

PART TWO

Delinquency (Adolescence and Early Adulthood)

CHAPTER EIGHT

General Strain Theory and Offending over the Life Course

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KEY TERMS

Failure to achieve positively valued goals
General strain theory
Presentation of negative stimuli
Removal of positively valued stimuli

INTRODUCTION

Criminologists have become increasingly aware that offenders exhibit different patterns of offending over the course of their lives. They begin offending at different ages, commit different amounts and types of crime, and stop offending at different ages. Most offenders begin their illegal activities as they enter adolescence, commit small to moderate amounts of largely minor crime, and desist from crime as they enter adulthood. Researchers have coined the term *adolescence limited* to describe this offending pattern.¹ Research also suggests that there is a smaller group of individuals who become involved in crime at an earlier age, offend at high rates, commit serious and minor crimes, and continue offending well into their adult years. Individuals in this group, known as the *life-course-persistent* offenders, encompass perhaps 5 to 10 percent of all offenders, yet account for the majority of all serious crime. Their frequent and serious offending makes them a special concern for law enforcement officials, policymakers, and academics, alike. Still other patterns of offending have been identified, but most research focuses on the adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent patterns. This chapter describes how General Strain Theory (GST) explains these two patterns of offending. It then draws on GST to explain patterns of offending committed by street youth, an important but neglected population. We begin by providing an overview of GST, then discuss how it can be used to explain adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent offending, and conclude by explaining patterns of offending among street youth.

AN OVERVIEW OF GENERAL STRAIN THEORY

General strain theory states that a range of strains or negative events and conditions increase crime. These strains lead to negative emotions, such as anger, which create much pressure for corrective action. Crime is one way to cope with strains and negative emotions. Individuals may engage in crime to escape from or reduce their strain (e.g., run away from abusive parents, steal the money they need), seek revenge against the source of strain or related targets (e.g., assault the peers who are bullying them), or alleviate negative emotions (e.g., use illicit drugs to feel better). Whether the strain and negative emotions lead to crime, however, is influenced by several factors—including coping skills and level of social support.²

GST focuses on three general types of strain. The first is the actual or anticipated **failure to achieve positively valued goals**, such as monetary goals, status or respect, and thrills/excitement. The second is the actual or threatened **removal of positively valued stimuli**, such as the loss of one's job, homelessness, and the breakup of relationships. The third is the actual or threatened **presentation of negative stimuli**, such as criminal victimization, child abuse, negative school and work experiences, and discrimination.

GST distinguishes between “objective” and “subjective” strains. Objective strains are events and conditions that most people in a given group dislike. Subjective strains are events and conditions disliked by the people experiencing them. Individuals may differ in their subjective reaction to the same objective strain. For example, some people may be devastated by their divorce and others may view their divorce as a cause for celebration. Both objective and subjective strains may impact crime, but we would expect subjective strains to have a greater effect.

Strains most likely to lead to crime have certain characteristics. They are high in magnitude, meaning that they are severe, frequent, long in duration, recent, and expected to continue into the future. They also affect the central values, goals, needs, identities, and/or activities of individuals. Strains conducive to crime are also seen as unjust (e.g., a deliberate versus accidental bump), which contributes to anger. Further, these strains are associated with low social control. For example, the strain of parental rejection is associated with weak bonds to parents, while the strain of unemployment is associated with weak bonds to society. Finally, the strains most likely to result in crime create some pressure or incentive for criminal coping. For example, certain strains (e.g., peer abuse) involve exposure to criminal models and foster beliefs conducive to crime (e.g., crime is a way to right a wrong). Also, crime is sometimes an expedient way to cope with certain strains (e.g., theft is an easy way to obtain money).³

Strains may lead to a range of negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, depression, and humiliation. However, the critical emotion in GST is anger. Anger is conducive to crime because it energizes individuals for action, creates a desire for revenge, reduces concern for the consequences of one's behavior, provides a justification for crime (righting a wrong), and undermines certain non-criminal forms of coping, such as negotiation. Most individuals who experience strain and anger, however, do not cope by committing crime. Several factors influence whether people engage in criminal coping. These factors include coping skills and resources, such as social and problem-solving skills, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and financial resources. They include the availability and quality of conventional social supports. Social support may come in the form of financial assistance, guidance, and emotional support—all of which reduce the likelihood of criminal coping. Criminal coping is also more likely when the benefits of crime are high and the costs are low. For example, criminal coping is more likely among those who have little to lose by engaging in crime, such as those with weak family ties, little interest in school, and no jobs. Further, criminal coping is more

likely among those who are disposed to crime, including those with criminal peers, those with beliefs favorable to crime, and those with traits such as negative emotionality and low constraint. Criminal peers increase the likelihood of criminal coping by reinforcing criminal behavior, modeling criminal acts, defining certain illegal activities as appropriate responses to strain, and serving as instigators to crime. Individuals with negative emotionality are easily upset and tend to have aggressive interactional styles. Those with low constraint tend to be impulsive risk takers, with little empathy for others.

