

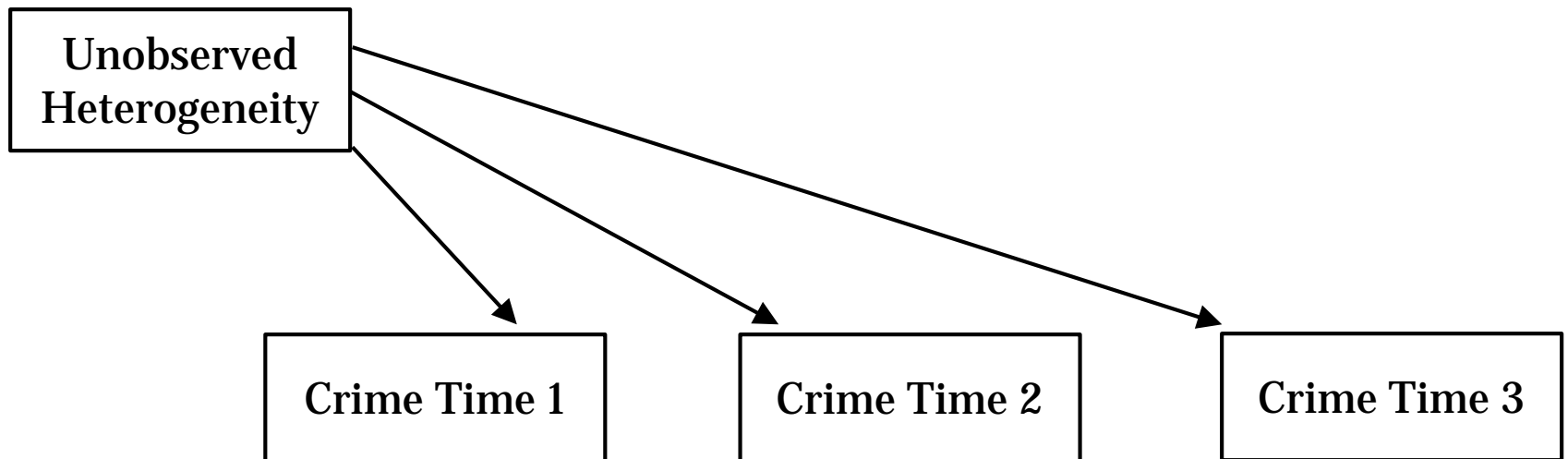
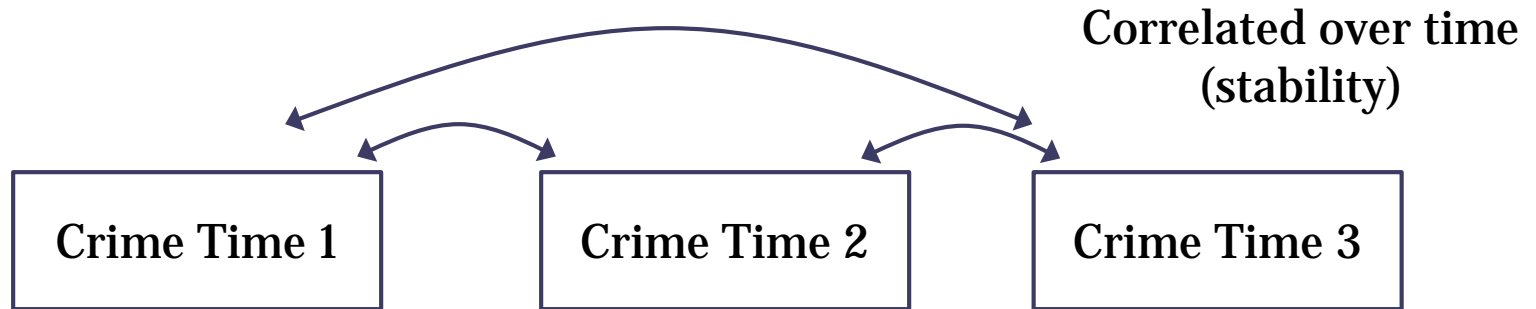
Low Self-Control Theory

