Criminal justice system involvement and continuity of youth crime: a longitudinal test of labeling theory

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Criminal justice system involvement and continuity of youth crime:

a longitudinal test of labeling theory

by

Lee Michael Johnson

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Major: Sociology

Major Professor: Ronald L. Simons

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Criminal justice system involvement and continuity of youth crime:
a longitudinal test of labeling theory

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Adolescent crime is a major issue confronting not only the criminal justice system and the general public, but researchers as well. Studies of criminal careers reveal several possible factors explaining persistent offending. At one time, labeling theory was a popular explanation for continued deviance, but a lack of empirical support and conceptual objections soon made the theory unpopular. In this analysis, labeling theory is integrated with other theories and then re-considered as an explanation for persistent youth crime. The primary contention here is that formal legal sanctioning—in the form of involvement with the police, courts, and correctional agencies—may, ironically, operate as a factor sustaining persistent offending. Seven waves of data collected on 153 males were used to test a model hypothesizing relationships among criminal justice system involvement, association with deviant peers, and crime—over time. Results revealed continuity in offending across waves, but only partial continuity in deviant peer association. More importantly, consistent with labeling theory, criminal justice system involvement was positively related to later crime, as well as to later deviant peer association. Further, crime was positively related to later deviant peer association, but
deviant peer association was not related to later crime, and same-time correlation between the two were significantly positive. While, understandably, crime predicted criminal justice system involvement, deviant peer association did not. Based on these results, labeling processes should be viewed within a life course perspective. and implications for theory, research, and treatment are discussed.
This is to certify that the Doctoral dissertation of

Lee Michael Johnson

has met the dissertation requirements of Iowa State University

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--Mike Johnson
INTRODUCTION

This analysis explores the possibility that children who get involved with the criminal justice system continue their illegal behavior as a result of this involvement. I use longitudinal data from the Iowa Youth and Families Project (IYFP) to test a structural equation model arguing that criminal justice system involvement plays a mediating part in youth crime continuity. Here, I am proposing what many theorists already have—that societal reactions to crime by formal social control agents are responsible for a portion of crime. Thus, it seems logical to take an approach that would fall under the rubric of societal reaction theory. In particular, the proposition that social responses to crime lead to more crime is fundamental to labeling theory.

This analysis explores a timely issue important not only to deviance scholars, but to professionals working with troubled youth as well as the general public. The public is given much to worry about with regard to children and teenagers as a safety threat, especially with media reports of youth crime ranging from petty theft to gang violence and school shootings. While it is safe to assume that citizens generally want to be protected from crime, a civil society is also faced with constructing well-conceived humanitarian efforts to help persons inhibiting their quality of life with their own behavior. It is fairly apparent that efforts by criminal justice and social work agencies, as well as others in the community, have not stopped youth crime to the extent most of us would like. Herein, it is my intent to confront the problem of understanding why certain youth persistently offend despite aggressive efforts by
agents of the criminal justice system to stop them. With this analysis, I hope to gain some insights as to what we can do to prevent chronic offending.

Juvenile delinquency is very common. Adolescents commit a disproportionate amount of crime, including the more serious violent and property crime. In 1999, youth aged 13-17, who only account for about 6 percent of the general population, were involved in 16 percent of all Violent Crime Index arrests and 32 percent of all Property Crime Index arrests in the United States (OJJDP, 2000). Aggregate data is fairly consistent in revealing an “age-crime curve”—crime rates rise sharply in teenage years, peak at about 16 to 18 years old, and then decline significantly with age (Moffitt, 1993; Sampson and Laub, 2001a). Youth cohort studies (Farrington and associate’s Cambridge study and Wolfgang and associate’s Philadelphia study, for instance) on crime persistence and recidivism tend to show that the probability of re-offending increases after each offense (Farrington, 1997).

Thus, while research on youth crime validates public concern over it as a social problem, it also shows that the vast majority of teenagers stop committing illegal behavior after entering adulthood—they “age-out” of crime. After age cohorts reach adulthood, what is left is a small category of chronic offenders. Much of our “crime problem” may be attributed to this small category (Sampson and Laub, 2001a). While life-course theory does well in explaining why most youth age-out of crime, it needs to be elaborated to explain why a small number of them persist.

Explanations of aging-out quite often focus on how deviance may somehow be rewarding, temporarily, during adolescence, but punishing during adulthood. Most
teenagers engaging in delinquency remain relatively integrated in their communities, and once they “grow up,” they have more to lose by engaging in behaviors that interfere with their abilities to extract resources from the community—through employment, higher education, marriage, etc. (Sampson and Laub, 2001a). Our criminal justice system was developed to discourage crime—to give individuals more to lose by engaging in crime. Thus, rationally speaking, we might expect all teenagers to eventually age-out of crime. Yet, a small number of youth offenders behave in a manner opposite to that intended by the criminal justice system—they persist with their offending. In this study, I employ life-course criminology and labeling theory to offer a possible explanation for this persistence.

While labeling theory is not as popular as it once was, it has not been completely discredited as a way to understand how social processes lead to deviant behavior. However, there are at least three general problems with labeling theory. One problem is that the theory is often over-simplified and misunderstood. I begin this analysis by revisiting the major works popularly presented as “labeling theory,” defending it at times while admitting weaknesses at others. A second problem, then, is that the theory does have weaknesses. Many of these weaknesses may be compensated for through integration with other theories. I then present more recent conceptualizations of labeling theory that strengthen it as a framework with which to study crime. A third problem is that labeling processes are often improperly studied in research. Analytical strategies involving the use of longitudinal data are more appropriate for testing propositions drawn from labeling theory. For the empirical
portion of this analysis, the relationship between deviant behavior and formal efforts
to deter it is studied longitudinally, temporally arranged in a manner consistent with
the predictions of labeling theory. Following the empirical analysis, I discuss the
importance empirically supported labeling theory has for future theory and research,
as well as its application in the treatment of youth offenders.
LABELING THEORY

Overview of “Classic” Labeling Theory

Labeling theory is used as a way to understand deviant behavior, including crime, as a consequence of social differentiation processes in which some of society's members are singled out, identified, and defined as deviant, while others are not (Traub and Little, 1994). Labeling theory was born out of a movement in the study of deviance to give more attention to societal reactions to deviance. Among others, John Kitsuse (1964: 87) proposed to "shift the focus of theory and research from the forms of deviant behavior to the processes by which persons come to be defined as deviant by others." According to Edwin Schur (1971: 7), "The central tenet of the labeling orientation is quite straightforward: Deviance and social control always involve processes of social definition." Individuals segregated as deviant are done so on the basis of their violation of social norms. As rule breakers, these individuals become, as Howard Becker (1973) stated, "outsiders" to mainstream members of society.

The labeling perspective contains two general arguments regarding the creation of deviance. One is causal: interactions with agents and agencies of social control direct individuals toward deviant behavior, by affecting the development of deviant self-concepts for instance (Schur, 1971). The other argument is perhaps more iterative: deviant behaviors are deviant because individual and collective actors in society make rules against them (Schur, 1971). The processes involved in the creation of deviance operate at varying micro to macro levels. For instance, the development of deviant self-concepts takes place in interpersonal interaction, through
social psychological processes, while social definitions and rule making is often the result of organizational and societal behavior (Schur, 1971).

The causal proposition of labeling theory is that the act of treating a person as a deviant, in itself, can lead to deviant behavior on the part of that person. The punishment of deviant behavior often has an ironic effect: efforts at social control lead to decreased control (Schur, 1971). Social definitions of deviance and their accompanying social sanctions somehow pressure labeled individuals into further deviant behaviors. Loosely speaking, a "label," or, a definition of a person as deviant, may be thought of as an independent variable, or, a cause of deviant behavior (Akers, 2000; Williams and McShane, 1994). The process by which a person is labeled as deviant may be summarized as follows. First, an act is deemed as deviant. Second, the person committing the act is deemed as deviant. And third, a moral condemnation is placed upon this person (Traub and Little, 1994).

According to labeling theory, then, reactions to criminal behavior should be considered at least as important as the behavior itself, if not more. Labeling theory took a lesson from Kai Erikson (1964), who argued that the "social audience," not the individual, is the critical variable in studying deviance because it is the audience who decides which acts, or types of acts, deserve the deviant label. In their coverage of labeling theory, Traub and Little (1994: 290) wrote "it is the definition of an individual's behavior as deviant, rather than the behavior itself, that can cause a marked change in status which transforms a person's conception of self and initiates the process of locking that person into a 'deviant career'." Thus, we would expect a
"labeling theorist" to examine how the community behaves to control individuals that they view as undesirable--as deviant, as well as the outcomes of such social interaction. Labeling theorists may look at the effects of "defining" persons as "criminal," "delinquent," "bad kid," "mentally ill," "poor student," and so on by authority figures, such as the police, judges, teachers, parents, and psychiatrists, just to name just a few.

Labeling theory may not explain well why people at first act in such a way to induce others to define them as deviant (the first time a child commits a delinquent act such as shoplifting, for example). It better explains deviant acts that take place after people have been labeled as deviant by authority figures. Thus, to understand how labeling processes end with deviant outcomes, it is important to know the relationship between "primary deviance" and "secondary deviance," as explained by Edwin Lemert (1994). Primary deviance refers to the initial deviant acts that people react to in defining someone as deviant. These acts can be attributed to many different causes but not labeling. It is the way that labelers treat the labeled after encountering their primary acts of deviance that constitute a traumatic event for the labeled and induces a personality change in the person defined as deviant. Secondary deviance refers to deviant acts that can be attributed to labeling. These subsequent acts of deviance may be seen as a defense or an attack launched by those labeled as deviant, who have developed an antagonistic relationship with mainstream society (Lemert, 1994). Secondary deviance may occur even if the primary accusation, or definition, of deviance is false (conversely, not everyone who commits deviant acts
will be labeled and treated as deviant). Thus, through the process in which we define, differentiate, and treat persons as deviant, primary deviance can lead to secondary deviance. Taken together, the two concepts specify a deviance amplification process.

Becker (1973) helps us to understand how primary deviance may lead to secondary deviance through his discussion of the significance of deviance to social status. First, he applied the concept of *master status traits*, as popularized earlier by Everett C. Hughes. As a consequence of being caught and defined as deviant, a person undergoes a change in "public identity." The thing the person is accused of being is often represented with a term, such as "criminal," and the person caught and convicted of a crime acquires the social status of "criminal." Master status traits are used to primarily distinguish between those who belong in a status category and those who do not. In the case of the criminal, some kind of a "record" of the person's condemned behavior serves as the master status trait that warrants the person's status of "criminal" and denies her or him the status of "non-criminal." This is important remembering that labeling is a social differentiation process whereby some people are sorted out as deviant and others are sorted out as conforming. Further, certain "auxiliary traits" are also associated with certain statuses. Although these are not the traits that distinguish belonging, they are the ones we would expect people holding certain positions to have. In the case of the criminal, the public might expect her or him to also engage in other deviant behavior such as sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, and poor school or work performance. These expectations serve as the justification for further scrutiny of the labeled person's behavior by agents of social
control, increasing the salience of one’s public identity as a deviant across social situations.

Next, Becker (1973) focused attention on the deviant status itself by bringing in the concept of *master status*, also popularized by Hughes, as it applies to explaining deviant behavior. A master status has the most impact on a person’s public identity and tends to override other statuses in determining how others will respond to her or him across social situations. For example, an employer may use a felony conviction record as a determinant in hiring a person more than that person’s training or educational level—statuses that are in this case “subordinate statuses.” Not only have persons labeled as criminal been granted a deviant status based on their presumed traits, but this status becomes the most important in determining their general social standing and public identity. Since there appears to be some evidence to others that the labeled person has broke rules, the person becomes publicly identified as the type of person who generally breaks rules. Becker (1973: 34) stated, “The deviant identification becomes the controlling one.”

Similarly, Erikson (1964) pointed out that the social selection process whereby the community decides whether or not to control an individual’s behavior is a very intricate one. He argued that behavior condemned by the community is atypical of probably even prolific offenders. Any individual commits a wide variety of acts, and although greatly varied from person to person, the majority of these acts are bound to be conforming. When the community sanctions a person for a deviant act, it is reacting to one or a few acts from the person’s behavioral repertoire. A
problem with social control, then, is that the community grants the master status of deviant to an individual on the basis of a flawed generalization of the individual's behavior. Based on a person's atypical behavior, s/he is seen to possess some general form of intra-personal pathology that warrants some kind of punishment and/or treatment, which may actually lead to undesirable outcomes. To put all of this in perspective, it might be said that the community has no more right to label a person who steals once or a few times a "criminal" than to label a person who fixes a car once or a few times a "mechanic."

Erikson (1964) proposed that individuals undergo a three-phase ceremony to acquire a deviant status. First, based on the discovery of some behavior determined to be offensive, there is a confrontation between the alleged deviant person and community representatives—going to court or a psychiatric review for example. Second, community representatives announce some kind of judgement about the person and her or his behavior—a verdict or a diagnosis for example. Third, community representatives perform an act of placement—assigning the person special roles, such as "prisoner" or "patient." By assigning these roles, social control agencies redefine the person's position in society. The individual's experience in these phases is often quite public, such as the criminal trial, although not always as dramatic. A person defined and treated as deviant undergoes a type of ceremony in which her or his status is degraded.