THE GST EXPLANATION OF ADOLESCENCE-LIMITED OFFENDING

As noted earlier, the most common pattern of offending is known as *adolescence limited* and involves an increase in mostly minor offending during the adolescent years. According to GST, offending peaks during the adolescent years because adolescents are more likely than children and/or adults to: (1) experience certain strains conducive to crime, (2) perceive these strains as highly aversive, and (3) cope with these strains through crime.

An Increase in Strain

Adolescents are more likely to experience strains conducive to crime for several reasons. Children live in a small, closely supervised world dominated by parents and teachers; as such, they are more often protected from strains. Parents, for example, are quick to intervene if anyone threatens their child. Adolescents, however, are given more freedom than children, and thus they often interact with others away from the watchful eye of parents and teachers. Many adolescents, for example, spend afternoons and evenings interacting with peers in settings outside home and school. Further, adolescents are increasingly expected to cope with problems on their own. As such, adolescents are much less likely to be protected from strains than are children.⁴

Further, adolescents live in a larger, more diverse, and more demanding social world than children and adults. Adolescents enter secondary schools that are typically much larger and more diverse than the elementary schools they attended. They change classes several times a day, interacting with large groups of peers, including many they do not know well. They also spend much time with others in public settings outside of school. Further, their social world becomes more demanding. Schoolwork becomes more challenging and grading more difficult. Peer relations become paramount, including romantic relationships, but they often lack the skills to effectively navigate complex social relationships. As a result of such changes, adolescents are exposed to more people (e.g., peers) who can treat them in a negative manner. The increased demands they face increase the likelihood of negative treatment, such as failure at school and rejection by romantic partners. But as adolescents enter adulthood, their social world shrinks, they have more control over it (e.g., control over the peers they interact with, where they live), and they develop the skills necessary to manage complex social relationships.

In addition, adolescents have more trouble achieving their goals than children and adults. The goals of children are limited, and adults provide much assistance in achieving them. Adolescents, however, come to desire an array of privileges that are usually reserved for adults, such as status, autonomy, and money (often necessary to achieve popularity with peers). Adolescents, however, are often prevented from achieving these goals through legal channels. Parents and teachers, for example, often deny them the autonomy and status they desire. And adolescents are often unable

to secure the money they need from parents or work. Adolescents in these situations may resort to delinquent behavior as a method of asserting autonomy or adult status (e.g., sexual intercourse, alcohol consumption, disorderly behavior), obtaining money (e.g., theft), or venting frustration against those who block their achievement of goals (e.g., assaulting parents or teachers). Adults, by contrast, are better able than adolescents to achieve goals such as autonomy, status, and money through legal channels.

GST recognizes that not all adolescents experience increased levels of negative treatment or strain. Nor does it suggest that all individuals moving from adolescence into adulthood will experience a decline in strain. Some adolescents are protected from strain by attending small, well supervised schools. Further, some adolescents are less inclined to spend time in social environments where negative treatment is likely, perhaps because they are intensely focused on academics or are socially awkward. This allows us to understand why a small percentage of adolescents does not engage in crime. In a similar vein, there are adults who do not enter into positive employment, stable marriages, or other environments that reduce exposure to negative treatment. This helps us to partially understand the small percentage of people who continue their criminal participation as they enter adulthood.

An Increased Tendency to View Negative Relations as Aversive

Not only are adolescents more likely to experience strains, they are also more likely to view them as aversive. Adolescents begin to become aware of and upset by events and experiences that escape younger children's consideration. Adolescents are also more inclined to blame others for the strains they experience, a tendency that declines in adulthood. Further, many of the strains experienced by adolescents involve their peers or become known to their peers. These peers often remind adolescents of the strains they have experienced, thus exacerbating their effect. For example, peers may regularly remind one another of the insults they have experienced. The strains experienced by adults, however, are less likely to become public knowledge.

