

CHAPTER 9: FRIENDS

Introduction

As chapter eight has already identified, there appears to be a strong association between the activities young people get involved in with friends and their own delinquency. The relationship between peer group activity and delinquency has long been recognised within criminological theory. Two contrasting explanations have been put forward, in the form of sub-cultural theory and differential association.

Sub-cultural theory views delinquency as a product of the dynamics of group interactions which encourage young people to resist adult authority and express youthful subversion. Cohen (1955) argued that young males from working class backgrounds form gangs as a solution to the status frustration or strain they experience when they come up against the 'middle class measuring rod' at school. Cloward and Ohlin (1961) proposed that delinquent sub-cultures arose because of a gap between the aspirations of lower class youth for economic success and the possibility of achieving them through legitimate means. While Downes (1966) suggested that delinquency amongst young people had less to do with economic aspirations and more to do with blocked opportunities for the pursuit of leisure activities. However, these accounts of delinquency do not provide an adequate explanation for gender differences in offending.¹

In their theory of differential association, Sutherland and Cressey (1970) proposed that delinquency was not a collective reaction to circumstances but an individual learned response, conditioned by exposure to the values of intimate personal groups (such as family or peers) who viewed criminal behaviour as acceptable. Rutter and Giller (1983) also found strong relationships between individual delinquency and criminality within both the family and the peer group. However, differential association theory fails to explain the reasons why some people behave differently to others in the face of very similar circumstances.

Recent research into youth offending has produced a hybrid of these two theories, which proposes that delinquency is partly the product of an individual predisposition towards offending and partly the result of a culture of delinquency which develops and thrives amongst members of the peer group (Thornberry et al, 1994). As individual personality characteristics are discussed elsewhere in this report (see chapter 6), this chapter of the report focuses on the structure and characteristics of young people's friendship groups, including girlfriends and boyfriends, paying particular attention to gender differences. This section also explores the relationships between respondents reports of their own and their friends' delinquency and examines the extent to which respondents felt their behaviour would be influenced by their peers.

¹ Cohen, for example, has been heavily criticised for the stereotypical manner in which he portrays female behaviour (see Heidensohn, 1996). According to Cohen the main way of achieving status for girls is through successful relationships with the opposite sex and, where opportunities for this are limited, girls become sexually delinquent.

Structure and characteristics of friendship groups

At each sweep, respondents were asked a series of questions about how many friends they had and what they were like, in order to build up a picture of the characteristics of young people's peer groups (see Table 9.1). There was a slight difference in emphasis between the two sweeps. Sweep one asked about 'friends' generally while, in recognition of the fact that young people often have a large number of friends with very different characteristics, sweep two focused more specifically on the 'friends you mostly go about with in your spare time'.

Table 9.1: Questions on friends' characteristics – sweeps 1 and 2

<p>Sweep 1</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How many friends do you have altogether?2. How many close friends do you have?3. Do you wish that you had more friends?4. How many of your friends...<ul style="list-style-type: none">- go to the same school as you?- live in your neighbourhood?- are boys?- are girls?- are a year younger than you?- are about the same age as you?- are a year or more older than you? <p>Sweep 2</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How many friends do you have altogether? <p><i>Now think about the friends you mostly go about with in your spare time...</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">2. How many of the friends you went about with last year do you still go about with now?3. How old are the friends you usually go about with?4. How many of the friends you usually go about with are girls and boys?5. How many friends do you usually go about with at once?6. Would you call the group of friends you usually go about with a 'gang'?
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Friendship group size

As expected with a cohort of this age, the respondents proved to be a very sociable group, with the majority in both sweeps one (76.3 per cent) and sweep two (78.7 per cent) saying they had more than 10 friends altogether. The overall pattern of friendship group size was very similar for both boys and girls, with most having many friends and few having only one or two. However, girls clearly had a greater number of social associations, as they were more likely ($p < 0.05$) than boys to say they had more than 10 friends at sweep one and even more likely ($p < 0.01$) than boys to have 6 friends or more at sweep two.