Becker (1973) explained that it is the granting of a deviant master status that has a stigmatizing and segregating effect upon persons labeled as deviant. When
others are aware of this status, they protect themselves from the person labeled as deviant by denying her or him opportunities to offend them. This necessarily involves a restriction from mainstream opportunities, such as school peer activities and employment, as well as any non-mainstream activities the labeled individual desires to engage in. Becker (1973) uses the example of the drug user. The deviant behavioral trait assumed of the person labeled a drug addict is generalized to other situations; others assume that the “type of person” to take drugs is also the “type of person” to do things like cheat at school or do a poor job at work. As a result, the drug user may be denied access to gainful employment, in addition to legitimate access to drugs. But, at this point, it is not the intrinsic qualities of a primary deviant act that prevents a person from engaging in mainstream activities—it is the social responses to that act that does. The fact that a person uses drugs may not itself render her or him incapable of performing well at work, it is the social restriction placed on the person by others in the community that does. Denied access to legitimate ways of making money to support a drug habit, the user may resort to illegal activities to do so—the secondary deviance in this case, which is not a direct result of taking drugs.

Erikson (1964) also discussed the stigmatizing nature of the status degradation ceremony. He pointed out that this status change is almost irreversible; societal reactions to deviance typically do not involve an opposing “terminal ceremony” after the allotted time spent in deviant roles—one that would facilitate deviant role exit and a return to full citizen status. In other words, the sanctioned deviant is not allowed a status re-gradation ceremony. Idealistically, deviant roles are temporary, as a civil
society is expected to grant its rule violators chances to redeem themselves and return
to the good graces of the community. Terminal ceremonies are in place for other
temporary roles, however, such as the student whose role exit is marked by
graduation. Without a public ceremony recognizing a sanctioned individual’s return
to mainstream social life—one that symbolically erases the public degradation
ceremony—members of the community continue to believe that the individual
possesses the deviant traits assumed to earn her or him the degraded status to begin
with. Thus, the community refuses to grant the sanctioned person equal status; the
deviant status becomes a fairly permanent one. For instance, police agencies
typically scrutinize the behavior of ex-convicts more and will often turn to them first
when searching for current crime suspects. After continued rejection by the
community, sanctioned persons may even come to believe that their deviant roles are
a stable reality for them, and resume deviant behavior (Erikson, 1964).

Labeling theory put more focus on the already familiar argument that the
institutions created to deter deviance might actually help perpetuate it. Prior to the
theory’s rise in popularity, it was widely proposed that institutions such as juvenile
detentions, prisons, and residential mental health facilities gathered marginally
deviant people into smaller, alienated group environments in which they could
mutually learn and reinforce sustained deviant behaviors (Erikson, 1964). It is also a
common argument that some of our social control institutions are quite weak and do
not do a good job of stopping deviant behavior. According to Erikson (1964: 15),
these institutions are so poorly equipped to deter deviance that we should wonder if
“this is considered their ‘real’ function at all.” Perhaps Erikson is alluding here to some kind of latent function of deviance, ala Durkheim. If so, all the more reason to view social control and rule-making as entrepreneurial activity. The community may actually have a need for deviance to be sustained, for cohesion, norm clarification, and even to make life a little more interesting. Further, policing agencies need behavior to police, and deviants give them this—they provide social control agencies with a purpose in society.

In addition to the causal argument, it is also important to understand the perspectives on deviance that labeling theory employs. First, labeling theory employs a “reactive” definition of deviance. Another major proposition of the theory is that behavior is deviant only because members of society designate it as deviant. In this way, it is, in a manner of speaking, society that creates deviance—through rule making and enforcing (Becker, 1973; Schur, 1971). The following statement by Erikson (1964: 11) expresses a position very popular in labeling theory: “Deviance is not a property inherent in certain forms of behavior; it is a property conferred upon these forms by the audiences which directly or indirectly witness them.” The controversy here is that it appears that an “audience” is required for deviance to exist. A person who commits a potentially offensive act that either goes unnoticed or unsanctioned cannot be deviant, not sociologically anyway (Kitsuse, 1964). Thus, a label may also be seen as an outcome variable, or, a result of societal definition (Akers, 2000; Williams and McShane, 1994; Schur, 1971). Consistent with Erikson’s
(1964) view of deviance, the following quote from Becker (1973: 9) illustrates this point well:

...social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an “offender.” The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.

To continue with the labeling perspective on deviance, it may be argued that the quality of deviant behavior emerges from interactions and exchanges between offending individuals and social control agents—it is the product of the relationship between person and social environment (Becker, 1973; Schur, 1971; Traub and Little, 1994). Deviance, then, is a quality of interaction between “labelee” and “labeler.”

Further, labeling theory also holds the view that deviance is relative: whether an act is considered deviant or not depends on the situation, culture, historical period, and even who is committing the act. Even within a given population, it is rarely the case that a set of prescribed behaviors will be universally supported, practiced, and enforced (Kitsuse, 1964). Thus, labeling theory portrays deviance as a subjective social reality. A labeling theorist would consider how “rules” are made as well as the context in which they are made (Traub and Little, 1994). According to labeling theory, then, we
should not just believe that deviant behavior is the result of individuals' refusal or inability to obey certain objectively virtuous laws or rules (Schur, 1971).

It is a common observation that many actions that cause serious harm to others receive little or no punishment, while seemingly harmless actions often receive severe punishment. Globally speaking, social entities can appear to be quite capricious in the way they construct and control deviance. Because of this, Kitsuse (1964) reasoned that it is not behavior itself that activates the social differentiation process that segregates deviants from non-deviants, and sociological definitions of deviance must incorporate the point of view of those who decide what and who is deviant. Accordingly, a major problem for deviance theory and research is knowing how groups, communities, or societies as wholes decide which behaviors are to be defined as deviant, and how they use these definitions to react to persons defined as deviant. Kitsuse (1964: 88) conceived of deviance as “a process by which the members of a group, community, or society (1) interpret behavior as deviant, (2) define persons who so behave as a certain kind of deviant, and (3) accord them the treatment considered appropriate to such deviants.” This definition of deviance is quite consistent with a basic model of the labeling process. Kitsuse (1964: 97) also wrote, “it is the responses of the conventional and conforming members of the society who identify and interpret behavior as deviant which sociologically transforms persons into deviants.”

Becker (1973) spoke of deviance as an enterprise. Rules do not automatically arise from social need—they have to be created and then applied to people. He
referred to people who engage in this enterprise as “moral entrepreneurs” and identified two general types—“rule creators and rule enforcers.” Rule creators are involved in making new rules. A popular variety consists of the reformer, who organizes moral crusades against types of behavior on behalf of humanity. Examples include the early twentieth century alcohol prohibitionists in the United States, or other prohibitionists objecting to gambling or certain sexual behaviors. Although crusaders may have altruistic intentions, they may also be quite self-righteous and have self-serving motives behind their campaigns. The ends sought by moral crusaders are usually some kind of formal legislation establishing rules against certain forms of behavior. For example, the moral crusade against alcohol led to the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment, which established Prohibition Laws. Once rules are created, rule enforcers are designated to identify and sanction persons who do not follow them. Rule enforcers often involve existing agencies, but new rules may require new enforcers. For example, after Prohibition Laws were passed, new police agencies were created to keep people from distributing and consuming alcohol, and to punish those who did. With the enterprise of deviance, it is moral entrepreneurs who determine the nature of deviance, not the behavior, itself, to which they object.

Labeling theory may also be thought of as the symbolic interactionist perspective applied to deviance, especially with regard to Mead’s ideas concerning the development of “self,” and the self as a social process (Schur, 1971). The traditional version of labeling theory is often called the “self-concept approach.” *Self-concept* refers to the sum of an individual’s thoughts and feelings about her or
himself as an object (Rosenberg, 1992). Self-concepts are products of the reflexive self. Traditionally, labeling theory proposed that definitions of persons as deviant could become or at least strongly influence self-concepts.

Deviance, including crime, is the product of interaction with others, whereby people learn and interpret the meaning of behavior, as well as reactions to it. Moral meanings attached to behaviors are socially constructed over time through social interaction. Also, one's perceptions of oneself is constructed through social interaction—who we think we are depends largely on how others treat us. A "label" is symbolic of the person, and its meaning is interpreted and used to shape social interaction. De-valued labels contribute to unfavorable definitions of the person. Children form their self-concepts reflexively, through interaction with significant others; by learning how others see them, children find a source of information as to who they are. If significant others define and treat them as deviant, children may come to see themselves as deviant. The child's self-appraisal as somehow undesirable is actually a reflected appraisal based on the child's interpretation of others' actions toward her or him. Further, a person's behavior may be seen as largely the result of self-concepts and self-attitudes. For example, if a child is repeatedly called a "bad kid" by a parent, the child may come to perceive her/himself as a bad kid and misbehave. Seen this way, labeling processes involve Cooley's notion of "the looking glass self" in action.

According to labeling theory, the treatment of individuals as deviant has a "stigmatizing" effect on a person defined as deviant, to the point of altering her or his
sense of self (Traub and Little, 1994). An indication of moral condemnation is placed upon a person for committing a deviant act—the person becomes “branded,” if you will, which may actually involve the stereotyping of offenders. After being put through a degradation ceremony, the person realizes that s/he now has diminished status. According to Tannenbaum (1994), children labeled as deviant come to realize that they are defined as a different kind of person than their "non-deviant" peers. He wrote, "This recognition on his part becomes a process of self-identification and integration with the group which shares his activities" (293). The child defined as deviant, then, comes to identify with others labeled as deviant. Tannenbaum (1994: 296) wrote further, "The person becomes the thing he is described as being."

Conceptualized this way, an act of labeling can have profound immediate effects on a person's sense of self and behavior.

However, Tannenbaum (1994) also discussed the ongoing conflict that exists between children labeled as deviant and those who define and react to them as deviant. As a reaction to being treated as undesirable, these children begin to develop an antagonistic attitude toward socially expected and/or approved behavioral expressions and come to view them as insufficient for meeting their needs. They then do not conform to the behavioral patterns adults attempt to impose upon them. Not fitting into established social institutions, these children look to alternative institutions, possibly those involving illegal behaviors, to fulfill their wishes. Thus, it is the treatment of children as deviant that can "push" them toward delinquency.

Here, Tannenbaum leaves the door open to talk about the role of prolonged
interaction between labeler and "labelee" in promoting deviant behavior instead of just focusing on the immediate impact of labeling on self-development. Once children treated as deviant reject mainstream institutions and accept illegal ones, and identify with criminally defined social groups and categories, they may actually come to expect (and perhaps even desire) messages from significant others and representatives of mainstream institutions that they are not part of mainstream society.

As Becker (1973) and Erikson (1964) mentioned, labeling deviant behavior involves what Merton (1957) called the "self-fulfilling prophecy," a concept useful in understanding many social processes. The self-fulfilling prophecy refers to perceptions or judgments that are validated only because people believe them to be true and subsequently behave in ways that make them come true. Usually, when we initiate self-fulfilling prophecies, we likely do so unintentionally—we do not realize that we are the ones bringing about our own predictions. Merton tells us that the self-fulfilling prophecy is part of what W. I. Thomas referred to as the "definition of the situation." The "Thomas Theorem" simply states, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (quoted in Merton, 1957: 475). The predictions made in self-fulfilling prophecies are "definitions of a situation" that "become an integral part of the situation and thus affect subsequent developments" (Merton, 1957: 477). The self-fulfilling prophecy is often, initially, a "false definition of the situation." After this false definition is conceived, it is the behavior of its perpetrator that makes it come true. Because the false definition eventually becomes true, the
perpetrator of the self-fulfilling prophecy can point to the outcome as proof of the legitimacy of the initial definition, creating a "reign of errors." (In other words, we can make claims that are not true but behave in ways that make them come true, and then proclaim that we originally claimed correctly.)

Finally, it is important to recognize the contingencies evident in labeling processes. Kitsuse (1964: 101) pointed out that the process of differentiating people into deviants and non-deviants depend on "circumstances of the situation, place, social and personal biography, and the bureaucratically organized activities of agencies of control." To begin, social status is one important contingency.

Social conflict theory also deserves some credit for contributing to labeling theory. Although not always recognized, power is a critical building block in labeling theory. It is the powerful—those with high social status—who make and enforce the rules used as standards in judging persons as deviant (Becker, 1973). It is likely that the powerful in society engage in the enterprise of deviance in such a way as to protect mainstream social arrangements and aspirations. Thus, it is important to recognize that labeling processes are contingent upon social statuses such as class, race, ethnicity, sex/gender, and age. We should not expect them to occur in the same way across different social groups and categories. It is the less powerful who stand a greater chance of being defined and treated as deviant, due to increased exposure and vulnerability to sanctioning agents (Becker, 1973). The pressure toward conformity is more easily placed on those who lack the resources to resist this pressure, and it is the powerful that determine which acts are deviant, which are not, and the
punishment for non-conformity. For the most part, it is the powerful that label, and it is the less powerful who get labeled. For example, some research suggests that lower SES youth are more susceptible to labeling processes than higher SES youth (Matsueda, 1992; Sampson, 1986; Sampson and Laub, 1997). That is, defining children as deviant may promote further deviance on their part for lower-class children, but it may actually deter further deviance on the part of higher-class children (eventually), possibly because higher social and economic resources buffer the stigmatizing and segregating effects of labeling.