Crime and the Life Course
SOC 401

Two Mechanisms Producing Stability in Crime

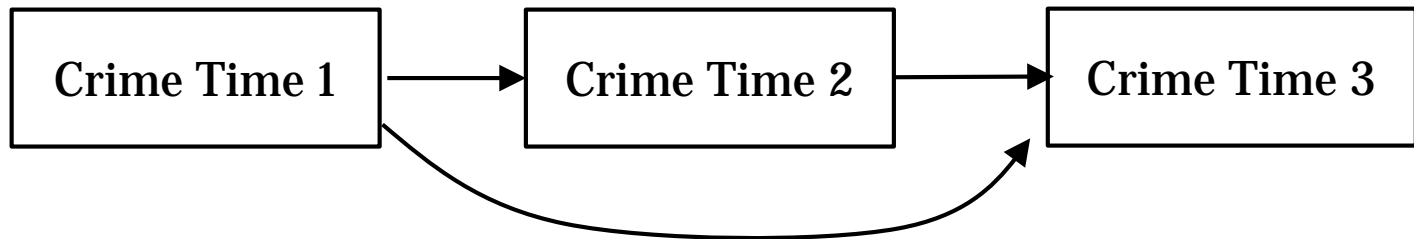
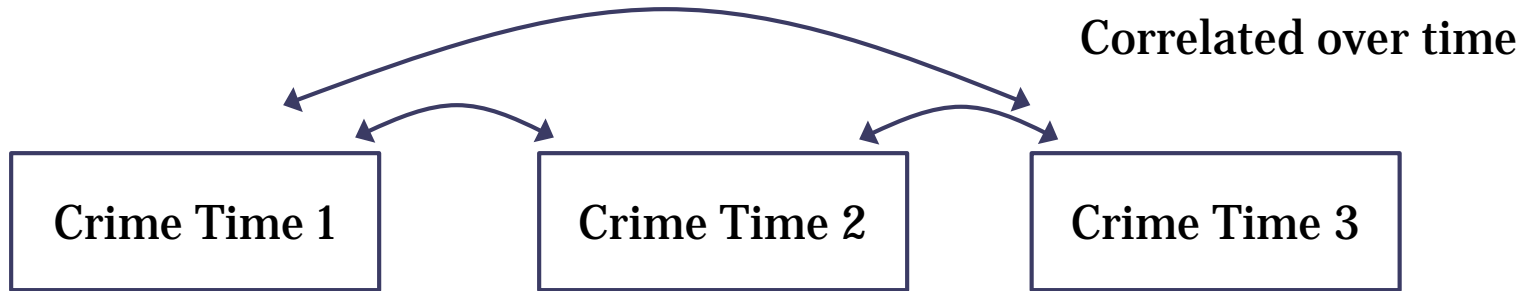
- **James Heckman: Unobserved heterogeneity vs. state dependence in employment**
- **Unobserved Heterogeneity**
 - Individual differences that are stable over time.
 - E.g., IQ, personality, sex, race
 - If their effects on crime do not change over time, they will produce stability in crime.
- **State Dependence**
 - Committing crime at one time changes the probability of committing a crime at a second time.
 - E.g., labeling and stigma, peer associations, learning, opportunities.