Although most respondents reported having large numbers of friends at sweep one, they tended to have a smaller number of close friends. Most people said they had one or two (26.5 per cent) or between 3 and 5 (37.6 per cent) close friends. Interestingly,

boys were significantly ($p < 0.01$) more likely than girls to say that they had no close friends. When asked about the number of friends they hung about with at sweep two, most respondents reported usually going around with between 3 and 5 (45 per cent) or with six or more (31.4 per cent) friends. Only 23.5 per cent said they would hang around with one or two friends. Once again, girls favoured a larger group of friends and were significantly ($p < 0.01$) more likely to hang about with 6 friends or more, while boys were more likely than girls to hang around with only 1 or 2 others.

Seven in ten respondents (71.5 per cent) at sweep two said that most or all of their friends were the same as they had been the previous year, although 25.0 per cent said that only some were the same and 3.5 per cent said all their friends had changed. Although boys reported having fewer friends than girls overall, they were significantly more likely ($p < 0.01$) to report that most or all of their friends in sweep two were the same as they had been the previous year. Girls, on the other hand, were more likely to say that only some of their friends were the same. These findings suggest that girls not only have more friends altogether and hang around in larger groups than boys, but they are also more active in terms of changing friendship groups and making new friends at this age.

Although Ball and Curry (1995) found little evidence in Britain of the 'gang culture' typical amongst American youth, the findings from sweep two show that young people do predominantly hang around in groups. While respondents' concept of the term 'gang' may be very different to that of the American street gangs, a significant minority (26.4 per cent) of those who said they hung about with at least three others described their group as a 'gang'. Boys were no more likely than girls overall to say they belonged to a gang. However, their experiences were somewhat different as boys were significantly more likely ($p < 0.01$) to say that their gang had a name (30.5 per cent, compared with 17.2 per cent of girls) and that their gang used special signs or sayings (32.6 per cent and 23.5 per cent respectively).

Sex, age and social origin of friends

Not surprisingly, respondents tended to have predominantly same sex friends, although this was significantly more common ($p < 0.01$) among boys in both sweeps. Testing between sweeps, there was a significant ($p < 0.01$) rise from 65.3 per cent to 72.4 per cent in the proportion of boys who said their friends were mostly or all the same sex. The rise from 61.4 per cent to 64.5 per cent for girls was not significant. These findings suggest that boys' friendship groups are not only smaller but more exclusively male, whereas girls are more socially interactive with a larger number of people from both sexes.

This finding seems somewhat paradoxical and is difficult to explain. One speculation may be that girls and boys within the same group have a differing sense of social attachment. For example, if boys are the key actors in group activities they may only consider other participating boys as their friends. Girls are often perceived to be bystanders in group activities, however, their stronger sense of social attachment may lead them to consider the boys as their friends merely through association with them.

Boys and girls also differed in terms of the age of their friends. The majority of respondents (63.4 per cent) reported that all or most of their friends were the same age as themselves, although this was significantly more common ($p < 0.001$) amongst girls in both sweeps (68.7 per cent and 71.8 per cent, respectively) than amongst boys (58.1 per cent and 65.2 per cent, respectively). Boys on the other hand were more likely than girls to report having a mixture of older, younger and same age friends (19.5 per cent and 13.3 per cent in sweeps one and two) compared with girls (13.7 per cent and 8.5 per cent, respectively). There were no gender differences in terms of those who said they had predominantly older or predominantly younger friends.

It is not really surprising that most respondents had friends of the same age, since 67.8 per cent of respondents stated that most or all of their friends went to the same school as them and were probably in the same year group, although this question was not asked. This did not necessarily mean that they lived in the same area, however. In fact, 58.1 per cent of respondents said that only some of their friends lived in the same neighbourhood and almost one in five (19.0 per cent) reported that they did not live near any of their friends. Although the patterns were similar, again there were some gender differences in the social origin of friends. While girls' friends were more likely ($p < 0.001$) to go to the same school, boys were more likely ($p < 0.001$) to be acquainted with friends from the same neighbourhood.

Boyfriends and girlfriends

Other studies have shown that forming partnerships and settling down has a positive effect on reducing delinquency amongst women, although the effect of marriage and children is not so apparent amongst young men (Graham and Bowling, 1995). However, there is little evidence to suggest that making close attachments to one or more partners during adolescence has the same preventative effect. Unfortunately, due to the restrictions on asking detailed questions about their relationships (see chapter 1), it was not possible to assess how serious their relationships were. Nevertheless, a few basic questions were asked about boyfriends and girlfriends in sweeps one and two (see Table 9.2, below).