We might expect a similar case with race and ethnicity—that racial and ethnic minorities will be more exposed and vulnerable to being labeled as deviant, while less likely to be the ones doing the defining and sanctioning (Fishman, 1998). On the structural level we know that in the United States, racial and ethnic minorities are over-represented in lower SES categories, granting them less social and economic power than the white majority. It is the dominant white majority that has the greater hand in determining what and who is to be defined as deviant as well as what the proper sanctions should be (Fishman, 1998), largely based on Western, capitalist, Judeo-Christian values. Socio-economic disadvantages mean that minorities have less power to hide their behavior from social control agencies. For example, the police typically patrol poor neighborhoods with large concentrations of minorities, to look for "street crime" (Fishman, 1998; Portillos, 1998), but not many patrol plush office buildings looking for "white collar crime." Socio-economic disadvantages also mean that minorities are less able to resist labels once authorities attempt to apply
them. For instance, poorer defendants in court do not have the amount of money needed to purchase a strong defense, or, "get them off." Further, labeling on the basis of race and ethnicity is built into institutional practices—a good example being racial profiling. Racial profiling illustrates the self-fulfilling prophecy quite thoroughly. Racial bias means that police target racial minorities more when attempting to expose crime. Since they target the minorities more, they catch more minorities. Criminal composites are formed on the basis of who has been arrested the most in the past; not who actually commits the most crime. Armed with the resulting profile, the police target minorities, and so on.

On the interpersonal level, commonly held prejudices and stereotypes get located in the cognitive structures of individuals serving as social control authorities (Portillos, 1998). In a racially and ethnically prejudiced society, the schematic version of "the deviant," notably "the criminal," is all too often a minority (Fishman, 1998; Rodriguez, 1998). For example, to see how often African-American and Latino/a-American are used to provide the schema of the "criminal," one only need to look at popular images portrayed in television and movies (Berg, 1997; Castro, 1998; Lichter and Amundsen, 1997; Rodriguez, 1997). When enfranchised Americans think of what kind of person would hurt them, they may be more likely to think of a racial or ethnic minority. Individuals holding authority such as the police, judges, teachers, counselors, etc. are also part of the communities wherein derogatory social attitudes lie, and they are all capable of using racial and ethnic stereotypes to increase their tendency to label minorities more often than whites. A popular complaint
among African Americans is that the police frequently pull them over in automobiles without probable cause, a pattern likely due to such a tendency (Fishman, 1998).

A class interaction with labeling may have been demonstrated in William Chambliss’ well-known case study of “The Saints and the Roughnecks” (Chambliss, 2000). The Saints were a group of white upper-middle-class high school boys who did fairly well in school and got in virtually no trouble with the law. The Roughnecks were a group of white lower-class boys at the same high school. They did not do as well in school and got into a great deal of trouble with the law. However, per Chambliss’ observations, both groups engaged in about the same rate and seriousness of delinquency. The local police, as well as the community in general, saw the Saints as “good boys,” which may have led to the boys’ avoidance of arrest. On the other hand, the community, especially the local police, saw the Roughnecks as troublemakers—as evidenced by their prior contact with the Roughnecks. The difference in social definitions of the Saints versus the Roughnecks was largely due to “selective perception and labeling.” It was apparent that the police scrutinized the behavior of the Roughnecks more than the Saints, based on their contrasting definitions of the two groups. This likely led to the Roughnecks getting caught and punished a great deal more than the Saints. Further, the Saints’ ability to avoid the deviant label may have in some ways facilitated their delinquent behavior. The bias the police had in favor of the Saints and against the Roughnecks could be one of class—the police were of the same socio-economic status as the families of the Saints. Also, being lower class meant that the Roughnecks were more “visible.”
They lacked transportation resources and were less able to make it to the edge of town where deviant behavior could be hidden.

After high school, most of the Saints went to college and acquired good careers. Only two of the Roughnecks acquired gainful careers, and at least three of the boys graduated into chronic and/or serious crime. Social class affected the experiences with social control agencies of both the Saints and the Roughnecks while they were growing up. Chambliss (2000) believed that through interaction with others in the community, the Roughnecks acquired images of themselves as deviants and chose to associate with others like them. Through the way the community defined and reacted to the boys over time, and through exchanges within their deviant groups, the developing deviant self-images of the Roughnecks were continually reinforced. As the deviant self-identity got stronger, they became more willing to try new and more serious forms of deviant behavior, putting them at greater risk of getting stuck on a path toward deviant careers. For the Saints, on the other hand, class advantages meant that their interaction with the mainstream community would lead to the development and reinforcement of non-deviant identities (the Saints did not even define their delinquent behavior as deviant) and opportunities for long-term community integration and socially desirable careers.

Additionally, the likelihood that one will be defined and treated as deviant depends on the status of the person(s) being offended (Becker, 1973). High status persons possess social resources that may be used to inflict serious sanctions upon those who offend them, whereas lower status persons may not be able to be as
punishing toward their offenders, especially when their offenders are of higher status. For example, an employer who discovers that an employee is stealing at the workplace is able to convince others that the employee is deviant and go so far as to fire the employee. On the other hand, an employee who discovers that an employer has, say, violated workplace safety laws would have great difficulty in establishing a widely held definition of the employer as deviant or removing the employer from her or his position. Thus, the stickiness of a label is the result of a status interaction between the person doing an act and the person(s) judging the act.

Being labeled as deviant is also dependent upon factors other than social status. As Palamara, Cullen, and Gerstein (1986) suggest, the effects of labeling on future deviance may depend on the type of deviance as well as the type of societal reaction to it. For instance, we might expect certain crimes to draw more profound societal reactions than others might. Marijuana use in the United States, for example, is condemned more than alcohol use, especially through law, and neither is as "bad" as physical assault. At the same time, certain societal reactions have more powerful stigmatizing and segregating effects than others might—incarceration over probation for example. Becker (1973) mentioned that labeling depends on the timing of an act. For example, formal sanctions and public condemnation against drug use is likely to be more harsh during periods in which politicians declare a "war on drugs," as compared to periods with more liberal political climates. Becker (1973) also mentioned that labeling depends on the consequences of an act. For example, the drunk driver who causes an accident harming someone may be seen as more
“deviant,” and will certainly receive stiffer penalties, than the drunk driver who only gets pulled over by the police.

Erikson (1964) also argued that the “sorting” of persons into deviant versus non-deviant social categories often depend on many factors having nothing to do with the deviant act in and of itself (which may be less true for serious crimes such as murder). In addition to social class, these factors may include offending record, degree of offender remorse, and the changing temperament of the community. These factors may explain, for instance, why some people who drink too much are labeled “alcoholics,” while others are not. Noting the expansive criteria by which the community judges its members as deviant returns us to the reason why some sociologists of deviance during the 1960s called for an accounting of the audience in identifying the nature of deviance. Erikson (1964: 12) wrote:

... the difference between those who earn a deviant label and those who go their own way in peace depends almost entirely on the way in which the community sifts out and codes the many details of behavior to which it is witness. In this respect, the community screen may be a more relevant subject for sociological research than the actual behavior which is filtered through it. From this standpoint, it is important to understand how a community decides what and who is deviant or not, and we cannot assume that the community administers social control simply to protect itself from objectively harmful effects of deviance.

Figure 1 depicts a conceptual model that summarizes the general argument of the traditional self-concept approach to labeling theory.
Figure 1. A self-concept model of labeling theory
A Critique and Defense of Labeling Theory

Labeling theory has endured its share of criticism, with much of it warranted. Conceptual analyses by critics have revealed theoretical “holes” in labeling’s explanatory reasoning, and hypotheses developed from the framework have traditionally been difficult to support. Thus, by the early 1970s, labeling theory had become unpopular (Goode, 1975). However, much of the decline in the theory’s popularity may be due to misunderstandings, over-simplifications, and unfair criticisms surrounding the theory (Schur, 1971).

One of the problems with labeling theory may be that it is not a distinct, unified “field,” containing theorists and researchers who may be neatly “labeled,” if you will, “labeling theorists.” Goode (1975) pointed out that much of the classic work on “labeling theory” was done by writers whose work was not done primarily in labeling, and whose work often stands in opposition to each other or principles popularly believed to be an integral part of labeling theory. Goode called into question the work of four theorists often cited as labeling theorists: Edwin Lemert, Kai Erikson, John Kitsuse, and Howard Becker. Per Goode’s argument, Lemert referred to “objective” qualities of deviance, Erikson’s work in general was more functionalist, Kitsuse wrote critiques of labeling theory, and Becker believes that labeling is not even a theory, per se. Consequently, it is difficult to identify a unified body of work that we may designate collectively as “labeling theory,” and it may even be argued that labeling theory does not exist outside of popular characterizations
of it (Goode, 1975). Without a clear, complete statement of labeling theory, it can be confusing and it is more vulnerable to “straw man” attacks against it.

However, even if it is true that labeling theory is not a well-defined body of work, this does not mean that we cannot utilize and refine labeling as a wider perspective or theoretical framework, and at least develop a clearer idea of what we mean by “labeling theory.” Further, we should not be uncomfortable with a lack of a unified school of labeling theorists who work primarily in labeling theory. If we can be convinced of the value of integrated theory and research, we should not have to see a need for a body of work that can strictly be considered labeling theory. Rather, what is important is that we develop a useful labeling framework containing a system of conceptual tools that can be used to construct empirically verifiable theoretical explanations of crime or other deviant behavior. Thus, it is okay if theorists who work primarily in other areas “dabble” in labeling theory, as long as they produce informative work. Apparently, later writers took the work of deviance scholars such as Becker, Lemert, Erikson, and Kitususe and turned it into a “theory” that these scholars did not intend. This is a risky venture, but one that does not necessarily discount the unintended theory. Although it is preferable that most theory is not constructed this way, a practical argument would be that the true value of a theory lies in how much it can explain more than the way it was constructed. A favorable slant can be placed on the way labeling theory was “concocted.” It is a very interesting, and hopefully useful, piecing together of bits of work on deviance. It may be that labeling theory is one of the most wonderful “accidents” in sociological theory.
Another problem is that many times, labeling “works.” The theory is difficult to reconcile with empirical observations that defining and treating an individual as deviant reduce continued deviant behavior (Goode, 1975; Mankoff, 1999). By being stigmatized, a person may feel guilty about committing a certain act and be compelled to avoid doing it again. The person may even engage in more pro-social behavior to “get back in the good graces” of those one has relationships with. This apparent clash is actually easily resolved, remembering that labeling is not just a social psychological process but also a social structural one. According to the theory, labeling is a social differentiation process. It recognizes that some people in a society are defined as deviant while others are not, often regardless of the actual behaviors they perform. Whether one is defined as deviant or not may depend more on one’s relative power than actual behavior. Individuals with a good deal of power are more resistant, and perhaps exposed less, to the segregating effects of being labeled, while they have more to lose by continuing deviant behavior. It is the powerful that do the labeling, which makes it less likely that they will be labeled. On the other hand, individuals with little power are not only targeted more, but they have less psychosocial resources in which to ward off labels, and they enjoy less social privileges. Thus, there is an interaction here with regard to successful social control via labeling. Stigmatization may “work” on higher status, well-integrated persons but “not work” on very low status, disenfranchised persons.

Problems with labeling theory also stem from the definition of deviance it employs (Schur, 1971). Claiming that deviance is relative, reactive, and interactive
opens the door to a quite broad definition of deviance. At times, labeling definitions of deviance appear "foggy." It is, of course, important to use clear, practical definitions of phenomena explored in scientific inquiry. In response, Schur (1971: 24) offered the following "working definition of deviance":

Human behavior is deviant to the extent that it comes to be viewed as involving a personally discreditable departure from a group's normative expectations, and it elicits interpersonal or collective reactions that serve to 'isolate,' 'treat,' 'correct,' or 'punish' individuals engaged in such behavior.

This definition is a useful guide to operationalizing deviant behavior in research because it specifies, albeit abstractly, the behaviors to be included as deviant phenomena as well as the conditions under which they occur. Also, the definition is flexible enough to view deviance as a "sensitizing concept" (Schur, 1971).

Since the theory employs a relativistic, reactive definition of deviance, it is limited in explaining any crime that appears to have at least some absolute qualities (Goode, 1975; Mankoff, 1999). Many criminal acts are tangibly injurious, such as murder, physical assault, and item theft. Arguably, just about any criminal act is bound to have at least a small element of objective harm about it. But, an important part of labeling theory is that it posits that behavior can only be established as deviant through societal reactions to it. In other words, the only thing that makes behavior deviant is the label placed upon it. It is very difficult to argue that all deviance is merely a matter of interpretation on the part of the "labeler." Further, a reactive definition of deviance makes it more difficult to distinguish between deviance and
non-deviance, or between "deviants" and "non-deviants" (Gibbs, 1966). For example, if deviance is created only by societal reaction, then thieves who do not get caught cannot be deviant, while persons falsely accused of stealing are deviant.

In an article first printed in 1971, Mankoff (1999) argued that societal reaction theory does not explain all forms of career rule-breaking. Specifically, he argued that the theory may help explain "ascribed rule-breaking" but not "achieved rule-breaking." Ascribed rule-breaking occurs when the labeled person does not commit an act that leads to being labeled; the person is labeled on the basis of her or his physical characteristics such as height, handicap, sex, race, and attractiveness. Here, consistent with labeling theory, the only way individuals may be considered "deviant" is if the community so labels them—this label is completely independent from the individual's behavior. Thus, societal reaction is a necessary condition for career ascribed deviance. However, since stigmatized persons may have the status, power, and skill to ward off social definitions of them as deviant, societal reaction is not quite a sufficient condition for career ascribed deviance. Achieved rule-breaking, on the other hand, occurs when a person acts in such a way to receive a label—stealing for example. Here, if an act is required to receive a label, then societal reaction is not a necessary condition for career achieved deviance, which is contrary to labeling theory. Mankoff (1999) pointed out that even Becker did not include societal reaction in his model outlining the progression from a beginning marijuana user (as a case of primary deviance) to a regular marijuana user (as a case of secondary deviance).

Further, since early research did not support hypotheses of the exacerbating effects of
formal sanctions, it did not appear that societal reaction is a sufficient condition for career achieved deviance either. Thus, Mankoff (1999) concluded that societal reaction theory is not an adequate general theory of deviance. It is fair to admit that labeling theory lends itself to explaining certain forms of deviant behavior better than others might (Schur, 1971).