An Increased Likelihood of Responding to Strain with Crime

Finally, adolescents are more likely to cope with strains through crime. Adolescents lack experience at coping. Parents cope on behalf of their children, but adolescents are increasingly expected to cope on their own. However, adolescents are not as experienced at coping as adults, and they also lack many of the resources that facilitate coping, such as power and money. For example, adolescents "are compelled to live with their family in a certain neighborhood; to go to a certain school; and, within limits, to interact with the same age group of peers and neighbors."⁵ As such, there is little they can do to legally avoid or escape from these people if they are mistreated. Adults, however, have the ability to end relationships, change schools or jobs, and move to new neighborhoods when they experience negative treatment.

Adolescents are also more likely to engage in criminal coping because they tend to lack access to conventional social supports. Parents and teachers often expect adolescents to cope on their own. Adolescents are often reluctant to turn to parents and teachers when they have problems, in part because of the cultural expectation that they should cope on their own. And peers are often unable to provide effective assistance at coping, because they too lack coping experience and resources.

Adolescents are also lower in many forms of social control. In particular, they are not as well supervised as children, their bonds to family members are weaker, they often lack strong

commitments to conventional institutions such as school and work, and they are not yet subject to the harsher sanctions of the adult criminal justice system. This too increases the likelihood of criminal coping, since adolescents have less to lose through crime. Further, adolescents are more likely to associate with criminal peers who reinforce criminal coping, model such coping, and teach beliefs favorable to such coping. Criminal peers, for example, may foster the belief that violence is an appropriate response if others treat one in a disrespectful manner. Finally, adolescents are less able than adults to exercise self-control if they are tempted or provoked, again increasing the likelihood of criminal coping.

In sum, GST explains the peak in offending during adolescence by arguing that adolescents are more likely than children and adults to experience strains conducive to crime, to view these strains as aversive, and to cope with them through crime.

THE GST EXPLANATION OF LIFE-COURSE-PERSISTENT OFFENDING

As noted earlier, there is a small group of offenders who engage in high rates of crime, including some serious crime, over much of their lives. According to GST, this is the case because such offenders are more likely to experience strain, interpret such strain as highly aversive, and engage in criminal coping *over much of their lives*. This is partly the case because such offenders possess the traits of negative emotionality and low constraint, traits that tend to be relatively stable over the life course. While these traits can undermine levels of social control and contribute to the social learning of crime, they also increase the likelihood that individuals will “a) experience objective strains conducive to crime, b) interpret these strains as high in magnitude and unjust, and c) cope with them in a criminal manner.”⁶

Individuals with negative emotionality/low constraint experience more strain because they more often engage in behaviors that provoke negative responses from parents, peers, teachers, spouses, employers, and others. Such individuals might be described as “quick to anger” and “out-of-control”; as such, they often exasperate and provoke others, eliciting negative responses. For example, they are harshly punished by parents, rejected by conventional peers, frequently disciplined by teachers, and fired by employers. People with these traits are also more likely to select themselves into environments where the probability of negative treatment is high. For example, they are more likely to associate with delinquent peers because they are rejected by conventional peers and attracted by the risky behavior of delinquent peers. Delinquent peers, however, are more likely to verbally and physically abuse one another, as well as get into conflicts with others. To give another example, individuals with these traits are more likely to end up in undesirable jobs because of their poor school performance and bad work habits. Such jobs are characterized by low pay, few benefits, unpleasant working conditions, and coercive forms of control (e.g., threats, yelling). Further, the negative experiences encountered by people with these traits serve to reinforce the traits. Verbal and physical abuse by others, for example, increases negative emotionality. A vicious cycle is thereby set into motion: These traits increase negative treatment or strain, and strain fosters these traits. This cycle helps maintain high levels of offending over the life course.

Individuals with the traits of negative emotionality and low constraint are not only more likely to experience objective strains, but also to interpret these strains as highly aversive and unjust. In particular, such individuals are very sensitive to strains and tend to blame their problems on others. Further, they are more likely to cope in an aggressive or criminal manner, reflecting their higher anger, tendency to act without thinking about the consequences of their behavior, and attraction

to risky activities. In brief, the traits of negative emotionality and low constraint contribute to life-course-persistent offending partly by increasing objective strain, subjective strain, and the tendency to cope in a criminal manner.