Only 24.3 per cent of respondents in sweep one reported currently having a partner², although a further 50.5 per cent said they had had one at some point in the past. Boys were more likely ($p < 0.01$) than girls to say they currently had a partner, while girls were more likely than boys never to have had one. Not surprisingly, 71.8 per cent of those who currently had a partner said that they were the same age, which reflects the age of their friendship groups generally. However, almost a quarter (22.6 per cent) said that their partner was a year or more older, and girls were significantly more likely ($p < 0.01$) than boys to have an older partner (27.4 per cent and 18.5 per cent, respectively).

² For the sake of brevity, 'partner' is used to describe boyfriends and girlfriends, although this is not intended to insinuate stable, long term commitments which, at this age, would be unlikely.

Table 9.2: Questions on boyfriends and girlfriends³ - sweeps 1 and 2

<p>Sweep 1</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Do you have a girlfriend or boyfriend at the moment?2. How old is your girlfriend or boyfriend? <p>Sweep 2</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. During the last year, did you have a girlfriend or boyfriend? <p><i>If yes,</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">2. How many have you had during the last year? <p><i>If you don't have one just now, answer the next two questions about your last one</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">3. How old is your girlfriend or boyfriend?4. Do your parents know that you have a girlfriend or boyfriend?5. How often do you do things in your spare time with a boyfriend or girlfriend? (not exactly as asked in the questionnaire)

In accordance with the changes to the reference period, the cohort in sweep two were asked whether they had had a boyfriend or girlfriend during the previous year. Six in ten (60.1 per cent) said that they had, with the majority (71.6 per cent) having had more than one and a quarter (23.2 per cent) saying they had had four or more partners. Nevertheless, far fewer stated that they did things most days (16.9 per cent) or at least once a week (14.4 per cent) with a girlfriend or boyfriend. In fact, 55.6 per cent of respondents said this was something they hardly ever or never did in their spare time. Most (75.8 per cent) of those at sweep two also reported that their current (or previous) partner was the same age. While a smaller proportion than at sweep one (19.5 per cent) said that their partner was a year or more older, girls were still significantly more likely ($p < 0.01$) to have an older partner than boys (23.4 per cent compared with 15.8 per cent, respectively).

Most (68.3 per cent) respondents stated that their parents were aware of their current (or previous) partner. Similar proportions of girls and boys said this, but boys were slightly more likely to say that their parents knew about their relationships. This was slightly unexpected, since girls generally had better relationships with their parents than boys (see chapter 7). This might have been explained by the fact that girls were more likely to have an older partner and were unwilling to tell their parents about this. However, there turned out to be no significant difference in parental awareness by age of partner.

There was some evidence that having a partner was associated with delinquency, although it is likely that this relationship is inter-linked with young people's friendship groups and lifestyles generally. Nevertheless, both boys and girls who had been involved in at least one form of delinquency were significantly more likely ($p < 0.001$) at both sweeps to say that they had had a partner. At sweep one, only 19.3

³ In order not to delve more deeply into the nature of the relationship, the terms 'girlfriend' and 'boyfriend' were not defined in a prescriptive way.

per cent of girls who had offended had never had a partner compared with 43.6 per cent of non-offenders, while the Tables for the boys were similar (17.9 per cent and 44.1 per cent respectively). However, there were no differences between male and female non-offenders or between male and female offender groups. Similarly at sweep two, 74.1 per cent of girls who reported at least one type of delinquency said they had had a partner in the previous year compared with only 31.9 per cent of non-offending girls. The pattern for the boys was very similar, with the comparable Tables being 67.6 per cent and 32.1 per cent, respectively.

Friends' delinquency

Given the strong relationship between hanging around or doing other activities with friends and self-reported delinquency, and the fact that most young people hang around in groups, it is not surprising that other studies have found a strong relationship between self-reported offending and friends' offending (Junger-Tas, 1988; Hagell and Newburn, 1994). However, determining the causality of such relationships is complicated. As Rowe et al (1994) concluded, the influence of a delinquent peer group is strongly affected by both individual pre-disposition towards delinquency and the process of peer selection. An additional problem with self-report studies is the risk that the respondent may seek to absolve themselves of guilt by giving an inflated estimate of their friends' delinquency.