It would be easy here to “cop-out” and just admit that labeling theory cannot explain all crime, but perhaps reconciliation should be made here also. Edwin Schur (1971) cleared up some of the misunderstandings of labeling theory. To begin, he pointed out that an extreme relativistic definition of deviance is not the cornerstone of labeling theory. An important tenet of labeling theory is not that deviance is only “in the eye of the beholder,” but that the nature of an individual’s offensive behavior is not independent from social definition. Thus, it should be understood that a strict focus on “the labeler” is contradictory to what the labeling theorist desires. Rather, the labeling theorist is interested in the entire social context of offensive behavior (Schur, 1971). It is a better representation of labeling theory to present an “interactionist” definition of deviance as one of its primary features. With this in mind, even an act with objective properties, such as murder, is available for subjective interpretation. For instance, our willingness to label an individual who kills someone as a “murderer” as opposed to, say, one who was acting in self-defense (or is even “innocent”) may depend on her or his social status and power. Further, even if crime may have objective qualities, perhaps the most important point made in labeling theory—that reactions to deviance may promote further deviance—is not
discounted. A case in point, an individual sanctioned for committing violent acts may still become more prone to committing violent acts, despite the relativistic versus absolute nature of physical violence. Perhaps, then, the extent to which societal reaction to behavior defines the social nature of the behavior varies from act to act. For instance, the representation of marijuana use as socially harmful may be almost completely constructed through social reaction, whereas the representation of murder as harmful is largely not. Additionally, it would be wise to avoid dichotomizing between “deviants” and non-deviant.” Persons may be relatively deviant or conforming, as the standards used to establish the deviance vary in their degree of severity as well as the circumstances under which they apply (Schur, 1971).

A similar problem is that since labeling theory puts a great deal of focus on the behavior of those who label, it may not pay enough attention to the behavior of those who get labeled (Akers, 2000). It is difficult for the theory to account for agency on the part of the actor defined and treated as deviant, or the motivation of the actor to commit the behavior (Gibbs, 1966). Labeling theory does hold that the labeler determines whether or not an act becomes labeled as deviant, not the act itself. However, although there are certainly many instances of erroneous and unjust labels placed upon people, it is not likely that agents of social control label people haphazardly (Akers, 2000). In most cases, it is probably understandable that a person is labeled as deviant and sanctioned per her or his behavior. For example, it would be difficult to argue that individuals who commit armed robbery have given the criminal justice system no cause to label and punish them. Wouldn’t we expect actual illegal
behavior to still be the largest predictor of whether or not a person gets involved with
the criminal justice system? It seems reasonable to hold labeled persons at least
partly responsible for the labels they receive, in many cases. Also, it is warranted that
labeling theory incorporate human agency more in portraying how labels are applied.

Arguments as to how much responsibility we attribute to individuals’ behavior
for their own labels will vary, of course. For example, Akers (2000: 127) teaches,
“The behavior creates the label more than the label creates the behavior, and
subsequent deviant behavior continues the label more than the label continues the
behavior.” Is this always true? What about cases involving false or unwarranted
labels? For example, is it universally accepted that marijuana use warrants the label
of “criminal” placed upon the regular marijuana user, while the same label is not
placed upon the regular alcohol user? Further, can’t the “subsequent deviant
behavior” that “continues the label” be due to a prior label, as labeling theory would
predict? Akers’ statement begs for much empirical verification. Even if it turns out
to be true, labeling theory will still be useful as long as we can show that sanctions
can promote future deviance. Again, an important proposition of labeling theory has
not been confronted here. Even if an individual’s behavior is completely to blame for
receiving a label as deviant, it does not mean that the label and accompanying
sanctions will not lead to more deviance on the part of the individual. We live in a
world that has a great deal of unfairness, and labeling theory is still important in that
it explains some of that unfairness.
Although labeling theory carries an admission that the label does not cause the
deviant behavior initially, with the distinction between primary and secondary
deviance, the theory tended to disregard factors that may explain initial deviant
behavior after a person has been labeled. Once behavior may be conceived as
secondary deviance, it would be a mistake to assume that factors other than labeling--
such as socio-economic status, parental supervision, community disorganization, and
psychopathology, to name a few--have nothing to do with continued deviant behavior
(Akers, 2000). It is not necessary that labeled persons commit all of their deviant acts
because they are labeled, and it is certainly possible for individuals to continue
deviant behavior without it being known to or sanctioned by others. Deviant
behavior, like any social behavior, is multi-causal. To confront this weakness in
labeling theory, it must be integrated conceptually and in research with other theories.
This it quite possible in that labeling is actually complimentary to other theoretical
perspectives, as I will elaborate later. Schur (1971: 29) stated early, “In general, the
labeling approach should not, and indeed cannot be seen in terms of labeling alone.”

Although labeling theory’s weaknesses must be acknowledged, and we should
work to improve it, much of the criticism launched against it may be unfair. In
somewhat of a defense of labeling theory, Erich Goode (1975) charged that critiques
of labeling often shared three flaws. First, critics appeared bent on discrediting it
instead of criticizing it constructively. Second, labeling arguments have been
misrepresented. Third, specific writings on labeling theory have been attacked rather
than considering its worth as a wider perspective. One of the problems with labeling
theory is that it is often portrayed in an over-simplified manner, and some of its critics have been accused of launching "straw man" arguments against it (Goode, 1975).

In this section, the specific criticisms against labeling theory are itemized. Looking at each criticism, it appears that many labeling critics focus on one particular argument in labeling theory, claim it as the central argument of the theory, and then "burn it down." Really, labeling theory contains many important arguments: labeling causes deviant behavior, labeling is the result of societal reaction, deviance is relative and created by the societal reaction, labeling affects one's self-concept, and labeling is also a social structural differentiation process. Which one of these arguments is central to labeling appears to be quite subjective; the literature contains no consensus as to what the main point made in labeling theory (which does create problems).

Personally, I find the proposition that labeling is a cause of deviant behavior to be central because it is pertinent to the etiology of crime, and it suggests a way to go about reducing crime. However, I do not have an argument as to why others should accept this. Perhaps the most appreciative way to present labeling theory is as a wide theoretical framework containing several important arguments as to the causes and nature of deviant behavior. To dismiss labeling as a theoretical framework, at least most of its collection of arguments has to be completely dismissed. In many of the labeling critiques, an admission is made that "central" propositions in labeling theory may at times be true.

Goode (1975) defended labeling theory against some specific criticisms. For instance, labeling theory has traditionally been used to explain a somewhat narrow
range of morally reprehensible deviant behavior committed by the less powerful—the behavior of "nuts, sluts, and perverts." Also, labeling theory has been accused of narrowly focusing on social psychological processes and ignoring structural causes of deviance (Gibbs, 1966). Quite often, in the literature, the approach does seem to ignore the part that powerful segments of society play in creating and sustaining deviant behavior (including their own). However, as Goode points out, this problem with labeling theory lies within how it has been used and is not inherent in the nature of the tool itself. Perhaps labeling theory’s relationship with the conflict perspective should be more recognized. For instance, we can attempt to explain why persons committing certain “damaging” acts get labeled as deviant and become segregated while others do not, even if they are committing the same kind of deviance. It is already suspected that poorer people and minorities are more likely to be labeled and treated as deviant. The differing incidence of deviant behavior across segments of the population may be partially explained by the proposition that societal reactions to deviance differ across social categories and institutional settings. As Schur (1971) pointed out, labeling processes operate at several levels, so to accuse labeling theory of only proposing that deviant outcomes is produced at one level is unfair.

Of the earlier so-called “labeling theorists,” the one we may be able to rightly refer to as such is Edwin Schur. Schur (1971) took the fragmented propositions of labeling theory and organized them into a coherent set of explanations. He mentioned two basic deviant outcomes of the interplay between social process and societal level. First, with regard to labeled individuals, they settle into the role most available to
them—a deviant role. As such, they become more locked into deviant careers.

Second, with regard to society as a whole, the secondary deviance produced through societal reaction expands its "deviance problems" (adding to a "crime problem" for instance). These are the outcomes proposed by most, if not all, labeling theory. What makes Schur’s labeling theory more defendable against critics is his multi-level view of labeling processes, as well as his explanation of how these processes work.

According to Schur’s (1971), labeling processes operate at three social levels. One level is “collective rule-making.” "Rules" are closely tied with beliefs and values widely held among people who make up a society, or a segment of society. On a more macro-social level, rule-making, as well as rule-enforcing, result from collective action such as moral crusades, which may involve social conflict between segments of society. A second level is “organizational processing.” Social organizations engage in social control, formally and informally, and as such, play a part in producing deviance. A third level is “interpersonal reactions.” As a symbolic interactionist perspective on labeling teaches, deviant identity formation, stigmatization, and segregation take place when individuals and small groups react to persons labeled as deviant.

Also according to Schur (1971), labeling involves three “basic response processes” operating across the three levels. One is stereotyping. To a great extent, to label someone is to stereotype someone. On the collective rule-making level, members of the general public share attitudes and beliefs about the stereotypical attributes of the "deviant." An example is the way stereotypes of criminals are
presented in the mass media. On the organizational level, "profiles" and other typifications are used to "process" constituents, according to their normal or abnormal status. An example is the processing of criminal offenders through the legal system, or the preference of employers to hire non-offenders. On the interpersonal level, individuals use stereotypes as information telling them what the person labeled as deviant is like and how to respond to her or him in interaction, as when members of the community tend to avoid contact with offenders.

Another process is "retrospective interpretation," which involves a retroactive cognitive restructuring of the past behavior of a person "discovered" to be deviant (Schur, 1971). On the collective rule-making level, categories of persons may be "seen in a new light" contingent upon changes in the political climate, as when the drug user becomes demonized during a "war on drugs." On the organizational level, recorded "histories" of constituents are used to determine present and future statuses with the organization, as when adjudicators and mental health professionals use "case histories" to assess the extent of a person's criminality or mental health problems. On the interpersonal level, after individuals learn about a person's label, they tend to believe that the person has been qualitatively deviant all along. For example, mere "hanging out" may be reinterpreted as "looking for trouble" after a neighbor discovers that a teenager has been in trouble with the law.

A third process is negotiation. The degree to which one is considered deviant and punished depends on power exchanges involving "bargaining" (Schur, 1971). Those with more power resist labels better. On the collective rule-making level,
different collectivities compete and compromise to institutionalize their definitions of
deviance, as when political movements lead to changes in law. On the organizational
processing level, constituents bargain with their organizations to determine relative
deviant or non-deviant statuses—plea bargaining in court for example. On the
interpersonal level, labeler and labelee bargain over the label, as when a psychiatrist
diagnoses a patient.

Goode (1975) also defended labeling theory against the false accusation that
labeling theorists assume that there is “value consensus” in society among both
“deviants” and “conformists.” Labeling theory may hold the assumption that persons
committing deviant acts are aware of conformist values and may even be concerned
with the consequences of their deviant acts (including others’ reactions to them).
However, the theory also allows for the recognition that these persons often do not
share normative values or even care about public condemnation for violating them.
Further, many persons committing acts considered to be deviant do not have their
behavior exposed to the public and thus escape “public labeling” (although one may
experience the effects of labeling through a more private identification with a publicly
stigmatized social category or group).

Goode (1975) goes a long way in “saving” labeling theory but does so at a
cost that those of use wishing to use it may not be willing to pay. He made a few
significant concluding statements, including “Labeling theory isn’t a theory at all”
(1975: 581). Given the lack of defining boundaries on what is and is not labeling
theory, he is probably correct in stating that labeling is not a theory. But, Goode went
on to state, “Perhaps it isn’t even as grandiose an edifice as a general perspective” (1975: 581). Is this way of looking at labeling theory a “cop-out”? Is Goode making labeling theory easier to defend by watering it down to some vague paradigm? He drew from Blumer in claiming that the ideas of labeling theory exist at the level of “sensitizing concepts,” which by no means serves as a demotion for labeling theory, but would be incomplete if labeling theory can prove to provide operational definitions of causal variables. Goode appears to believe that using labeling theory to search for causes of deviant behavior would be a waste of time. He continued, “The question of etiology... may very well be beyond the scope of labeling theory; it was never intended to be an explanation of causality” and “… no one would hold that labeling creates a given form of behavior de novo” (1975: 582).

Becker (1973) added a chapter titled, “Labelling Theory Reconsidered” to his revised version of *Outsiders*. In it, he asserted that the statements on deviance he and the other theorists originally credited for labeling theory should never have been considered explicit theories—they were not statements directly addressing the etiology of crime. Rather, they were just a way to broaden an understanding of deviance through a consideration of the behavior of others surrounding the rule-breaking actor. He went so far as to reject the expression, “labelling theory,” and instead referred to the work this term represents as “interactionist theory.” Becker (1973) admitted that the actions of “moral entrepreneurs” couldn’t, by themselves, explain why people commit deviant acts. It would be foolish to say, for instance, that a robber robs simply because someone labeled him/her a “robber.” We cannot ignore
the fact that one of the forefathers of labeling theory, so to speak, has refuted popular interpretations of it. However, Becker (1973) did hold a place for “interactionist theory” as a “perspective” increasing our understanding of deviance.