Unobserved Heterogeneity

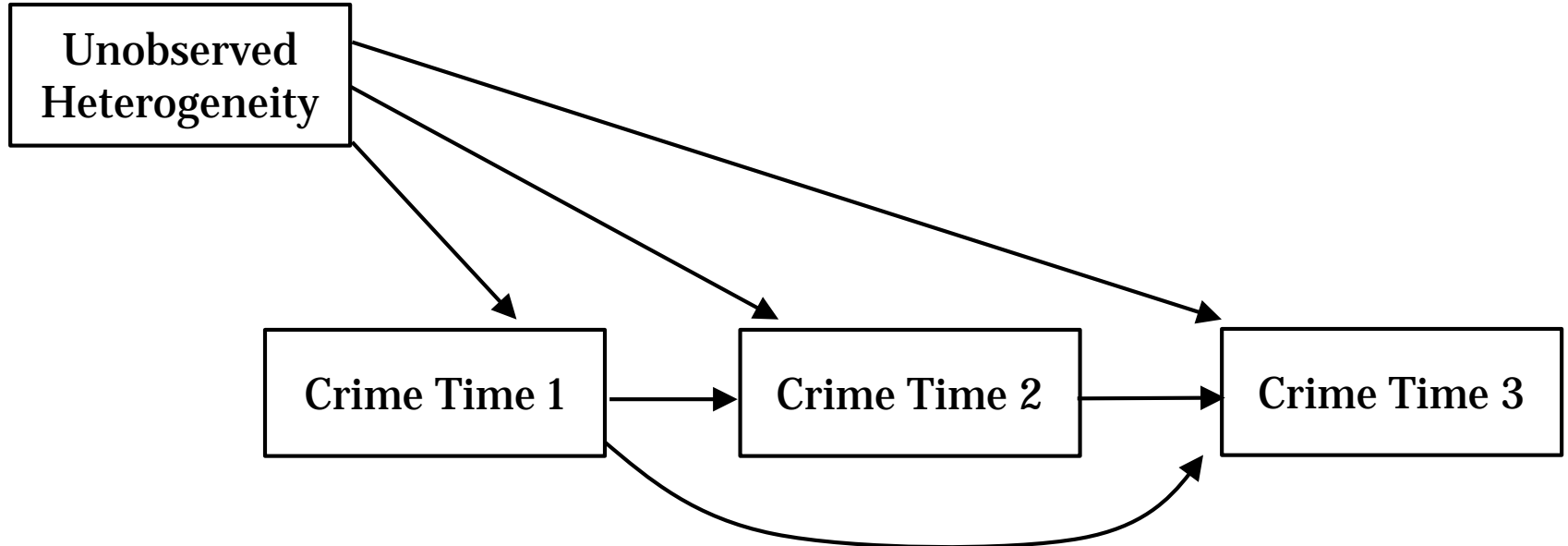
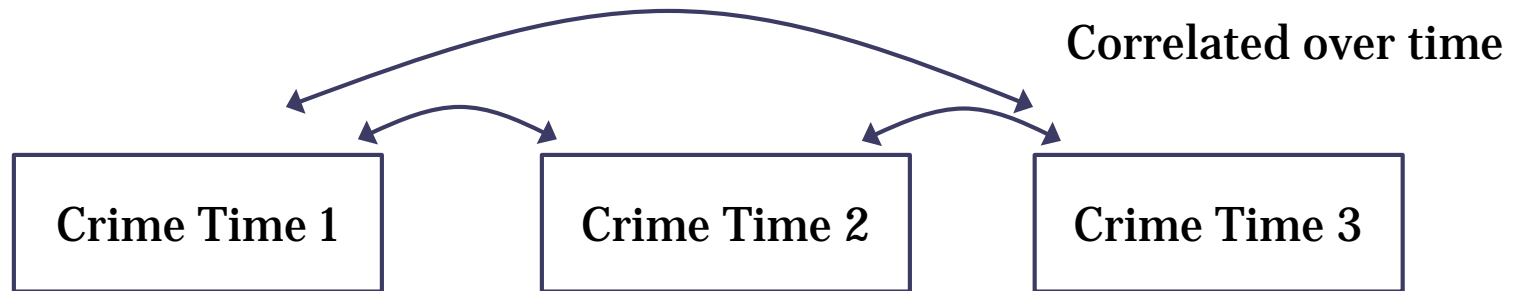