In sweeps one and two, the cohort were asked whether any of their friends had committed any of the delinquent acts that they themselves were asked about (see Table 3.1)⁴. The average number of delinquent acts respondents said their friends had been involved in was 3.04 in sweep one, rising to 3.53 in sweep two. Comparing the means for boys and girls, boys were significantly more likely ($p < 0.01$) to report that their friends were involved in delinquent acts than the girls in both sweeps.

Counting the types of delinquency that friends were reported to have been involved in (ever at sweep one, and in the last year at sweep two) a variety of friends' delinquency score was calculated, identical to that created for self-reported delinquency.⁵ Extremely strong correlation scores were found in sweep one between friends' variety of delinquency and both variety (0.750) and volume (0.676) of self-reported offending. And in sweep two, the strength of the association remained virtually unchanged (0.750 and 0.678 respectively). Correlation scores for boys were stronger than those for girls ($p < 0.01$), but both scored extremely highly on all counts.

Table 9.3 looks in more detail at the type of delinquent acts that respondents said their friends had been involved in. Referring back to Table 3.3, which shows the prevalence rates of self-reported delinquency, similar trends are apparent. The types of delinquency which were most common amongst respondents were also those they reported most often for their friends. And those types of delinquency which increased in prevalence between sweeps were similar for both respondents and friends.

⁴ The only difference to the self-report questions was that they were given a 'don't know' option for friends' delinquency.

⁵ The scale was made up of 15 items of delinquency, and excluded cruelty to animals which was asked only in the second sweep and would not have provided a comparable measure.

The comparisons between self-reported and friends' reported delinquency confirm there is a strong relationship between the two. However, the percentage difference between the two responses reveals that respondents consistently reported higher prevalence of offending amongst their friends than amongst themselves. The only exceptions to this were 'theft from home' (which may be explained by the large proportion of 'don't know' responses), 'graffiti' in sweep two (which shows only a slight difference) and 'fighting' in sweep one.

Table 9.3: Friends' reported delinquency - sweeps 1 and 2

Column percentages

	% prevalence ¹		% difference with self reports ²	
	Sweep 1	Sweep 2	Sweep 1	Sweep 2
Fare dodge	27.9	29.2	+ 4.3	+ 3.0
Shoplift	35.8	40.3	+ 8.9	+ 13.9
Rowdy	35.3	48.3	+ 9.9	+ 8.2
Joyride	4.3	8.0	+ 1.8	+ 3.5
Theft at school	15.0	14.4	+ 3.7	+ 5.2
Carry weapon	15.6	17.4	+ 3.8	+ 1.6
Damage property	17.4	21.2	+ 3.6	+ 5.3
Housebreak	3.6	5.4	+ 1.3	+ 2.5
Graffiti	30.0	33.6	+ 2.4	- 0.8
Rob	5.3	6.6	+ 3.6	+ 5.0
Theft at home	20.2	18.2	- 10.2	- 1.2
Fire setting	7.5	15.9	+ 3.5	+ 2.2
Injure, fight	48.1	46.2	- 5.2	+ 0.1
Car break	4.1	6.2	+ 2.8	+ 4.3
Truancy	36.7	43.7	+ 19.1	+ 20.0
Cruelty to animals	-	8.1	-	+ 2.3

1. Sweep 1 ever; sweep 2, past 12 months.

2. Percentage difference measured by subtracting prevalence of self-reported delinquency from prevalence of friends' delinquency.

It is impossible to prove that there is not some level of attribution effect in terms of individuals inflating their friends' delinquent activities to justify their own.⁶ However, it was not the case that every individual who reported doing a delinquent act also said that they had a friend who had done the same thing. For example, less than half of those who had stolen something from home said their friends had done the same in sweeps one (43.2 per cent) and two (45.1 per cent). And even those who had done more serious things did not implicate their friends. Of those who had broken into a house or building to steal something, for instance, only 53.7 per cent in sweep one and 49.6 per cent in sweep two said their friends had also done this. Given the size of the friendship groups described earlier, it would not be surprising if many non-delinquents were acquainted with others who had offended in some way.