GST also posits that individuals without the traits of negative emotionality/low constraint sometimes engage in high rates of offending over their life course. Individuals who follow this pattern are most likely to be poor and live in poor communities. Such individuals are often more exposed to a range of strains related to their poverty, including problems with family members, peers, school, and neighborhood residents. The stresses associated with poverty, for example, increase the likelihood of abuse and harsh/erratic parental discipline, although this does not imply that most poor individuals experience these problems. To give another example, individuals in poor neighborhoods are more likely to be the victims of violence and to witness violence against others. Further, such individuals are more likely to cope with strains through crime. Among other things, they lack certain coping skills and resources, such as money; are lower in conventional social supports; and are more often exposed to peers who encourage criminal coping. The strains and the criminal coping of these individuals frequently contribute to further strains. For example, the criminal acts committed by these individuals often provoke negative treatment by parents, teachers, neighbors, and police. The result, once more, is a vicious cycle that contributes to offending over the life course. It is important to note, however, that most poor individuals do not become life-course-persistent offenders. A range of factors, such as coping skills, support from family, positive experiences at school, and mentoring by adults in the community helps prevent this.

Finally, life-course-persistent offending may result from what is known as the proliferation of strain.⁷ Current experiences of strain may lead to or create other forms of strain. This may come about in two different ways. First, this may occur through *primary proliferation*. Here, the initial strains come to impact areas of one's life that are closely associated with the primary strain. Thus, job dissatisfaction could lead to conflict with colleagues. Second, there may also be situations where the primary strain comes to influence other aspects of the individual's life. This is referred to as *secondary proliferation*. For example, the loss of one's job may lead to conflict with one's spouse. Strain proliferation suggests then that strains can begin to cluster and accumulate over time, increasing the likelihood that offending will persist across the life course. It should be noted that the strains most likely to proliferate tend to be experienced more by disadvantaged groups and minorities, with these strains including "incarceration, illness, unemployment, and chronic financial strain."⁸

While the GST offers an explanation of life-course-persistent offending it also offers an explanation for those adult offenders who desist in their behavior.⁹ Some offenders desist because they experience reductions in strain; for example, they obtain decent jobs or become involved in good relationships. Related to this, some desist because they become less likely to respond to strains with crime. Perhaps they experience an increase in social control (e.g., by getting a decent job), receive support from others, develop their coping skills, or leave their criminal peers.

PATTERNS OF OFFENDING AMONG STREET YOUTH

The central argument advanced in this chapter is individuals' offending at any given time is a function of their levels of objective and subjective strain, as well as their tendency to cope with strains in a criminal manner. These points are next illustrated in the following discussion of patterns of offending among street youth.

Background Strains

The term *street youth* usually refers to youths who have run away or been expelled from their homes and/or who spend some or most of their time in public locations. Their path to the street begins with their exposure to strain in their family backgrounds. Research suggests that many of these youths begin their lives in homes suffering economic difficulties where parents are unemployed or working poorly paying jobs. The economic pressures in these homes often lead to stresses that undermine family relations and break up the family. The conflict within the family, the parenting stresses associated with disruption, and the economic pressures all leave these families more at risk to utilize volatile and inconsistent methods of discipline in the home. As a result, the youths who flee to the streets from these homes tend to have experienced high rates of various forms of abuse.¹⁰

Research shows that many street youths have experienced high rates of emotional abuse where family members regularly say hurtful or insulting things. At the same time, these youths have experienced emotional neglect where they feel little affection, attachment, or support from the members of their family. Further, they experience high rates of physical abuse where members of their family strike them so violently that the attacks leaves bruises or marks, and the injuries are often so severe that the youths require medical attention. In addition, consistent with the economic problems of the parental home, these youths often suffer from physical neglect where there is not enough food in the home for them to gain regular meals, clothes are not washed, and parents are so preoccupied with alcohol and/or drugs that they are unable to provide their children with proper care. Finally, these youths are often exposed to sexual abuse in which others have attempted to make them engage in, or watch, unwanted sexual activities.¹¹

A recent study showed that nearly all (98 percent) of the 400 street youths interviewed met the criteria for at least one form of maltreatment and more than one-third (34.5 percent) had experienced all five types. Prevalence in the individual forms of maltreatment ranged from 45.0 percent for sexual abuse to 90.0 percent for emotional neglect. The most common co-occurring maltreatment types were emotional neglect and emotional abuse (83.0 percent) and emotional abuse and physical neglect (73.7 percent).¹² Thus, we see that these youth experience a range of serious negative experiences. The following passage, drawn from separate interview data gathered as part of Baron's project on strain, illustrates these experiences:¹³

Because my mom, when I was growing up, this is when I was an only child, 'cause my sisters are young still, she was always doing everything. They were always doing dope. They used to do needles. Always drinkin', and I always had all kinds of babysitters, so I was everywhere.