Uncorrelated after controlling for unobserved heterogeneity

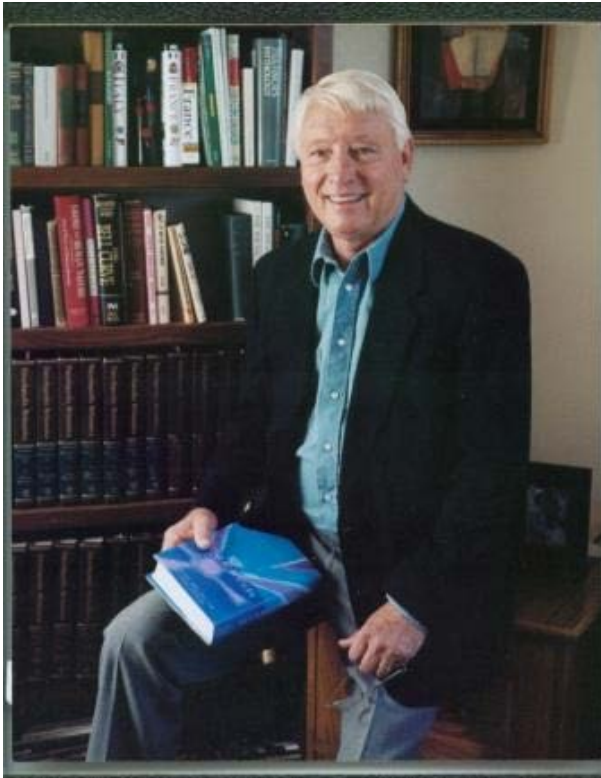
State Dependence



Both State Dependence and Unobserved Heterogeneity



Gottfredson and Hirschi. 1990 *The General Theory of Crime*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.



Travis Hirschi



Michael Gottfredson

Assumptions of Control Theories

- **Consensus model of society:** Society consists of a single moral order
- **Crime is not relative,** but is invariant across time and societies
- **Everyone is equally-motivated to commit crime**
 - **Crime is not learned**
 - **Explain conformity, not crime**

A General Theory of Crime: Low Self Control Theory

- Universal definition of crime: force or fraud committed for self-interested gain.
- Assumes criminal acts are short-lived, immediately gratifying, simple, easy, and exciting.
- Crime shares much with some noncriminal behavior: gambling, accidents, skydiving

Three Empirical Facts that Other Criminological Theories Cannot Explain

- Age distribution of crime is invariant across time, social groups, societies
- Versatility (or lack of specialization)
 - Cafeteria-style offending patterns
 - Wolfgang, et al. , Delinquency in a Birth Cohort
- Stability of Crime
 - After about age 8, crime is relatively stable
 - Best predictor is prior crime

Identifying the Concept of Low Self Control

H&G: Look at modal characteristics of crime and infer modal characteristics of criminals:

Characteristics of Crimes

Exciting & risky
Immediately pleasurable
No delayed gratification
No manual or academic skill
Entails suffering of others
Self-centered
Impulsive
Low tolerance for frustration

Characteristics of Criminals

Seek excitement and risk
Seek immediate pleasure
Cannot delay gratification
Lack manual or academic skill
Indifferent to suffering of others
Tend to be self-centered
Tend to be impulsive
Have a low tolerance for frustration

Adds up to low self-control: A stable trait like personality. Doesn't change throughout the life course (Note: example of unobserved heterogeneity.)

Low Self Control and Stability of Crime

- People high on self-control have low propensity to crime at all times
- People low on self-control have high propensity to commit crimes at all times
- But they don't have to: Depends on opportunity and the situation
 - Given a crime opportunity, individuals will calculate costs and benefits of crime
 - But persons low on self control will have less control (seek immediate rewards and discount long term outcomes)
- Explains the stability in crime (note: unobserved heterogeneity)

Low Self Control & Versatility

- People low on self control are also more likely to engage in risky noncrimes:
 - Unwed pregnancies
 - Illicit sex (premarital and extramarital)
 - Smoking, drinking, drugs
 - Gambling
 - Divorce
 - Accidents
 - Fired from job
- Whether they engage in a particular criminal offense or risky behavior depends on opportunity and situations.

