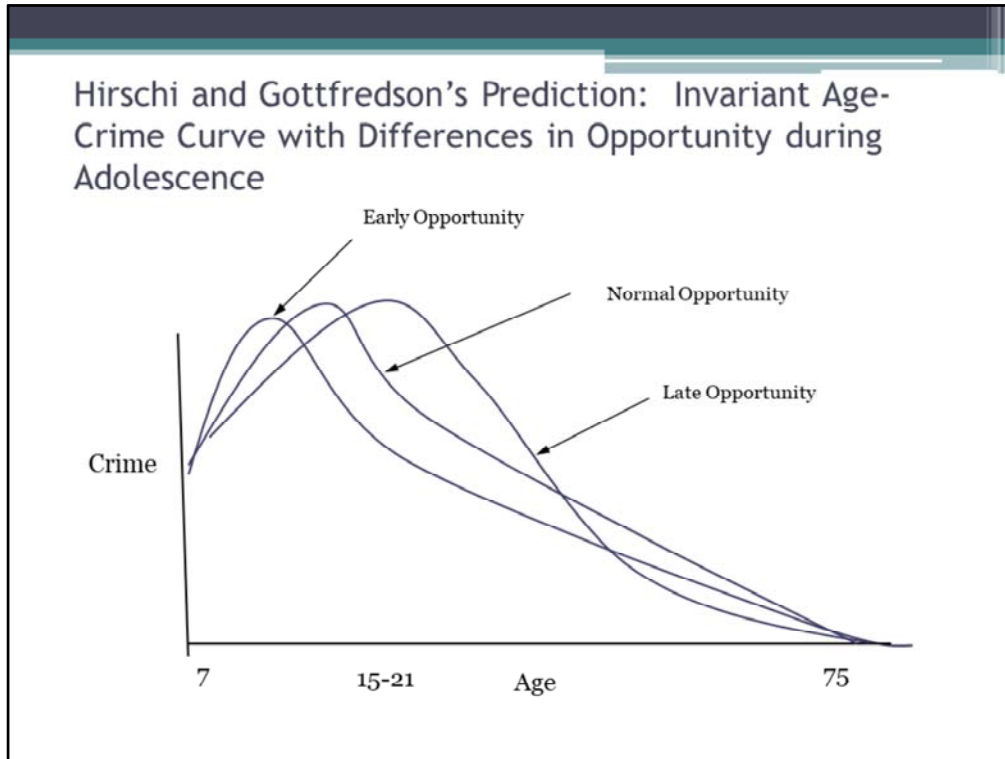
Low Social Class

(or low on any other
social variable)

Hirschi and Gottfredson, Con't

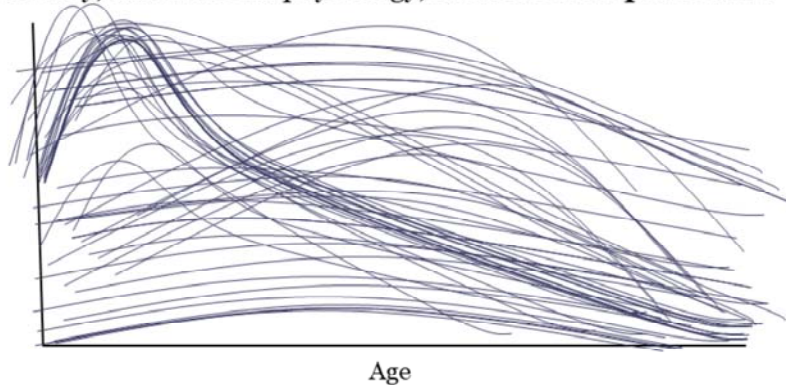
- Life course events (examples of social variables) cannot explain the age effect.
- Life course perspectives are unnecessary to the study of crime: Age + propensity explains differences in crime over time.
- Longitudinal data are unnecessary.
 - Cross-sectional data are good enough.
- Criminal career research is unnecessary: Age explains crime over time.
- Selective incapacitation will not work.
 - Once you identify the career criminal, he begins aging out of crime.
 - Cannot predict career criminal before the fact.
- Age effect: Brute force of age!
 - Perhaps physiological effects of aging.
 - Physical strength, hormones (testosterone), cognitive ability.





Latent Classes of Trajectories

- There are a lot of trajectories of offending over time.
- Hirschi and Gottfredson argue that all these trajectories reflect one age crime curve.
- Deviations are due to random noise, differences in propensity, opportunity, differences in physiology, but **not social processes**.



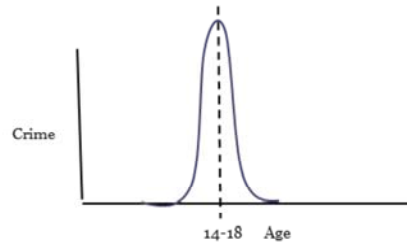
Terrie Moffitt's Developmental Taxonomy



Moffitt, Terrie E. 1993. "Adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behavior: A developmental taxonomy." *Psychological Review*, 100(4): 674-701.