I propose that it is still premature to draw the conclusion that labeling theory (or, interactionist theory, or, societal reaction theory—whatever it should be called) has no etiological value. Let’s see if an improved labeling theory can prove to be fruitful. I propose that we still entertain the notion that labeling theory can be used to guide research intended to seek support for theorized causal relationships concerning deviant behavior. I echo Braithwaite’s (1989: 17) sentiments regarding the propositions of labeling theory: “Whether or not we want to call these collections of propositions a theory, they are central to this analysis, and I am concerned to assess how they stand up to empirical testing, even if some of the labelists are not.” We cannot ignore Goode’s (1975) point because it is too difficult to argue that “labeling” itself is a causal entity. But, maybe it is a process wherein causal stimuli reside. To re-conceptualize labeling theory and find it useful, do we have to assign it such minimal importance in explaining deviance? After all, we may be tempted to ask if labeling is not a theory, a theoretical perspective, or a way to search for causation, how much good is it? Although Becker (1973: 34) argued that labeling theory does not address etiological questions of deviance, I wonder about his following hypothetical example of a self-fulfilling prophecy from Outsiders, which I interpret as an etiological statement:
... Though the effects of opiate drugs may not impair one's working ability, to be known as an addict will probably lead to losing one's job. In such cases, the individual finds it difficult to conform to other rules which he had no intention or desire to break, and perforce finds himself deviant in these areas as well. ...The drug addict finds himself forced [italics mine] into other illegitimate kinds of activity, such as robbery and theft, by the refusal of respectable employers to have him around.

In this example, it seems to me as if the drug user is labeled as deviant by others, who then cause the drug user to resort to instrumental crime.

Although new ways of looking at labeling theory are needed, it is also useful to return to Merton's (1957) notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy, an idea fundamental to understanding labeling processes. I use the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy here in the context of human development, and, thus, as a relatively long process. I am interested in examining labeling as an ongoing social process--as a self-fulfilling prophecy that unfolds over time under the management of the labeler and other sanctioning agents. I do not argue that a label simply "sticks" to a person and then causes that person to engage in deviant behavior (without necessarily continuing to interact with the labeler). I believe it is more likely that the causal force behind a label, which often exists as a cognitive representation of an individual as somehow faulty, lies in what it does to the persons doing the labeling--the thought that a person is deviant shapes our reactions to that person.

Consequently, it is these reactions, not the "label" itself, that may have a causal
impact on the deviant behavior of those labeled as deviant. After all, a self-fulfilling prophecy requires not just a "prediction" (here, the label), but also a continuous effort on the part of the social agent making the prediction to make it come true.

Thus, a weakness in traditional labeling theory is that it focuses on the self-definitions of labeled persons as causal factors in crime while neglecting consideration of the impact of the behavior of the labelers toward the labeled. Labeling is the Thomas Theorem (Merton, 1957) in action. The label represents a "definition of the situation" as real, and it is this definition that helps structure how labelers act toward the labeled. The label has "real consequences" in the form of the interaction that takes place between labeler and "labelee" (and possibly also in the form of the "labelee" acting in accordance with the label). We do not simply "label" the person, rather, we are involved in labeling the person, over time. It is not likely that individuals, even children, accept socially undesirable self-concepts quickly and easily. All self-concepts take a long time to develop, and even in instances when individuals are being defined as deviant, they are quite often aware of opposing "good" person definitions. Further, as Becker (1973) pointed out, when labeled persons do not see the rules they break as legitimate, it is not likely that they will see the deviant label as legitimate; they may even see those who judge against them as the "outsiders." What if a labeled person never "accepts the label"? Will the person automatically cease deviant behavior, or will the labeling agent necessarily change the definitions and reactions toward that person? We probably cannot answer these questions with a sure "yes." Therefore, "labels" should be examined with regard to
how they structure the way labelers interact with those they label as deviant at least as much as how they alter the self-definitions of labeled individuals.

Thus, when we commit a self-fulfilling prophecy using a "label," it is us that make the label become valid. If a label as deviant only works through the self-definition of the person labeled, then it could be said that the labelee makes the prophecy come true (from the point of self re-definition on, anyway) by internalizing a definition of self as deviant. It would be possible, then, for us to have nothing to do with the deviant behavior of the labeled from the point of initial stigmatization on. If so, then we are no longer active in fulfilling the prophecy; we have sort of handed it off to the labeled. It is doubtful that earlier labeling theorists intended for us to see labeling processes in this over-simplified manner. Rather, labeling processes occur through the continued engagement between those labeled as deviant and the social agents that define and treat them as deviant.

Finally, a major problem with labeling theory is that it was not supported by the research it spawned after it became popular (Goode, 1975; Mankoff, 1999). However, labeling research traditionally relied on analyses of cross-sectional data (Sampson and Laub, 1997). Labeling theory posits within-individual changes, but much labeling research has looked at cross-category differences. It is no wonder then, that labeling theory has not been well supported by research; analytical strategies unfit to test its propositions have been used. Longitudinal, as opposed to cross-sectional, analyses are more appropriate for locating within-individual changes (Sampson and Laub, 1997). It makes more sense to examine a cohort over time, in an
attempt to uncover the extent to which individuals’ deviant behavior is affected by social sanctions, as opposed to, say, simply looking at a proportion of a sample that recidivates after sanctioning. With this in mind, not only should labeling theory be re-conceptualized, but it should also be re-tested in research using longitudinal data.
REVISED LABELING THEORY

Braithwaite’s Theory of Reintegrative Shaming

Perhaps the most prominent contemporary version of labeling theory is John Braithwaite’s (1989) theory of reintegrative shaming. His theory improves the labeling perspective by confronting the apparent fact that sanctioning criminal behavior often reduces crime—one mentioned in the previous chapter as a weakness of labeling theory. Labeled persons may come to “see the errors of their ways” and refrain from offending again or seek some kind of help with their problems. Thus, he begins with the realization that labeling sometimes reduces crime and sometimes worsens it. Then, he specifies the conditions under which one or the other is likely to happen. In general, the type of “shaming” used in societal reactions to crime moderates the effects of labeling. It may not be the case that previous research showed labeling theory to be wrong--research might just not have specified the conditions under which labeling does make crime worse.

“Shaming” involves some overt expression of disapproval and criticism on the part of others for some kind of behavior—some effort to admonish the person committing the behavior. According to Braithwaite (1989), shaming can range in seriousness from a frown, to a broadcast of the behavior via mass media, to being pronounced in court. He does not couple the concepts of “punishment” and “shaming,” nor does he mention forms of actual punishment, such as spanking or imprisonment, in the range of possible forms of shaming. It is not necessary that shaming must be strongly punitive to deter crime. Also, shaming is not only a
specific response to an individual; it is also a widely held disapproval of certain forms of behavior throughout the community. As part of a community’s set of values, shaming works to control the behavior of offenders and non-offenders alike, including pro-actively. For offenders, it is reintegrative specific responses to offensive behavior that maintains their susceptibility to community-level shaming after what would likely be an atypical episode of offensive behavior on their part.

When an individual becomes stigmatized, that is, treated as an outcast or given deviant master status after committing crime, then labeling is likely to increase that individual’s criminal behavior. This is known as “disintegrative shaming.” On the other hand, when the individual is met with “reintegrative shaming,” then labeling is likely to decrease her or his criminal behavior. Reintegrative shaming involves condemnation of criminal behavior that does not cast the individual out, severing her or his ties to the community. Favorable regard is still held for the person committing crime, and gestures of forgiveness allow for re-acceptance into the community of law-abiding citizens. Reintegrative shaming allows the offender to act in a “repentant role.” It has a “de-labeling effect” and permits the kind of re-gradation ceremony (varying from a smile to a formal ceremony) that Becker (1973) and Erikson (1964) complained was missing in the process of granting the deviant master status. This show to the community publicly de-certifies the offender as deviant. Braithwaite (1989: 13) wrote, “Reintegrative shaming controls crime; stigmatization pushes offenders toward criminal subcultures.” Of course, a strict dichotomy between the two types of shaming does not exist—shaming may be relatively reintegrative or
disintegrative. Where shaming is more disintegrative than reintegrative, crime should be higher; where shaming is more reintegrative than disintegrative, crime should be lower.

Braithwaite (1989) uses integrative theory as a strategy to improve labeling theory. First, the theory of integrative shaming incorporates criminal subculture theory. By casting offenders out of the mainstream community, disintegrative shaming has the result of pushing them toward criminal subcultures. "Subcultures supply the outcast offender with the opportunity to reject her rejectors, thereby maintaining a form of self-respect" (Braithwaite, 1989: 14). Reintegrative shaming, in contrast, retains a place in the community for the offender and thus makes the criminal subculture less attractive to the offender. Thus, societies that create a great deal of stigmatizing responses to crime may give rise to a high number of criminal subcultures. Braithwaite (1989) charged that formal criminal punishment is a poor method of social control because it is a "degradation ceremony" that lacks reintegrative properties. Second, reintegrative shaming theory incorporates social control theory. Shaming works best on persons embedded in highly interdependent community networks. Since they have a great deal to lose by offending the community, these persons are more receptive to the social control mechanisms present in the community. Thus, shaming should work to decrease crime best in more communitarian societies. In inner-city communities or competitive corporate subcultures, shaming criminal behavior may not be as effective, especially if much of the shaming comes from outside of the community. Third, the theory incorporates
differential opportunity theory. Again, by casting out the offender, disintegrative shaming distances the offender from legitimate opportunities (such as employment), while making illegitimate opportunities like crime more attractive. In contrast, reintegrative shaming gives legitimate opportunities back to the offender. Finally, the theory incorporates social learning theory. Disintegrative shaming segregates offenders into criminal subcultures, wherein they learn the values, beliefs, and techniques that promotes criminal behavior. Reintegrative shaming keeps offenders in the mainstream community, wherein they continue to learn the ways of conformity.

**Labeling Theory as “Developmental Criminology”**

To make labeling theory and research more congruent, work on labeling should be guided by conceptual schemes and analytical strategies designed to examine within-individual changes. The criminological literature contains work that may be used to improve labeling theory. Perhaps the best approach to take is what Loeber and Le Blanc (1990) refer to as “developmental criminology.” In general, life-span developmental research is concerned with the link between early behavior and later behavior and life circumstances (Caspi, Elder, and Herbener, 1990). Developmental criminology is the study of the development of problematic behaviors with age, as well as the factors that initiate and direct the course of this development. It should be fairly easy to accept labeling theory arguments as developmental ones. Generally, labeling theory posits that deviant behavior at some “time one” is related to deviant behavior at some “time three” through societal reaction factors that bring about developmental changes in between—during some “time two” period.
An important methodological advantage of a developmental approach to the study of crime is that it involves longitudinal analyses that allow us to better distinguish "causes" of crime from mere correlates of crime. The "before-and-after" measurement design in longitudinal data satisfies the temporal order criterion for establishing cause and effect. Through longitudinal data, individuals' paths to (or away from) criminal careers may be uncovered (Loeber and Le Blanc, 1990). A developmental approach to studying labeling processes is needed if labeling theory is to be used to search for causes.

As opposed to following an ontogenetic model, a developmental perspective on labeling is concerned with social development, since labeling processes involve individuals' interactions and transactions with the social environment. Labeling theory deals with changes in "self," social status, social relationships, and life circumstance. Of primary concern to a developmental labeling theory, then, is 1. Human development in its social context, 2. Social environmental influences that operate independently from biological influences, 3. Social environmental influences that do not necessarily result in physiological changes (Rutter, 1989). For example, our culturally defined role expectations help determine our developmental contexts. Caspi, Elder, and Herbener (1990: 31) state "Transitions and adjustments to new roles and relationships are the core social-developmental tasks people face across the life course." Societal reactions to persons defined as deviant may be examined with regard to their interference with performance in age-graded roles, especially those concerned with school, peers, family, and work.
More appropriate to labeling theory is a "sociogenic" model of development (Sampson and Laub, 2001b). As are all aspects of human development, social development is a matter of both change and stability. New experiences result in intra-individual changes, but people carry with them the results of earlier experiences. Although individual characteristics at one age do not necessarily predict specific changes at future ages, earlier characteristics, problem behavior for instance, may be exhibited at later ages (Rutter, 1989). One of the most consistent patterns found in social scientific research is the stability of anti-social behavior over time (Sampson and Laub, 2001a). However, the specific problem behaviors are likely to change over time. It is also important then, to examine the ways in which individuals confront changing circumstances. Persistent deviant behavior is not necessarily a case of heterotypic continuity. Developmental research may involve the identification of early attributes as predictors of later developmental outcomes without necessarily searching for the persistence of specific traits (Caspi, Elder, and Herbener, 1990). The lesson for labeling theory here is that the connection between earlier and later deviant behavior may be determined by factors other than stable self-concepts, and that labeling processes may even be disrupted by social factors.

We should expect to find changes in criminal behavior as individuals grow from childhood to adulthood. Arguing for the utility of a developmental approach to studying crime, Thornberry (1997) points out that the relationship between age and criminal behavior is a fairly consistent finding in criminological research (see also Farrington, 1997). This research strongly suggests that delinquent and criminal
behavior change with age in an orderly manner. During childhood, actual illegal behavior is relatively uncommon, but the anti-social behaviors that serve as precursors to later illegal behavior are not. The onset of illegal behavior increases greatly during late childhood and early adolescence. The prevalence of illegal behavior peaks at around middle to late adolescence (around 17). This peak is followed by a rapid decline, with most offending tapering off during young adulthood. Labeling theory may be broadened to include an understanding of how efforts at social control play a part in determining changes in anti-social and illegal behavior across stage transitions.