Low Self Control & Age Distribution

- Distinguish between criminal propensity (low self-control) and criminal events (situations)
- **Criminal propensity** is low self-control: stable individual trait causing high propensity throughout the life course
- **Criminal events** are the “event-like” character of crimes:
 - Criminal opportunity: suitable targets and capable guardians
 - Rational choice: weighing of costs and benefits
 - Physical ability and skills
 - Age
- Serious offenses are more “event-like” and explained both by propensity and criminal events
- Nonserious crimes (e.g., petty theft, vandalism) are not “event-like” (no special opportunities needed) and are explained by propensity only
- This explains the age effect, which operates through criminal events

Origins of Low Self Control

- **Early parental child-rearing**
 - Caring parents will identify undesirable behavior and punish it through disapproval. Result: High self-control
 - Some parents don't recognize such behavior or fail to punish it. Result: Low self-control
- **Influences: Attachment, caring parents, parental criminality and low self-control, many children in the home**
- **Schools play a secondary role (require parental cooperation).**
 - Teachers monitor and punish behavior to maintain order.
 - High self-control is required for doing homework, getting good grades, getting along with others, liking school (attachment and commitment)

Criminal Organization and Delinquent Gangs

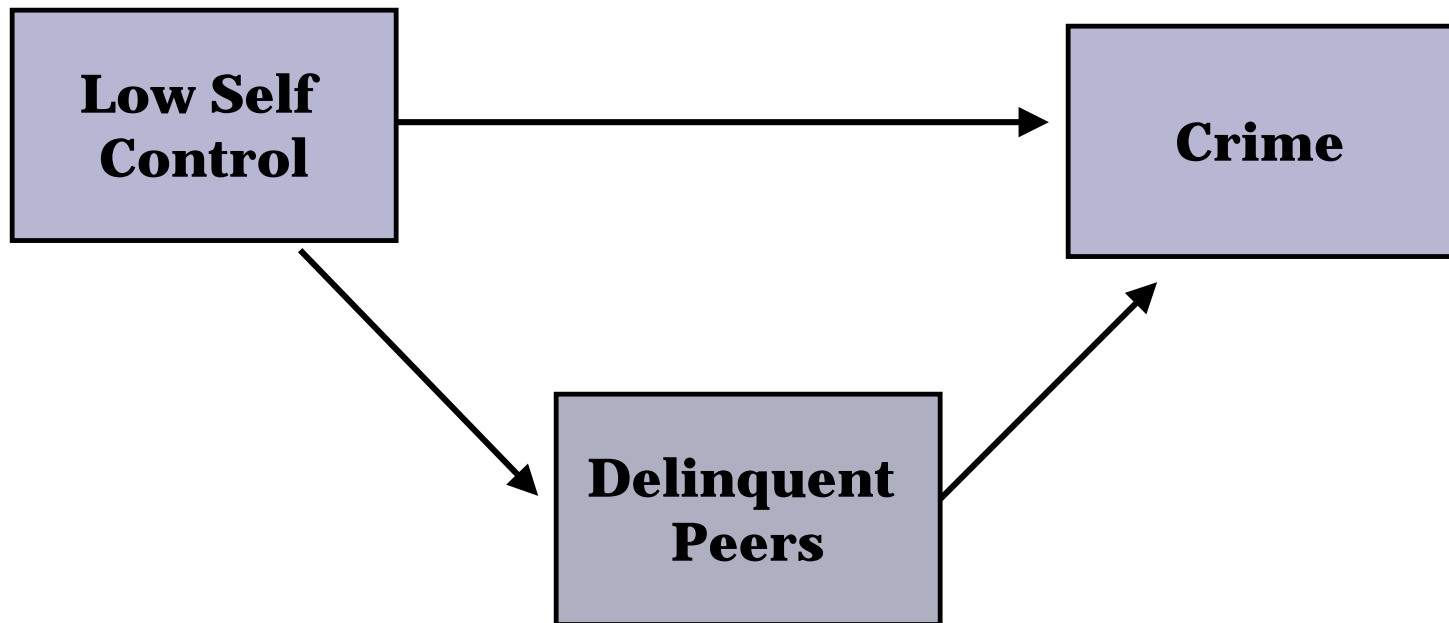
- Criminal and delinquent organizations don't exist.
- Mafia is a creation of the media and Department of Justice.
- Crips and Bloods were fanciful creations of Daryl Gates (L.A. Police Chief).
- Criminals cannot sustain stable organization or relationships: lack social skills, planning, etc.
- Criminals fight and victimize their peers.