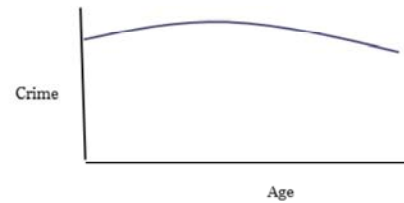
- The age-crime curve may be a mixture of different kinds of people
- She posits two groups of people
 - Adolescence-limited offenders
 - Life-course persistent offenders

Terrie Moffit's Developmental Taxonomy



**Adolescence-Limited
Offenders (90-95%)**

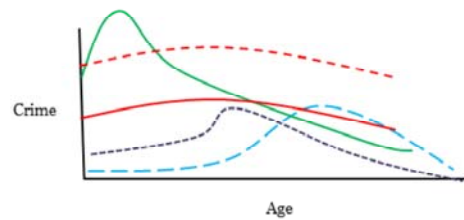
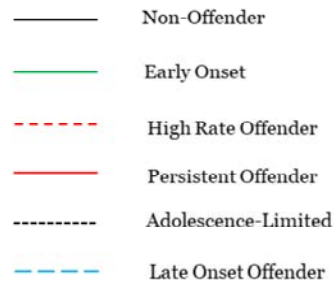
- Normal people.
- In adolescence, they mimic life-course persistent offenders
- Adolescent deviance is “normal” and healthy part of being an adolescent
- Then age out of crime, as they take on adult roles



**Life-Course Persistent
Offenders (5-10%)**

- Suffer from neurological deficits.
- Either genetic or effect of poor prenatal care.
- They are impulsive, unable to exercise self-control & at risk of crime throughout life
- Cumulative continuity: select into bad environments, increases risk of crime (example of state dependence)

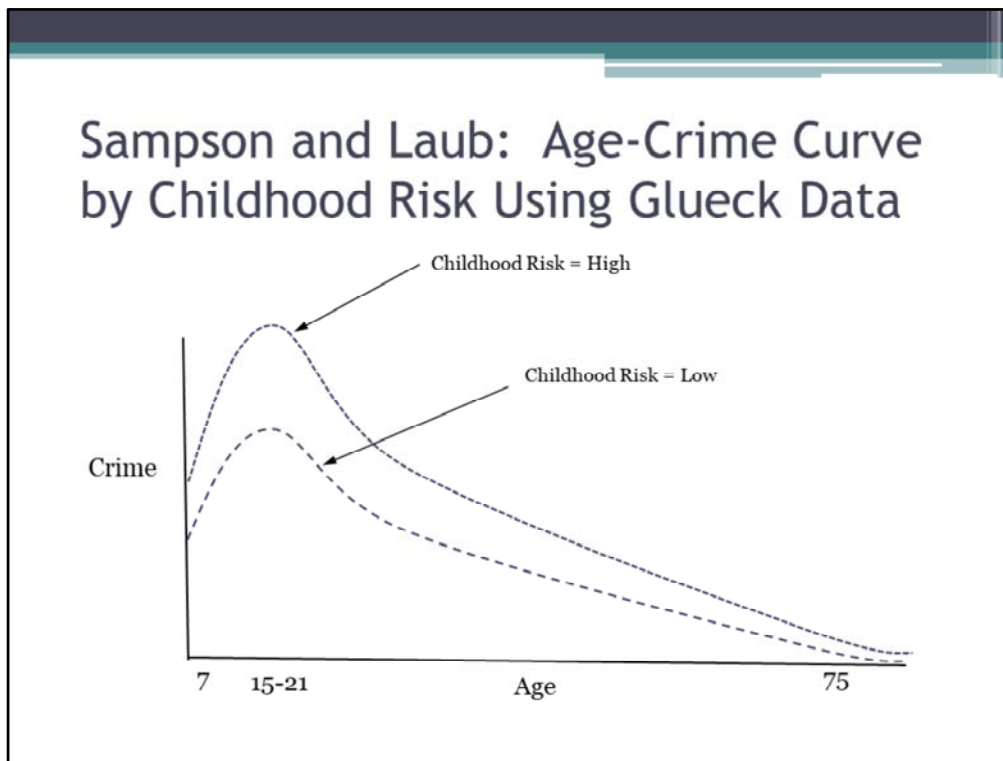
Typical Empirical Results



- The groups do not clearly divide into adolescence-limited and life course persistent groups
- Once the groups have been identified, researchers try to predict groups.
 - The evidence for Moffit is not strong.
 - Only a few covariates seem to differentiate the groups: Impulsivity, IQ.

Are There Distinct Groups?

- **Sampson and Laub:**
 - Sampson, Robert J., and John H. Laub. 2006. "Life-Course Desisters? Trajectories of Crime Among Delinquent Boys Followed to Age 70" *Criminology* 41: 555-592.
 - All groups share the shape of the overall age-crime curve.
 - The age crime curve looks the same for different social groups (IQ, Impulsivity, SES).
 - Group-based trajectory models have not advanced criminological theory.
- **Nagin & Tremblay:**
 - Groups describe important differences
 - May lead to theoretical advances ; but theory is not everything



Conclusions

- The age-crime curve is not **perfectly invariant**.
 - But it is close – always has the bell-shape.
 - Longitudinal studies are important.
 - Life course perspectives are important.
 - Social variables may explain most of the age effect, but not all (because of physiological effects).
- The evidence for Moffitt's theory as a whole is not strong.
 - Note: it is a kind of people theory.
 - Alternative: social process theory.
- At this point, we do not know how important trajectory groups of offending are.
- It is easy to reify (treat them as objective and meaningful) such groups.