From Thornberry (1997), we can see that developmental perspectives on crime are useful for the following reasons. First, they identify and explain some important dimensions of criminal behavior: prevalence, age of onset, duration of careers, escalation and de-escalation (with regard to both the frequency and seriousness of the behavior), and desistance. (It is important to note that the factors that explain any one of these dimensions do not necessarily explain any of the others.) Second, they distinguish between offenders who begin early and have long careers from those that begin late and offend for a relatively brief period (usually middle to late adolescence). The factors that explain one type of offender do not necessarily explain the other, and the identification of these two types makes it important to explain both stability and change in criminal behavior over time. For instance, Simons et al. (1994) found that oppositional/defiant behavior was present in paths to criminal justice system involvement for “early starters” of delinquency but not for
"late starters." Third, they focus attention on the precursors and consequences of criminal behavior instead of just factors present during the offending. Behavioral problems in earlier childhood may precede later illegal behavior, and involvement in illegal behavior has consequences for later psychosocial development. Fourth, developmental perspectives use knowledge of the developmental changes occurring over the life-course to explain patterns of criminal behavior.

Criminal behavior development may be examined in relation to major life transitions and changes in social environment. For example, as children proceed from home to elementary school, then to high school, then to work or college, their offending behavior may take on a different character as a result of factors present during these transitions. As individuals grow older, they may initiate, increase, decrease, or cease offending, and they may change over to different forms of offending behaviors or mix them. At issue is if these quantitative and qualitative changes in individual offending develop across time in an identifiable organized sequence. Taking some principles from developmental psychology, Loeber and Le Blanc (1990: 378) state that it may be worthwhile to determine "whether the course of offending is predictable, hierarchical, and orderly." They review evidence that suggests that there are anti-social behavioral sequences that can be combined into different developmental trajectories. Also, some important questions concerning the way "causes" of crime operate across the life span need to be answered. Are crime factors stable across time? Are different factors at work depending on whether offending begins at early versus late ages? Which factors have immediate effects,
and which ones take a long time to operate? And, which factors have singular effects, and which ones operate with others to have cumulative, longitudinal effects? All of these are developmental questions (Loeber and Le Blanc, 1990).

Developmental research is needed to better understand continuity in anti-social behavior. As Loeber and Le Blanc (1990) assert, studies examining continuity in anti-social behavior are useful for three reasons. First, they show that this continuity is higher for some people more than others are. Second, they explore the extent to which continuity between conduct problems and crime reflects continuity of more general deviance. And third, they identify "early markers" that distinguish between life-course persistent and age-limited offending. Some research finds that specific problem behaviors such as lying and truancy predict later general delinquency, and children who exhibit the earliest onset of anti-social behavior stand the greatest chance of continuing into adult crime, especially if the onset behavior is serious and frequent (Loeber and LeBlanc, 1990). Additionally, since development also involves desirable experiences, it is important for research to identify both risk and protective factors (and the interactions between them) (Rutter, 1989).

Patterson, DeBaryshe, and Ramsey (1989) believe that research supports the contention that anti-social behavior is a developmental trait that begins during early childhood (as early as grade school) and often continues into adolescence and adulthood, and this course is marked by an identifiable sequence of experiences. They present a developmental model of anti-social behavior that begins with ineffective parenting practices that lead to children's conduct problems during early
childhood. Child conduct problems then lead to social rejection (by conventional peers) and academic failure during middle childhood. Social rejection and academic failure are followed in late childhood and adolescence by deviant peer association, and then delinquency. Patterson et al. (1989) point out that children who follow this sequence are at high risk for chronic offending, although they are careful to acknowledge that most children who engage in anti-social behavior do not become anti-social adults.

Similarly, Moffitt (1993) offers a dual developmental taxonomy of anti-social behavior that sheds more light on the relationship between age and crime (the “age-crime curve”). She believes that the aggregate delinquency rates conceal two distinct categories of offenders: “life-course persistent” and “adolescent-limited.” As these terms suggest, the two categories reveal different patterns of offending. Life-course persistent offenders exhibit rather stable and persistent anti-social behavior, beginning in early childhood and continuing into adulthood. This type of behavior is committed by a relatively small number of youths, mostly male. In contrast, the anti-social behavior of adolescent-limiteds is temporary and situational—mostly restricted to the teenage years. This type of behavior is far more common than persistent offending. Most of the peak offending during teenage years is due to the activity of adolescent-limited offenders, while the far less frequent pre- and post-peak offending is due to the activity of the life-course persistents. These contrasting patterns suggest a need for separate causal explanations. Moffitt (1993) suggests that adolescent-limited offending is due to more proximal factors specific to adolescence. The absence of
these factors after adolescence explains discontinuity in the offending of adolescent-limiteds. The factors explaining persistent offending, on the other hand, are present in early childhood, perhaps at birth. Cumulative interactions between children’s neuro-psychological problems and poor socialization environments may result in a pathological personality that is responsible for anti-social behavior that continues across developmental stages.

Work on developmental criminology may be used to improve the study of labeling processes and their outcomes. In fact, Loeber and LeBlanc (1990: 421) mention labeling theory as an exception when charging that "Most criminological theories are not developmental in nature." Their approach calls for an examination of differences in offending between different times in an individual’s life, rather than offending differences between groups or categories of people. This is important to the study of labeling processes in that labeling theory generally posits that offending may be attributed to changes in an individual’s self-definition or social context. Labeling theory does not directly implicate factors that may be present for some social categories as opposed to others, although some may be more vulnerable or exposed to labeling than others might. Theory and research based on comparisons between individuals tend to propose static causes of deviant behavior, which does not explain variation within individuals’ behavior over time—the fact that people change. For instance, it is well known that while most adult criminal behavior can be traced back to childhood anti-social behavior, most children who exhibit anti-social behavior do not become adult criminals. Thus, static variables proposed to cause crime are
weak in prospectively explaining trajectories of crime over an individual’s life course (Sampson, 2001). Loeber and Le Blanc (1990) review research that reveal developmental sequences including ones in which individuals proceed from minor delinquency to more serious offenses. It is important to locate the variables that initiate and sustain this sequence. Labeling theory is useful for examining the part that institutions of social control, such as the criminal justice system, play in human development and persistent offending.

The Life Course Perspective and Criminology

As Sampson and Laub (2001) point out, the age-crime curve has inspired a great deal of crime and delinquency studies to focus on adolescents. However, characteristics and experiences during early childhood—the time before the sharp increase—and early adulthood—the time after the sharp decrease—may also be theoretically significant. Research also indicates an early onset of illegal behavior that continues over the life course. Therefore, the search for the causes of crime should be extended to include the impact of earlier childhood characteristics as well as links between childhood experiences and later adult outcomes. Since crime decreases sharply after adolescence, it is important to study the transition from illegal to legal behavior in adulthood and what it has to do with other transitions occurring within the general transition from adolescence to adulthood. There are also important questions concerning the nature of factors that bring about desistance; for instance, are they unique or just the opposite of the factors causing crime? A life course perspective on crime is concerned with how individuals’ illegal behavior changes as
they proceed through the stages of the life course. To better understand the relationship between age and crime, present knowledge concerning the etiology of crime should be viewed with respect to the age-graded transitions that occur during the life course (Sampson and Laub, 2001a). The question here is what are the effects of labeling across life stages?

Labeling theory offers an explanation of how individuals get caught up in criminal careers. A *criminal career* is a longitudinal, developmental, sequence of illegal behavior committed by an individual over the life course (Blumstein et al., 2001; Farrington, 1997). A recognizable onset and desistance mark the duration of a criminal career. However, since chronic offending is typically preceded and followed by non-illegal anti-social behavior (such as hyperactivity in early childhood and alcohol abuse in adulthood), criminal careers represent the legally defined mid-section of wider anti-social careers (Farrington, 1997). The criminal career perspective presumes that offending behavior is not spread throughout an entire population, rather, it is committed by an ever-changing sub-population—active offenders (Blumstein et al., 2001; Farrington, 1997). As opposed to simply examining general aggregate crime rates, the study of criminal careers recognizes offenders from non-offenders as well as the differential frequency, rate of escalation (or de-escalation), specialization, duration, and seriousness of illegal behavior among offenders. Criminal career studies may reveal how each of these dimensions is influenced by different factors. Since these dimensions go uncovered in aggregate crime data, criminal career analyses rely on individual level data. A criminal career
can range from committing a few, perhaps relatively minor, crimes to serious chronic offending (Blumstein et al., 2001; Farrington, 1997). Labeling theory offers a more plausible explanation for more chronic offending as compared to "dabbling" in illegal behavior.

According to Rutter (1989: 28), "the investigation of pathways from childhood to adult life requires an analysis of a quite complicated set of linkages over time." In addition to a direct and more immediate influence, social factors may have an indirect and more long-term influence on development (Caspi, Elder, and Herbener, 1990; Rutter, 1989). A factor may set in motion a "chain reaction" in which a harmful experience or environment leads to another (or a helpful experience or environment leads to another), as when academic failure leads to underemployment which leads to poor living conditions. Even increases in psychological functioning may be derived from the "cumulative effect" of social experiences (Rutter, 1989). It is important to note that these contingencies, or chains of "successes" or "failures," contrast with the notion that social success and failure are composed of repetitive consequences of a personal trait or attribute, such as intelligence. A popular assertion in criminology is that the correlation between past and future deviance is spurious, because life-course stable crime is due to an underlying criminal propensity present in a portion of a diverse population. In contrast, a life-course argument on criminal stability would hold, or at least imply, that the relationship between past and future deviance is causal (Sampson and Laub, 2001a).
At issue here is what “causes” continuity in exhibited characteristics, such as anti-social behavior. Adults with conduct problems often exhibited conduct problems as children. For example, aggressive behavior and peer rejection during childhood predict dropping out of school, adult crime, and other problems during adulthood (Rutter, 1989). Rutter (1989: 29) states “it remains uncertain whether low peer acceptance is merely an incidental correlate of persisting psychopathological disturbance or whether it plays a causal role in continuities over time because it predisposes to deviant socialization experiences and opportunities.” At any rate, continuities in conduct problems do not necessarily stem from intrinsic psychopathological processes; the persistence of conduct problems may reflect “the continuation of the psychosocial risk factors that gave rise to the children’s problems in the first place (Rutter, 1989: 29). The shaping of one’s environment is a possible mediating factor for continuities (and discontinuities). Children’s behavior and experiences help shape their adult environments. Children’s problem behavior puts a strain on peers and adults, thus creating an increased likelihood of future stressful environments, and of course continued problematic experiences grow from these stressful environments. As Rutter (1989: 30) states, “the strong implication is that behavioural disturbance predisposes to an increased likelihood of adverse psychosocial experiences or life events in adult life.”

Taking direction from life course and developmental theory, we may argue that labeling processes work through the “shaping of environment.” Rutter (1989: 42), himself states “…antisocial behaviour also will influence later environments
through the societal responses that it induces—such as custodial or correctional actions that may serve both to ‘label’ and to strengthen antisocial peer group influences, as well as potentially to create more adaptive environments.” It is important to remember that it is not just the individual that develops, but also the individual’s social context. The life span is not just a timeline of intra-individual changes, but also a timeline of social experiences occurring within specific environments. Although individuals play a major part in shaping their own environments, factors external to the individual such as the behavior of others also play a major part. As Sampson and Laub (2001: 35) state, “behavioral patterns may show stability simply because the contextual environment remains stable.” Thus, external factors also play a causal role in the path from earlier experiences to later ones. In some labeling processes, for instance, societal responses to deviance may create an increased likelihood that a person will be placed in future social environments that promote deviance, without necessarily bringing about a significant change in the intrinsic state of the individual.

A Life-Course Conceptualization of Labeling Theory

Thornberry (1987: 864) writes “...human behavior occurs in social interaction and can therefore best be explained by models that focus on interactive processes.” Labeling theory locates the causes of deviant behavior in processes of social interaction. Therefore, it shares a basic similarity with Thornberry’s (1987) “interactional theory of delinquency,” which stands as an integration of social control and social learning theories into a developmental framework. In contrast to more
static portrayals of delinquent behavior, delinquency is seen to result from children’s interactions with individuals and institutions over time. Through interaction with control agents such as parents and school, weak bonds to conventional society are formed, which then lend youth more “freedom” to enter environments in which the learning and reinforcing of delinquent behavior take place. It should be noted here that weakened bonds do not “cause” delinquency, per se; they merely allow for a wider range of possible behaviors, including conformity. Both weakened bonds and “bad” learning environments are needed to produce delinquency.

Conversely, children who form close bonds with their parents are more likely to commit to and do well in school, adopt conventional values, and therefore refrain from delinquency. These three “bonding variables” are not static or simply related to each other in a linear way. Attachment to parents, commitment to school, and belief in conventional values are dynamic attributes of the person that interact with each other in developmental processes. For some children, the levels of these bonds increase over time in an upward reinforcing spiral, while for others, the reciprocal relationship between these bonds means they further weaken each other over time (Thornberry, 1987). This ongoing reciprocal relationship may be seen in Chambliss’ (2000) portrayal of the Saints and the Roughnecks. He proposed that alienation from the community granted the Roughnecks more freedom to express disregard for legitimate authority. In turn, the community was offended by this show of disregard and increased its disregard for the Roughnecks. This exchange continued over time, perpetuating the process of the Roughneck’s commitment to deviance. Chambliss
indicated that it takes an event external to this kind of relationship to disrupt the process, pointing out that the two most successful Roughnecks received college athletic scholarships. In contrast, but by the same mechanism, the reciprocal relationship between the Saints and the community reinforced a process of a lack of commitment to deviance, despite that they engaged in deviant behavior during adolescence. Maintaining ties to the mainstream community made it easier for the Saints to settle into career conformity after leaving adolescence.