Delinquent Peers and Delinquency

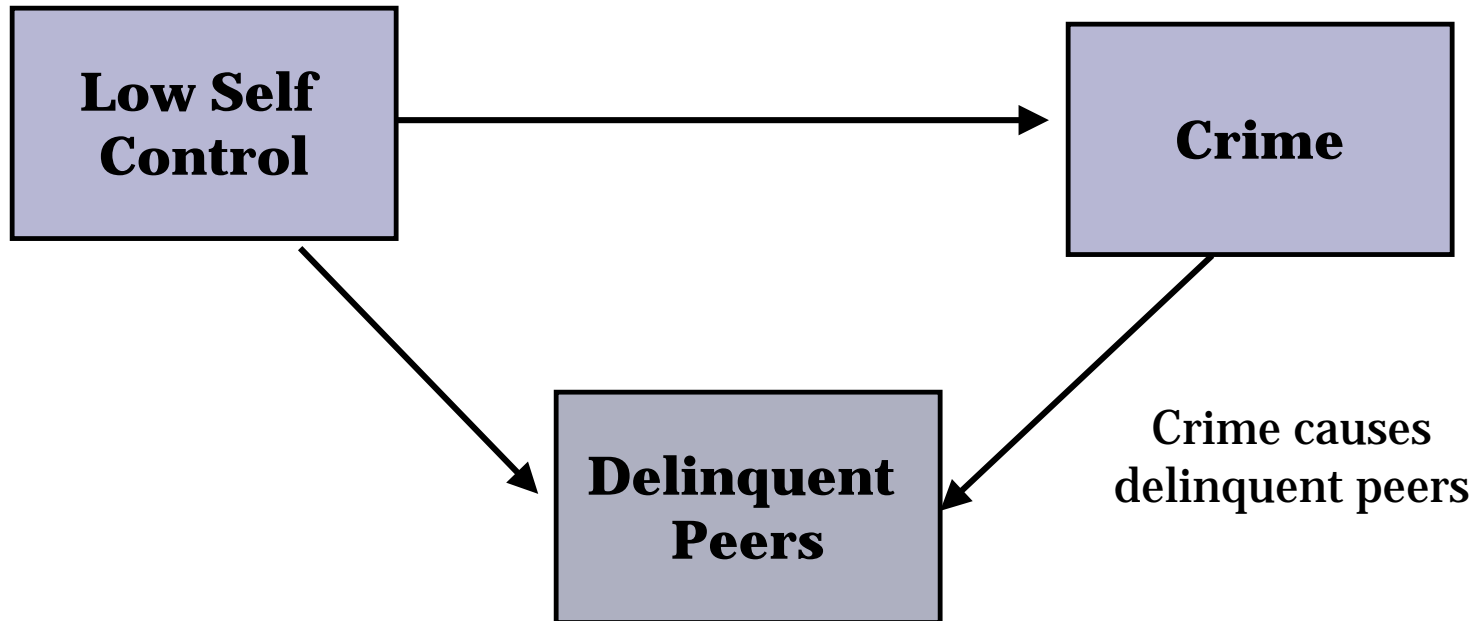
Correlation between delinquent peers and delinquent behavior is not causal

- **Spurious:** Low self-control causes delinquency and delinquent peer association
- **Reverse causal order (selection effect):** “Birds of a feather flock together”
- **Measurement artifact** (asking respondent about delinquent peers tells us about his/her own delinquency)