Within GST, these are serious strains that are likely to be linked to criminal coping behavior. Child abuse threatens a child's goals, values, needs, activities, and/or identities and is likely to be seen as unjust. Harsh physical punishment, verbal abuse, emotional and physical neglect, as well as sexual abuse can all be seen as strains that are high in magnitude. Parental violence, hostility, detachment, and sexual victimization undermine the attachments between parent and child, leading to low social control and crime. Further, evidence suggests that these forms of abuse can have long-term effects. Emotionally abused children often become hostile and aggressive and come to perceive the world as a hostile environment. Children from violent homes may model the violent behavior of their parents and adopt aggressive interpersonal strategies as a means of problem solving that can evolve to become favorable to violence.¹⁴ Abusive experiences may also diminish the ability to cope with stress, inhibit the development of empathy, and can lead youths to seek out peers who support or encourage violence.¹⁵ Similarly, there is evidence that sexual abuse can lead

to feelings of betrayal, causing hostility and anger; the powerlessness associated with the abuse can impair judgments and decrease coping skills while increasing insecurities, anxieties, and the desire to protect oneself. Shame, guilt, and stigmatization also leave victims at risk for association with stigmatized others, including deviant peers.¹⁶

Many of the characteristics that evolve in response to abuse are similar to those that are encompassed in the development of negative emotionality/low constraint.¹⁷ The development of negative emotionality in response to abuse leads to these youth becoming more easily upset and angered and developing impulsivity and risk-taking behaviors. Youth with these characteristics tend to select into negative environments like the street, unemployment, and peer groups that expose them to additional negative treatment. Further, this negative emotionality leaves the youth more likely to be sensitive to future strains, to interpret a broader array of situations as strain, and to view various conditions as unjust.¹⁸ In sum, the strains experienced by youths prior to coming to the streets have a long-term impact on their utilization of criminal coping in reaction to future strains.

These negative experiences in the home also serve to undermine educational activities and achievements. Hagan and McCarthy note that these conflictual and unsupportive backgrounds serve not only to restrict success at school, but also lead to increased difficulties with educational authorities.¹⁹ Conflict with school personnel and school failure serves as yet another form of strain and further undermines commitments to conventional lines of action and attachments to conventional others.

Upon entry to the street, these background strains continue to have an impact on criminal behavior. Research shows that street youths who have suffered either physical or sexual abuse are more likely to become involved in crime, generally once they land on the streets. Physical abuse, in particular, is strongly linked to violent offending on the street and appears to be linked to serious outcomes where the victims of these youths are more likely to suffer significant injuries. Backgrounds of physical abuse also appear to be drawn upon to increase participation in robberies where force, or the threat of force, is utilized to gain the possessions of others on the street.²⁰ Finally, youths tend to cope with backgrounds of abuse with hard drugs. For example, physical abuse is directly associated with harder drug use.²¹ The relationship between abuse and hard drug use appears to be strengthened when youths have adopted values that support the use of crime. Street youths with backgrounds of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse and who hold strong values regarding the validity of breaking the law are more likely to use hard drugs. Further, those with backgrounds of sexual abuse tend to be more likely to engage in violence if they hold these values. In addition, contact with deviant peers, who may also have suffered sexual victimization and who can help contextualize the experience of this strain, increases the likelihood that youths will respond to their sexual abuse with violence once on the street. Lastly, it appears that street youths who somehow manage to retain their self-esteem despite these negative experiences are more likely to respond to their physical abuse with violence and their emotional abuse with property offending. Self-esteem appears to be a resource that allows these youths to channel their reactions to strain into criminal sources of coping.²²