Further, the relationship between these processes—social bonding and learning—and delinquency is also reciprocal. Delinquency is as much a part of social developmental processes as it is their outcome. Acting now as an "independent variable," delinquency will illicit varying behavioral responses by others (often either punishing or reinforcing). The result is that delinquency further weakens social ties and predisposes youth to further deviant learning environments (Thomberry, 1987). This is, generally, very similar to the most convincing argument made in labeling theory: segregating individuals from conforming members of the community guides them toward social environments promoting deviance. Thornberry (1987) uses an interactional, developmental perspective to elaborate on social control theory. The same approach may be used to elaborate labeling theory. The point to be made is that labeling processes are interactive processes that result in delinquency, over significant spans of time.

Thornberry's (1987) interactional theory is developmental in that it recognizes the different institutions of social control operating at different life stages, as well as
the relationship between these stage-contingent social controls. Also, the structure of social interaction and learning environments are different at different stages. At earlier ages, parents are likely the most instrumental in determining their children's environments and developing their bonds to the community. By middle adolescence, influence shifts away from the family to school and peers, although interactions during earlier childhood play a part in determining later school and peer bonds and environments. During this stage, the determinants of delinquency are likely to lie outside of the home. Also, any delinquent values learned during earlier stages may now act as causes of delinquency. During later adolescence/early adulthood, importance shifts to other institutional settings that are, again, influenced by the interactions that took place in earlier life stages. Gainful employment, attending college, marriage, and military service are conventional activities that deter persons from delinquency and crime. These are likely precipitated by factors such as close relationships with parents, academic success, and involvement with pro-social peers. In contrast, activities pertaining to matters such as under-employment, poor adult relationships, and incarceration block involvement in conventional activities. These are often precipitated by factors such as poor relationships with parents, academic failure, anti-social peer involvement, and juvenile justice system involvement.

The interplay of social bonds, learning environments, and delinquency over time may be expressed in terms of two basic diverging behavioral trajectories. First, some youth develop weak bonds with their parents during early childhood and become weakly committed to school by early adolescence. These youth are more
likely to associate with delinquent peers, adopt delinquent values (and reject conventional values), and engage in delinquent behavior. Delinquency involvement then further weakens bonds to parents and school. The mutual reinforcement between weakening social bonds and increasing delinquency during middle adolescence makes it very difficult to (re-) establish bonds to conventional society during late adolescence, when delinquency is likely to continue or perhaps even increase. This trajectory may characterize the lives of "life-course persistent offenders" (Moffitt, 1993). On the other hand, non-delinquent youth proceed in an opposite direction. They become attached to their parents, commit to school, adopt conventional values, associate with non-delinquent peers, and engage in conventional activities. Strong social bonds and pro-social behavior mutually reinforce each other in such a way that "buffers" youth from delinquent environments throughout developmental stages. "Adolescent-limited offenders," despite exhibiting some antisocial behavior, may be characterized more by this trajectory (Moffitt, 1993). These two trajectories, of course, represent extreme possibilities. The degree to which children bond, commit to school, adopt conventional and delinquent values, associate with delinquent and conventional peers, and engage in delinquent and conventional activities vary greatly within these two extremes (Thornberry, 1987).

Recently, Sampson and Laub (1997) integrated labeling theory with an "age-graded" version of social control theory, within a life-course perspective. As Loeber and Le Blanc (1990) argue, integrated criminological theories may benefit from a developmental perspective. Sampson and Laub (1997) see labeling theory as
developmental in nature because it emphasizes processes over time. Much like Thornberry (1987), their (life-course) theory of cumulative disadvantage and criminal stability locates the causes of stable criminal behavior in social interactions and processes of social control (although they point out that it is not their intention to negate the roles of self-selection and individual differences in explaining criminal stability). Important are the structural constraints that can emerge as a consequence of labeling (such as difficulty in re-integration following long-term incarceration) rather than re-definitions of self. In fact, Sampson and Laub (1997) maintain the possibility that labeling effects occur without a re-definition of self. This idea fits well with the notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy--agents or agencies involved in defining persons as deviant play an active part in bringing about their future deviance. The idea also complements Tannenbaum’s (1994) discussion of the segregating effects of labeling. Persons need not necessarily acquire a "deviant personality" to experience labeling effects. Again, one of the problems with past analyses of labeling processes may have been an over-emphasis on what labeling does to the "labelee" and a lack of emphasis on what it does to the labeler(s).

Some research does focus attention on the behavior of sanctioning agents. For example, Sampson (1986) found negative relationships between neighborhood SES and police contact (independent of actual law-violative behavior) and between individual SES and subsequent court referrals (independent of self-reported delinquency and police records). These findings suggest that the police and courts may be more willing to label lower SES youth as delinquent. Also, research by
Matsueda (1992) suggests that parents with lower SES backgrounds may be more inclined to label their children as deviant. Further, he found that non-white parents, urban parents, and parents of delinquents were more likely to label their children as "rule violators," although these effects were mostly indirect through prior delinquency. Thornberry (1987) points out that structural variables such as race, class, sex, and residence influence the values of the variables that initiate developmental processes that lead to either deviant or conventional behavior. This relationship is important in that interactional theory posits that the initial values of the process variables set in motion the paths of behavioral trajectories. Labeling theory may assist in explaining how structural variables influence social processes resulting in criminal behavior, as it may be the case that social status is used as an object in definitions of persons as deviant.

Sampson and Laub developed and tested their ideas on social control across the life course in earlier work (Laub and Sampson, 1993; Sampson and Laub, 1990; Sampson and Laub, 1997). In their work, they retain the basic claim of social control theory: individuals are more likely to commit deviant acts when their ties to mainstream social institutions are poor. These social ties serve as avenues through which individual behavior is regulated (or, controlled) by social institutions. Further, they recognize that different institutions of social control are at work over an individual's life span. As children mature, they take on different role relationships within different social institutional settings, and they are required to develop other social ties. Thus, Sampson and Laub "contend that pathways to both crime and
conformity are modified by key institutions of social control in the transition to adulthood” (Laub and Sampson, 1993: 304). By arguing that the nature of social ties vary at different periods in an individual’s life span, they present a more dynamic version of social control that can actually be used to help explain both stability and change in criminal behavior over time. Thus, the likelihood that an individual will commit crime during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood may depend upon the quality of that individual’s ties to family, school, work, the community, etc., especially with regard to the part these institutions play in key life transitions. Or, as they put it, “age-graded changes in social bonds explain changes in crime” (142).

Sampson and Laub’s earlier work put special emphasis on “informal social control,” that which is provided by social institutions whose primary purpose is not to control crime such as family, work, and school (as opposed to criminal justice systems). More recently, they extended their theory of informal social control to include formal social control, and they argue that their framework can also absorb labeling theory (Sampson and Laub, 1997). Societal reactions to suppress illegal behavior by agents of the criminal justice system also play a part in determining the likelihood that sanctioned persons will continue or discontinue their illegal behavior. However, to begin, they point out that much anti-social behavior begins early in childhood and reason that efforts by agents of social control to suppress this behavior (societal reaction) also begin early. Over time a series of these delinquent actions and control reactions accumulate incrementally to produce developmental effects. Sampson and Laub (1997) incorporate the concepts of state dependence and
cumulative disadvantage to articulate labeling processes that occur across the life course. Consistent with the "stepping stone" principle of the life course perspective, the labeling of deviant behavior at one point in a person's life increases the likelihood that a person will engage in deviant behavior at a future point in life. Intra-individual stability in criminal behavior over time could be a matter of cumulative continuity, whereby the consequences of one's delinquent behavior progressively "cut off" legitimate opportunities, or a matter of interactional continuity, whereby the "labeler" participates in increasing the likelihood of continued criminal behavior through prolonged interaction with the "labelee."

A labeling event serves as a "turning point," which initiates a kind of "snowball effect." The sanctioning of those labeled as deviant severs the social bonds that facilitate social control, largely by structurally constraining opportunities for social integration (such as school activities and employment), which decreases the likelihood that efforts at social control will work on labeled persons in the future. Over one's life course, the weakening of social bonds leads to an accumulation of disadvantages in finding legitimate opportunities. Thus, a labeled person's "stake in conformity" reduces over time, perpetuating an increased likelihood that such a person will engage in future deviant acts. Sampson and Laub (1997: 145) write, "The cumulative continuity of disadvantage is thus not only a result of stable individual differences in criminal propensity, but a dynamic process whereby childhood antisocial behavior and adolescent delinquency foster adult crime through the severance of adult social bonds." At the same time, age-graded social ties may also
be seen as state-dependent, and mediated by crime. Through crime and the social responses it elicits, poor social ties to certain institutions during one life stage lead to poor ties to other institutions in later stages. For example, poor ties with school could lead to crime and involvement with the juvenile justice system, which could then obstruct the development of work and marital ties during early adulthood (Sampson and Laub, 1997).

At least one piece of research by Sampson and Laub (1993) may be seen as a test of structural labeling theory and the effects of formal social control, using life-course principles. As they point out, existing research has demonstrated that job stability is negatively associated with later crime. But in a quantitative re-analysis of the Glueck and Glueck Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency project data, they found that length of incarceration as a juvenile or young adult was negatively associated with later job stability, which was then negatively associated with continued criminal involvement. Interestingly enough, they found no direct effects between incarceration and later criminal behavior. This mediation suggests support for a state-dependence argument behind labeling theory—that stigmatizing experiences with agents of formal social control reduce legitimate opportunities and thus encourage illegitimate ones.

So far, I have discussed work such as Sampson and Laub (1997) and Thornberry (1987) that integrates a developmental/life-course perspective and social control theory with labeling theory. However, their work also opens the door for social learning theory to be brought into this mix, especially with respect to
Thornberry’s emphasis on the developmental effects of social environment. Labeling theory and learning theory are integrated through considering the relationship between societal reactions to deviance and deviant learning environments. Social learning theories generally posit that individuals learn deviant norms, values, beliefs, and practices from socialization agents who engage in deviant behavior, such as parents, other adult role models in the community, and peer groups. This learning then leads to deviant behavior on the part of the individual. Accepting that deviant environments lead to deviant behavior, an important etiological question must still be asked: How do individuals get placed in deviant social learning environments?

One possible answer to this question is that labeling puts them there. The acts of defining, segregating, and treating individuals as deviant may result in directing them toward affiliation with deviant persons. Theoretically speaking, then, we may argue that associations with deviant others mediates the relationship between labeling and continued deviance. Tannenbaum (1994) said, early on, that stigmatized children become integrated with other deviant children and come to identify with them, while developing a hostile orientation toward mainstream society. Since the punishment of deviance is often segregating, relationships with deviant persons become easier to develop, perhaps easier than relationships with conforming persons. Thus, the labeled child develops ties with persons who commit deviance—those who can help get him/her in trouble and alienates from the people who conform—those who can help keep him/her out of trouble. This makes sense especially with regard to youth placed in treatment facilities, detention, or prison. While “locked up,” youth are
certainly placed in environments promoting close contact with other offenders and separated from relatively law-abiding people. Upon release, incarceration may have provided youth with deviant "contacts," and it may make it difficult for youth to develop relationships with law-abiding members of the community. Both guide incarcerated youth into deviant social networks promoting future illegal behavior.

We may search for labeling effects over relatively smaller periods of time with regard to one social institutional setting. For example, we could focus on cyclical patterns of interaction between parents and young children whereby parental reactions to child deviant behavior promote further deviant behavior which, in turn, draw similar parental reactions, and so on. However, we could also search for labeling effects across different institutional settings involved at various periods over the wider life span, whereby the effects of social control efforts may be contingent upon the consequences of social control efforts in prior institutional settings. Based on the contentions of Sampson and Laub (1997) and other developmental theorists, it seems to me that the following hypothetical pathway may be proposed.

Beginning in early childhood, anti-social behavior on the part of a child may be met with harsh, ineffective discipline on the part of a parent. This discipline, then, promotes further anti-social behavior on the part of the child. Repetitive exchanges of this nature over time lead to improper socialization and the development of weak bonds to parents. Later, after reaching school age, the child does not possess the social skills and ties needed to be successful in school. Continued anti-social behavior is therefore a strong possibility, which may lead to segregation from
mainstream school activities by school authorities as well as rejection by “pro-social” peers. Conflicting relations, especially with teachers, make it difficult for the child to be academically successful. Without a good academic start, academic success later, say in junior high or high school, becomes more difficult. Academic failure may serve as a “push factor,” steering the child away from legitimate activities. Further, without strong social ties to mainstream peers and school or community activities, the child may associate with other “anti-social” children and engage in illegal activities by adolescence. Prolonged delinquency is likely to result in juvenile justice system involvement, which further disrupts the child’s chances of doing well in school and associating with pro-social peers (especially if the child becomes incarcerated). By early adulthood, access to legitimate opportunities such as college and gainful employment have been reduced, perhaps due largely to social settings that do not foster requisite social and intellectual skills. And by now, the social experiences needed to develop ties to adult social institutions have not accumulated. Thus, adult crime and involvement in the adult criminal justice system becomes more likely, possibly resulting in incarceration and a prison record. A prison record may be seen as an institutionalized label, which serves as a basis for discrimination against former prisoners in providing legitimate opportunities, such as employment. Integration into the mainstream community becomes blocked. Again, legitimate opportunities are cut-off, which makes illegal opportunities more viable for the labeled adult.

This hypothetical pathway illustrates how persistent criminal behavior may be explained in terms of interactional continuity involving persons defined as deviant
and those reacting to their deviance, regardless (but not discounting) of the recurring
effects of a possible “anti-social behavior trait.” It also illustrates the state
dependence between early anti-social behavior and later delinquency and crime—how
“clashes” between deviant behavior and societal reactions intended to suppress it can
lead to an accumulation of social disadvantages that promote the likelihood that one
will engage in criminal behavior. As Sampson and Laub (1997: 154) put it, “the
stability of (delinquent) behavior may reflect more the stability of social response
than the time-invariance of an individual trait” (parentheses added).