Delinquent Peers and Crime are Spuriously Correlated



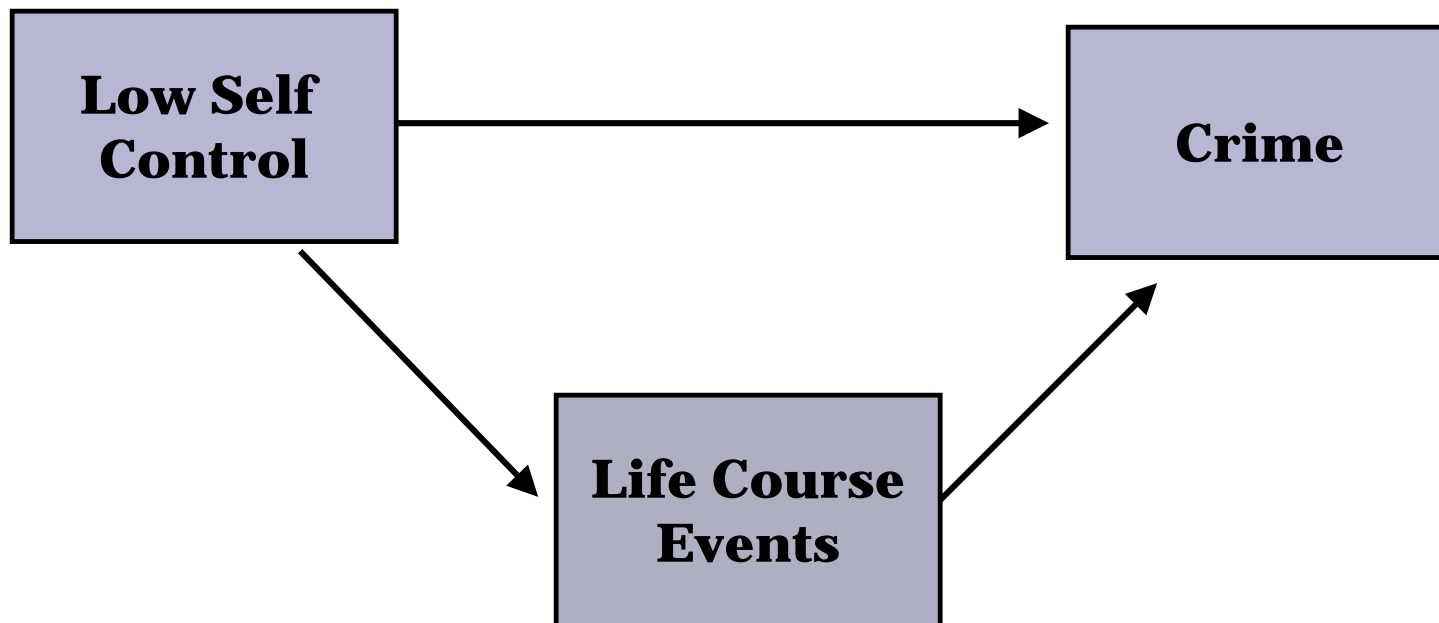
Birds of a Feather Flock Together



Life Course Transitions and Crime

- Life course events have no effect on crime.
- Work, marriage, military are spuriously correlated with crime.
 - Confounding variable: low self control.
 - Low self-control selects for poor jobs, divorce, and desertion.
 - High self-control selects for good jobs, marriage, and military service.
- If you controlled for low self-control, the correlation between life course events becomes zero.

Life Course Events and Crime: Spurious due to Low Self Control



Criticism: Tautology (Circular Argument)

- Akers: Self-control is identified by characteristics of crimes. Therefore, the theory argues that crime causes crime.
- In fact, H&G argue that the best measure of low self-control is prior crime.
- H&G: Tautologies can be good. Question is whether empirically it explains crimes.
- Empirical research: Has difficulty separating out measures of self-control from characteristics of crimes.