Homelessness

For youths who leave their homes because of adverse circumstances, the street itself becomes a new source of strain and also exposes them to an array of factors that increase their disposition toward offending. These youths enter an environment where they lack shelter, adequate sources of food, and access to other resources. GST maintains that homelessness is an extremely powerful source of strain for a number of reasons. Homelessness challenges a broad range of identities, needs, values,

and goals, and therefore can be seen as a strain that is high in magnitude. Homelessness is often perceived as unfair, and, because it decreases people's contact with and attachment to conventional society, it is associated with low levels of social control. Homelessness provides opportunities for crime since youths lacking shelter may wander the streets at all hours, increasing the likelihood that they will encounter human and property targets for victimization and theft, respectively. Homelessness is strongly related to the social learning of crime because it exposes youth to other offenders who can offer tutelage in and support for crime.²³ Further, there is a culture on the street or "street lifestyle" that encourages offending, providing values that support all forms of offending, including violence and drug use. Lastly, homelessness can contribute to the development of negative emotionality/low constraint.²⁴ Those with negative emotionality and low constraint are drawn to others on the street with similar characteristics, who then shape the way negative emotionality is channelled behaviorally. For those who come to the street *without* negative emotionality/low constraint, the negative economic circumstances, the often dangerous environment, and the characteristics of those who are already there, often lead to the development over time of negative emotionality/low constraint.

Evidence suggests that the objective strain of homelessness tends to lead to criminal coping as the time without a permanent shelter lengthens. Thus, as the duration of the strain grows, the impact of the strain deepens, and it is more likely to lead to an array of offending options. Street youths begin to engage in property offenses to obtain food and shelter. They turn to the distribution of illegal drugs to meet these same needs. Further, drug distribution facilitates gaining access to funds to help finance their own use of these substances as a coping mechanism. The use of these substances, particularly harder forms of drugs, tends to increase as time on the street becomes more extended. Finally, violence can be used as a method to gain funds (robbery), but can also be viewed as a way to cope with the stress created by being homeless.²⁵ Participants in Baron's study of strain were asked in separate qualitative interviews what they did with the proceeds from their criminal activities. Their responses illustrate how their illegal activities helped them cope with their adverse circumstances.²⁶

I buy cigarettes, I buy food, I buy pot, and if there's money left over, we may go out and buy a little bit of crystal now and then. But other than that, we use it for things that we need before things that we want.

'Cause I'm sober and I don't have a harsh drug addiction. So all my money goes towards food and housing instead of drugs.

The street itself is a dangerous environment, which means that the more time one spends on the street increases the likelihood that one will participate in violent events. The culture on the street that supports the use of crime as a method for coping with strain also contributes to the relationship between homelessness and crime. Youths who come to the street encounter a world where crime is not viewed negatively and those youth who come to adopt these views tend to react to their lengthening homelessness with a range of criminal activities.²⁷

Unemployment

Many youths are on the street and unable to support themselves because they lack viable employment. They often come to the street with incomplete education, which disqualifies them from all but the most menial of jobs. These youths' limited employment experiences tend to be characterized by

a series of poorly paying jobs with few benefits and little opportunity for advancement. This means that most youths on the street have decreased attachments to the labor market and little to keep them involved in conventional society.²⁸

The failure to acquire employment fits into all three types of strain outlined in GST, including goal blockage, the failure to achieve positively valued goals, and the presentation of negative stimuli. GST asserts that the desire for money is a major goal for many in our society and may be particularly important for those in lower socioeconomic locations.²⁹ Therefore, unemployment as an objective strain can be seen to increase individuals' motivation to commit crime in an effort to overcome economic problems. Unemployment may also leave individuals with fewer stakes to jeopardize through crime and can reduce beliefs regarding the legitimacy of rules or norms. Further, the unemployed may pass time together, facilitating the learning and undertaking of crime. Research suggests, however, that the link between unemployment and crime for street youths is complex, and it appears that criminal coping is more likely under a certain range of circumstances, and that subjective interpretations of economic situations, or subjective strain, may be as or more important to understanding the link between economics and crime in this population.³⁰

First, as would be expected from GST, unemployment generates anger in street youths. It does not do so directly, however. Instead, street youths become angry over their unemployment, blaming others for their circumstances without seeing themselves as blameworthy. When this blaming of others is accompanied by peers who help shape the manner in which the strain is interpreted, it reinforces their anger. Youths on the street are also likely to become angry over their unemployment when they begin to compare themselves to those around them in the broader society and come to view themselves as unfairly deprived. This dissatisfaction with their meager financial situations feeds into their anger.