⁶ To test this further, the respondents in sweep three are being asked to name their three closest friends (also cohort members) so that reports on self and friends' delinquency can be compared more closely.

In addition, the findings presented in chapter three showed that many young people reported being with others when they committed delinquent acts. Looking at this in slightly more detail, we find something quite paradoxical which is the opposite of the attribution effect. At sweep two, respondents who reported certain delinquent acts were asked about the last incident 'how many friends were you with at the time?'⁷. Many respondents who said they were with others at the time of the last incident later reported that they had no friends who had done these things. For example, 28.2 per cent of those who had been with others when they broke into a house or building to steal something said none of their friends had done this. The comparable figures for the other categories were 17.1 per cent for animal cruelty; 16.5 per cent for vandalism; 15.6 per cent for fire setting; 13.7 per cent for graffiti; 9.2 per cent for breaking into a vehicle; 6.5 per cent for being rowdy in public; and 5.9 per cent for shoplifting.

It may be true that in some cases the individual committed the act on their own while their friends acted as bystanders, since acts of vandalism, animal cruelty or housebreaking would not necessarily involve the whole group. However, it is likely to be the case that many respondents under-reported their friends activities. For example, being rowdy in public would typically be an activity involving the entire group. Rather than trying to attribute delinquent acts to their friends, therefore, perhaps individuals conceal their friends delinquency out of a sense of loyalty.

Friends' contact with the police

To pursue the relationship between individual and peer delinquency, the respondents were asked how many of their friends had been in trouble with the police. A fairly large proportion stated that at least some (32.5 per cent) or most (7.3 per cent) of their friends had ever got into trouble during sweep one. This dropped slightly in sweep two to 31.0 per cent and 6.1 per cent respectively, although this may be a result of the change in reference period to the last year only. Gender differences were apparent in both sweeps, with boys being significantly ($p < 0.01$) more likely to have friends who had been in trouble with the police than girls.

Respondents were very consistent in terms of reporting their friends' delinquency and the proportion of friends who had been in trouble with the police. Looking again at the variety of friends' delinquency score, those at sweep one who said none of their friends had been in trouble with the police scored a mean 1.19, while the scores for those who said one or some friends (4.75) and most or all friends (7.95) had been in trouble with the police were much higher. The findings at sweep two were very similar, with those with no friends in trouble scoring 1.59, those with one or some friends in trouble scoring 5.68 and those with most or all friends in trouble scoring 8.59 on the variety of friends delinquency scale. In other words, the more friends people said had been in trouble with the police, the greater the variety of delinquency they reported among their friends.

⁷ The delinquent acts for which this question was included were shoplifting, being rowdy in public, graffiti, vandalism, breaking into a house or building, fire setting, breaking into a vehicle to steal something and animal cruelty.

The respondents' own involvement in delinquency was another strong predictor of their friends involvement with the police. Almost half of those who had been involved in at least one delinquent act at both sweep one (48.3 per cent) and two (47.8 per cent) reported having at least some friends who had been in trouble with the police, compared with only 15.7 per cent and 16.9 per cent of non-delinquents at each sweep, respectively. And, not surprisingly, respondents' who had had adversarial contact with the police themselves were also more likely to have friends who had been in trouble with the police. As can be seen from Table 9.4, this was true of a significantly high proportion ($p < 0.001$) of both boys and girls who had had some form of adversarial contact with the police.

Table 9.4: Extent of friend's contact with the police by self-reported experience of adversarial police contact and gender - sweeps 1 and 2

Column percentages within sweep

Friends in trouble with the police	Boys		Girls	
	No adversarial police contact (n=1032)	Adversarial police contact (n=1115)	No adversarial police contact (n=1603)	Adversarial police contact (n=508)
Sweep 1				
None	44.9	11.7	54.0	15.7
One or some	25.7	53.5	17.0	48.6
Most or all	1.4	19.4	0.5	14.0
Sweep 2				
None	40.3	12.7	52.3	23.5
One or some	30.3	52.0	18.3	42.1
Most or all	2.9	18.6	1.1	10.8

1. Column percentages for each sweep do not add to 100 as those who responded 'don't know' are not included here.

Peer influence

The strong relationship between self-reported delinquency and both friends' delinquency and their police contact is undeniable, but how do young people perceive the influence of their friends on their behaviour? Jamieson et al (1999) found that most young people felt their behaviour was unaffected by the opinions of their friends, although boys aged 14-15 who were classed as persistent offenders were most likely to report being negatively influenced by their friends. In most cases, this was because their friends were involved in the same types of delinquency and because they often offended with their friends. In order to ascertain the extent to which young people thought they would be swayed by their peers against their better judgement, a series of questions was asked in sweep two (see Table 9.5, below).

Table 9.5: Questions on peer influence - sweep 2

- | |
|---|
| <p>1. How likely is it that you would still hang around with your friends if they were</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - getting you in trouble at home? - getting you in trouble at school? - getting you in trouble with the police? <p>2. How likely is it that you would do what your friends said if they</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - told you to do something that you thought was wrong? - told you to do something that you thought was against the law? |
|---|

A reliable scale was created by combining the responses all five questions on negative peer influence. Boys were found to have a significantly higher mean peer influence score (5.28) than girls (4.71), which indicated that they were more likely to be negatively influenced by their peers. However, those who reported being involved in at least one type of delinquency at sweep two also had a significantly higher ($p < 0.001$) mean peer influence score than non-delinquents (5.64 and 3.27, respectively) and so the gender difference could have been explained to some extent by this.

In order to explore this further, Table 9.6 combines gender and delinquency. This Table reveals that there are highly significant differences between delinquents and non-delinquents regardless of gender. However, the difference in mean peer influence scores for boys and girls who had committed a delinquent act was far smaller and there was no difference at all between girls and boys who had not committed a delinquent act.

Table 9.6: Significant difference in mean peer influence scores for delinquents and non-delinquents by gender - sweep 2

Column means and Pearsons Coefficients

	Mean score of peer influence		Significant difference between gender
	Boys (n=2185)	Girls (n=2144)	
Committed at least one delinquent act	5.81	5.45	P<0.01
Committed no delinquent acts	3.39	3.19	P<0.1
P value within gender groups	P<0.001	P<0.001	

¹ P value measures statistical significance between means. P<0.1 is not significant.

Looking in more detail at the relationship between peer influence and delinquency, the negative peer influence scale was strongly correlated with both variety (.442) and volume (.412) of self-reported delinquency. These correlation coefficients were very

similar for both boys and girls, which further supports the findings in Table 9.6. The negative peer influence scale also correlated highly with the variety score for friends' delinquency (.427). It is hardly surprising that there is a relationship between peer delinquency and likelihood to be negatively influenced by peers. However, the direction of causality cannot be inferred from these findings since it is equally possible that an individual may be predisposed to behaving in a delinquent manner and seek out those who share that predisposition.

Conclusions

One of the most powerful findings from this chapter was the extent to which peer group offending was correlated with self-reported delinquency, for both boys and girls. However, the association is clearly a very complex one. On the surface there was evidence that individuals attributed greater levels of delinquency to their friends than they reported themselves. However, many respondents did not attribute the same delinquency to their friends that they admitted themselves and, moreover, there were indications that some respondents under-reported their friends' delinquency. The results of sweep three, in which respondents were asked to name other cohort members who were their friends, will provide greater clarification on this.

The findings of this chapter are strongly linked to those of the previous chapter on leisure activities, which found that certain social activities were strongly associated with delinquency. Both boys and girls reported spending much of their time in groups, often quite large groups, and it is clear that offending often emerges out of these group interactions. The relationship between delinquency and peer group does not fully explain the lower rate of offending among girls, however. It seems certain that characteristic differences in the nature of these social interactions are more important in explaining gender differences. A more detailed understanding of these complex relationships will be determined by conducting further detailed analysis.

Whatever the relationship between individual and peer offending, there was a strong correlation between individual delinquency and susceptibility to negative peer influence. One of the advantages of the longitudinal design is the ability to test whether this is the result of genuine peer influence or merely a by product of the individual's disposition to select delinquent peers.