For those street youths who want to work in legitimate jobs to get off the street and who are willing to work hard, the anger over unemployment is increased. This anger over unemployment in turn leads to greater violent offending and drug distribution. Unemployment is also more likely to lead to coping through the use of violence and drug distribution when the youths report that they are not happy with their monetary circumstances. Without this interpretive state of affairs of their objective economic situation, lengthy unemployment does not lead to criminal coping. Thus, subjective strain helps to link objective strain with criminal coping. Additional data gathered as part of Baron and Hartnagel's study outlines some of the issues regarding attributions, anger, and perceptions of unfairness:³¹

Well, you try and get yourself out of it trying to get yourself off the street. But society is holding you back. They're telling the younger generation we want you to live on welfare the rest of your life.

Unemployment is also more likely to lead to criminal coping when the street youth has adopted values that support the use of crime. As the strength of these values increases and the length of unemployment increases, so does the likelihood of engaging in violence as a coping mechanism.

One of the key arguments of GST is that the people may view their situations as unjust. One of the key tenets of the "American Dream" is that those who work hard will have a chance to succeed. For street youths experiencing unemployment, this cultural imperative may leave them feeling that they are failures. However, strain theorists also argue that the failure to achieve positively valued goals can lead to alienation and a withdrawal of their belief in the legitimacy of dominant norms. Research suggests that street youths' economic experiences make them likely to reject the dominant meritocratic ideology, which increases the likelihood that their poor employment situations

will lead to criminal coping. The impact of this frustration is strengthened when they blame others for their situation, when they have adopted values supportive of the use of crime to cope, and when they associate with criminal peers. Unemployment and homelessness may lead similarly situated youths into the company of one another. These peers may help to contextualize the unemployment experience, and facilitate and encourage criminal behaviors as well as teaching, supporting, and rewarding beliefs that justify and rationalize criminal conduct.³²

Subjective Economic Strains

Street youths' subjective interpretations of negative economic circumstances and perceptions of relative deprivation are extremely important contributors to strains. According to GST, this type of strain is a function of the attainments of those in one's comparative reference group(s) and one's own failure to achieve. Strain is more likely when individuals believe that they are worse off monetarily than those to whom they compare themselves.³³ In North American society, with the dominant meritocratic ideology, people are encouraged to compare themselves with a broad range of people. Street youths lacking shelter, employment, finances, and regular sustenance who adopt this frame of reference are very likely to feel strained. There is evidence that this perception of deprivation leads to a range of offenses, including property crime and violence. The impact of this perceived deprivation, however, becomes even stronger when objective economic strains are more severe. For example, when relative deprivation is coupled with long-term homelessness, it leads street youths to engage in high rates of offending. Further, peers appear to be important in contextualizing how one interprets one's degree of deprivation. In the case of street youths, those who have more associations with criminal peers are more likely to react to their relative deprivation with violence and drug dealing. The following data gathered for Baron's work provides evidence of these issues of comparison and deprivation:³⁴

They, they, they, they make, they make, they belittle you. They make you feel like less of a person like, because you're lower end of the social class, you're, you're shit. You know?

Another important factor in whether street youths react to their negative financial situations with crime appears to be how unhappy they are with their economic circumstances. This dissatisfaction pressures or compels people to commit crime.³⁵ Thus, we find that street youths who are unhappy with their current economic situation are more likely to engage in crime. Further, subjective evaluations of financial happiness appear to be influenced by adverse economic situations. This dissatisfaction with the current economic situation is more likely to lead street youths to crime as the length of homelessness increases and as time since previous employment increases.

Finally, there is the goal of financial success itself. According to GST, having this sort of goal and perceiving that this goal will not be reached can create the need for criminal coping strategies. Street youths who have the goal of monetary success but who believe they will not reach this goal are more likely to engage in drug dealing and violent means to reach this goal. The importance of this goal in creating criminal coping is exacerbated by unemployment and homelessness. Having this ambition for financial success under extremely adverse economic circumstances in a culture that encourages criminal coping also leads to increased offending behavior. Street youths who have lofty financial goals, and who hold values supportive of breaking the law, tend to engage in instrumental offenses to achieve these goals as their bouts of homelessness and unemployment lengthen and as their perception of financial dissatisfaction grows.³⁶

Street Victimization

Being homeless also exposes these youths to a great deal of victimization. According to GST, victimization is typically seen as unjust and high in magnitude. Victimization is also most likely to occur in settings with low social control—such as unsupervised settings where young people gather. Further, people may learn from their victimization that physical aggression is necessary to deter future victimization and ensure the safety of themselves and their property. Offending behavior may also increase because prior victimization leads people to legitimize the use of crime. Because victimization is more common in delinquent peer groups and involves exposure to a criminal model, it is often associated with the social learning of crime and subcultural expectations that condone retaliation. Interviews conducted as part of Baron's study show the seriousness of some of this victimization:³⁷

Well, it's kinda weird. I don't know why, but about twenty guys came, like I was in ah, like, Burnaby or somewhere. About twenty guys came and rushed me and beat me up.

Um, me and a girlfriend were walking down the street and a gang of punks decided to jump us and wanted us, wanted our shit and I said no. So I ended up fighting five guys.

Street youths experience not only direct victimization in terms of physical attacks and property loss, but their dangerous lifestyle also leaves them exposed to “vicarious” and “anticipated” strains. On the street these youth eye witness the negative experiences of friends and associates (e.g., assaults), hear the negative events taking place (e.g., screams), or learn about the negative events from others (i.e., from victims). These experiences are viewed as unjust, are associated with low social control, are great in magnitude, and increase street youths' perceptions that they will suffer similar strains, leading to a greater likelihood of criminal coping.³⁸ Street youths exposed to these forms of vicarious victimization undertake criminal behavior as a method to avert future harm to themselves and to those around them. Criminal behavior can also be an avenue for revenge or reprisal against the individuals judged to be accountable for the harm.

Research shows that street youths who encounter more direct physical victimization are more likely to engage in violent offending. They are more likely to engage in assaults of both minor and serious forms, get involved in group fights, and engage in robbery.³⁹ Further, this form of victimization is more likely to lead to violent offenses when the youth have attitudes that support the use of violence and have greater sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy that allows them to use violence as a coping mechanism. Physical victimization is also likely to lead to violent coping when street youths have high levels of negative emotionality and low levels of constraint.⁴⁰ Their experience with robbery also invites violent coping, particularly for those who have been able to retain high levels of self-esteem. Property victimization promotes a violent response when youths hold attitudes that support the use of criminal coping. Street youth are more likely to respond to violent and property victimization through the use of hard drugs when they hold values supportive of criminal coping and when they associate with peers who engage in criminal coping.⁴¹ Research also shows that vicarious forms of violent victimization where peers have experienced violent events lead street youths to utilize criminal coping, particularly when they also have negative emotionality/low constraint. Further, the anticipation of physical victimization leads to a greater likelihood of violent coping when youths have acquired negative emotionality/low constraint.

While homelessness and the objective and subjective strains that accompany it embed street youths in situations that continually lead to criminal coping, some of these youths do manage to exit

from the street and crime. Research suggests that participation in employment assists in decreasing criminal participation. The time commitment required of employment, the access to nonstreet contacts, the acquisition of job skills, and the establishment of employment histories create experiences for street youths that are dissonant from their street and illegal activities. Youth able to secure even marginal, low-wage employment spend less time interacting with street friends, panhandling, searching for food and shelter, using drugs, and engaging in crime. The “embeddedness” in the street crime networks begins to decline and employment serves as a turning point in changing these youths’ trajectories toward a life off of the street.⁴²

CONCLUSION

General strain theory offers a valuable avenue from which to explore and understand issues of stability and change in offending behavior. Going beyond its utilization as an explanation of behavior between offenders, GST can be used to explain the behavior of individuals and employed to comprehend adolescent-limited and life-course offending patterns. It shows that adolescent-limited offending can be understood in the context of a life-course period in which there is an increased exposure to strain. Life-course-persistent offending can be explained by a stable trait of negative emotionality/low constraint and chronic exposure to strain. As applied to street youths, we can see how negative experiences can lead to increased levels of criminal coping, how decreases in strain can lead to a desistance from offending, and why continued experiences with strain can lead to persistence in criminal coping.

GLOSSARY

Failure to achieve positively valued goals—actual or anticipated failure to achieve monetary goals, status or respect, and thrills/excitement

General strain theory—Agnew’s theory that a range of strains or negative events and conditions increase crime; these strains lead to negative emotions, such as anger, which create pressure for corrective action

Presentation of negative stimuli—actual or threatened presence of negativity, such as criminal victimization, child abuse, negative school and work experiences, and discrimination

Removal of positively valued stimuli—actual or threatened removal of one’s job, home, relationships, or other valued thing

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