I do not propose to discard the self-concept approach to labeling and replace it
with a more structural approach. Labeling theory should be improved by considering
the different ways that societal reactions to deviance themselves promote further
deviance. Different approaches to labeling theory should be complimentary, and we
should be able to integrate them. Since the "self" develops over time, and the
structural effects of labeling also occur over time, it should not be impossible to
conceive that deviant identity formation processes and cumulative disadvantages
occur simultaneously and perhaps influence each other. As Sampson and Laub
(1997) point out, a modified approach to labeling as taken by Link and associates
(1989) with regard to the labeling of mental health disorders would also be beneficial
for re-conceptualizing labeling and delinquency.

**The Model to be Tested**

This analysis will test the proposition that involvement with sanctioning
agents is related to individuals’ later deviant behavior. Sampson and Laub’s (1997)
life course theory of informal social control has been noticeably tested in research. For example, in analyses of data from the Iowa Youth and Families Project (IYFP), Simons et al. (1998) found more support for a life course perspective, compared to a “latent trait” perspective, on the stability of anti-social behavior. They found that oppositional/defiant behavior during late childhood led to poor quality of parenting, low school commitment, and affiliation with deviant peers, which then led to conduct problems later in adolescence (improved parenting, increased school commitment, and reduced deviant peer affiliation reduced the likelihood of this stability). These findings suggest that prior anti-social behavior leads to later anti-social behavior via reduced social control. However, to date, I am not aware of much research testing Sampson and Laub’s extension of the life course perspective to formal social control and labeling. I use data collected by Simons and colleagues as part of the IYFP to test for a positive relationship between involvement with formal control agents and illegal behavior across multiple waves.

Support for a more structural conceptualization of labeling theory of delinquency and crime may begin with an empirical test of its primary assumption: that punitive societal reactions to crime increase the likelihood of future crime. The argument in this re-conceptualization may be summarized as follows. When their illegal activities are discovered, law violators are “defined,” or, “labeled” as deviant by representatives of the criminal justice system (for example, the police through arrests, and the courts through sentencing). Then, correctional agents administer punishment (such as admonishment, probation, “placement,” and incarceration) in
such a way that reduces law violators' opportunities to engage in mainstream activities in the future (which itself makes illegitimate opportunities such as crime a more viable—although not necessary—option). In other words, the criminal justice system "assists" law violators in "mortgaging their futures." With less legitimate opportunities, a person's stake in conformity is reduced, is thus less subject to social control, and is thus less likely to refrain from engaging in criminal behavior. Further, since segregating punishment guides persons toward deviant peer associations, illegitimate opportunities become more available, and thus more likely to be taken. Empirically, then, we should expect that experiences with sanctioning agents at some prior time would predict, or help predict, criminal behavior at a later time.

Taking direction from the developmental and life-course perspectives, this analysis will examine the relationship between criminal justice system involvement and illegal behavior across life stages—from late childhood (junior high school) to adolescence (high school) and to early adulthood. Since it is unlikely that many children will be involved with the criminal justice system during early childhood, it seems sensible to begin the longitudinal analysis with the early teen years.

Before presenting the actual model to be tested, let me begin to explain its evolution by presenting a theoretical model that summarizes some fairly consistent trends in research on crime (Figure 2). One such trend is the stability of anti-social behavior across time (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Moffitt, 1993; Sampson and Laub, 1997). Although it should be noted that most anti-social children discontinue anti-social behavior by adulthood (Laub and Sampson, 1993; Moffitt, 1993; Sampson
Figure 2. Model exhibiting persistent offending and deviant peer associations
and Laub, 1997), a strong predictor of delinquency and crime is prior delinquency and crime (or other early anti-social behavior) (Kaplan, 1984). Anti-social behavior during early and late childhood may be followed by delinquency during adolescence, which may be followed by adult criminal behavior (Farrington, 1997). Also, association with others who engage in criminal or other anti-social behavior ("deviant peers") can follow the same pattern. A theoretical question arises from this trend: What causes this stability? Is stability in criminal behavior due to an enduring personality trait, or is it due to enduring social factors?

The Figure 2 model shows same-time correlation between deviant peer association and illegal behavior first during grade 7, next during grade 10, and then during the third year after high school. Positive relationships of this kind are fairly easy to obtain in research, but they are really only enough to raise questions as to the causal direction between the two. Research suggests both "social causation" and "social selection" effects (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Kandel, 1996; Laub and Sampson, 1993), as depicted by the paths denoted "A" and "B" in the Figure 2 model. Both make sense in explaining correlation between delinquency and peers; children may choose their friends but are also subject to the influence of their friends (Sampson and Laub, 2001b). Path A helps explain deviant peer stability. Perhaps through peer influence and increased availability of opportunities to engage in delinquency, the chances of engaging in criminal behavior are increased by virtue of "hanging out" with friends who engage in criminal behavior (social causation). Subsequently, those who engage in criminal behavior may develop a preference
toward others who engage in criminal behavior (social selection). Inversely, deviant peer association may mediate between prior and later deviant behavior (Kaplan, Johnson, and Bailey, 1987). Path B helps explain criminal behavior stability. Youth who engage in delinquency may possess a preference toward others who do the same, who then influence them to engage in further criminal behavior (Simons et al., 1998). Thus, it is possible that criminal behavior and deviant peer association help sustain each other over time. However, another question might be asked: What part do social control institutions play in maintaining stability in deviant behavior and peer associations?

Labeling theory may be drawn from to further elaborate on the stability of anti-social behavior. Efforts at formal social control may play an important part in sustaining “criminal careers.” To account for this, criminal justice system involvement is added to provide the model to be tested, presented in Figure 3. It may be hypothesized that through involvement in the criminal justice system, prior delinquency (and deviant peer association) can lead to an increased chance of future deviant peer association and criminal behavior. Empirical support for this argument would exist if the relationships represented in bold is shown to be significant upon their inclusion in the model.

Path C in Figure 3 is an outline for an argument for a segregation effect of the criminal justice system on illegal versus legal behavior. In response to the detection of delinquent behavior, representatives of the criminal justice system “define” the law violator as delinquent (or some other kind of “label”) and base punishment and/or
Figure 3. Model to be tested
treatment on this definition. Punishment or treatment may include probation, involuntary community service, involuntary program participation, house arrest, out-of-home placement, or short and long term incarceration. This punishment may be "non-reintegrative" in that it does not foster participation in mainstream social activities that stand as preferred alternatives to criminal activities and, consequently, the social ties that increase one's stake in conformity. With less legitimate opportunities and lower social control, further criminal activities become a more accessible alternative. Once this further criminal behavior is detected by representatives of the criminal justice system, the sequence can be repeated.

Path D in Figure 3 is an outline for an argument for a segregation effect of the criminal justice system on deviant versus non-deviant peer association. Here is where the model integrates labeling theory with social learning and social control theories. Deviant peer association has been shown to explain continuity in deviant behavior. For example, Kaplan, Johnson, and Bailey, (1987) found that deviant peer association at time 2 mediated between time 1 deviance and time 3 deviance. Path D proposes the same relationship (using illegal behavior as a specific measure of deviance), but incorporates labeling theory by testing if criminal justice system involvement mediates between prior illegal behavior and later deviant peer association. As Kaplan et al. (1987) explain, the process of social selection toward deviant peer relationships may involve factors other than personal disposition. First, it makes sense that deviant peers are also selecting deviant individuals—the person committing deviant acts becomes more attractive to deviant peer groups. Second, social support for the
person committing deviant behavior is less available from conforming peers but quite
available from deviant peers. Thus, the deviant individual is drawn to the deviant
peer group for social support. Third, social sanctions against deviant behavior disrupt
conventional social bonds and steer individuals toward relationships with deviant
peers. Through involvement in the criminal justice system, not only do law violators
become exposed to a higher number of other law violators than they do otherwise, but
relationships with non-deviant peers are not fostered. Thus, system-involved youth
do not become integrated with mainstream youth that may have a conforming
influence upon them, further reducing their ties to mainstream social institutions and
the effectiveness of social control. Instead, system-involved youth become associated
with deviant peers who then, according to social learning theory, influence them to
commit future crime. Complete support for an integration of labeling, control, and
learning theory will exist, then, if deviant peer association is related to later illegal
behavior in the Figure 3 model also.

The Figure 3 model also hypothesizes a direct relationship between deviant
peer association and criminal justice system involvement. This relationship could
represent another type of labeling effect. Another way that deviant friends may get a
person in trouble is that they draw more attention to the person from agents of social
control. For example, if the police notice that a child is associating with known
“troublemakers,” they might assume the child is also a troublemaker and pay more
attention to his/her behavior—a sort of “guilt by association” effect. Holding the
amount of deviant behavior equal, a child who is under more scrutiny stands a greater
chance of being caught. Here, knowledge of one's deviant peer associations may be used as information to define one as deviant.

Although my theoretical interest is labeling theory, my analysis will also serve as a test of some basic propositions drawn from contrasting theoretical perspectives—social learning (independent of an integration with labeling theory), social control, and rational choice/deterrence. It would be important to note if the results of an empirical model support competing theoretical propositions more than those made from labeling theory. An etiological question still stands as a very important one in criminological study: Can kids get into trouble with delinquency because they “fall in with the bad crowd,” or do delinquents simply choose to hang out with other kids who are like them (or both)?

The Figure 3 model also proposes that deviant peer association lead to illegal behavior—a social causation hypothesis. As I mentioned previously, some studies find significant positive relationships between these two variables in the specified direction. According to social learning theories, children may learn deviant norms, values, beliefs, and behaviors through interaction with primary social groups, including groups of delinquent friends. This general proposition is evident in theories such as Sutherland and Cressey's differential association, Akers and Burgess' social learning theory of differential reinforcement, and Matza and Sykes' neutralization theories (Akers, 2000). Deviant peers may impact the delinquent's behavior by providing the "know-how" to commit crime, social support absent from mainstream peer groups, or "peer pressure" to conform to expectations to commit deviant acts.
According to Kaplan, Johnson, and Bailey (1987), associations with deviant peers may impact later deviance because they facilitate the deviant behavior of motivated offenders, provide rewards for offenders, and disrupt internal and external controls from inhibiting deviance. The model will support social learning theory if a significant positive relationship between prior deviant peer association and later illegal behavior is found.

The Figure 3 model also proposes that illegal behavior leads to deviant peer association (directly and indirectly)—a social selection hypothesis. As I also mentioned previously, some studies find significant positive relationships between the two in this direction. We might expect social control theories to posit this path more than the social causation path, especially Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) “general theory of crime.” It may be proposed that youth that acquire a propensity to commit anti-social behavior during early childhood—“low self-control” for example—also develop a preference to associate with others like them. These youth do not develop close ties with persons engaging in pro-social behavior. Illegal behavior, then, is a behavioral manifestation of low self-control more than an outcome of deviant peer influence. As Kaplan, Johnson, and Bailey (1987: 279) explain, a “disposition to deviance” may lead to association with deviant peers because they “(1) represent the repudiation of the conventional norms that were the source of self-perceived rejection and failure, and/or (2) provide the opportunities to achieve gratifications (e.g., social acceptance) that the individual felt deprived of in conventional groups.” If all of this
is true, the model should show that prior delinquency predicts deviant peer association better than prior deviant peer association predicts delinquency.

According to rational choice theories of crime, punishment deters crime. Punishing offenders carries with it a symbolic threat to any members of the community who may potentially commit crime, and, presumably, a concrete threat to persons who have actually offended (Akers, 2000). We may suppose that punishment delivered by criminal justice agencies gives individuals good reasons to avoid committing criminal acts. Two possible deterrence hypotheses may be considered. First, if I find that criminal justice system involvement is negatively related to future delinquency/crime, I will support deterrence theory. Since it is fairly well known that persons incarcerated in correctional facilities often recidivate, it would be no surprise if I failed to find this relationship. However, secondly, proponents of punishment may assert that the reason system-involved persons recidivate, or continue into criminal careers, is that the punishment administered by criminal justice agencies is not strong enough to be a deterrent. Formal efforts at punishment may constitute a “slap on the wrist,” especially with regard to juvenile offenders. The claim here is that criminal justice system involvement has no effect on criminal behavior. Therefore, if I do not find relationships between criminal justice system involvement and future delinquency/crime, negative or positive, I still may see support for deterrence theory.

Reasoning further, findings of positive relationships between criminal justice system involvement and future delinquency/crime would be difficult to explain with
rational choice theories because they may mean that system involvement does have an impact. An important implication may be drawn from such a finding—that not only does system involvement fail to deter crime, but it also makes crime worse. Such an implication is inconsistent with a pure rational choice approach to crime and punishment, while entirely consistent with a labeling approach. Positive relationships here would suggest that something more than rational choice on the part of the chronic system-involved offender is taking place.
METHODS

Sample and Data Collection Procedure

An analysis of the proposed models requires the use of longitudinal data that measures criminal behavior, deviant peer association, and criminal justice system involvement from childhood to early adulthood. Survey data collected by Ronald L. Simons and his colleagues as part of the Iowa Youth and Families Project (Simons et al., 1998) fit this requirement. This analysis uses all four waves of the IYFP as well as three waves of further data collected (on the same sample of children) as part of the “Transitions Project.” The IYFP is a panel study concerned with the life course trajectories of 451 two-parent families. They were recruited through the cohort of all male and female seventh grade students enrolled in public or private schools in eight counties in north central Iowa during winter and spring, 1989. Another criterion for inclusion in the study was the presence of a sibling within four years of age of the target seventh-grader. Slightly less than half of the cohort had families meeting these criteria. 78% of the eligible families agreed to participate. Participating families received $250 at each wave.

The families in the sample lived either on farms or in small towns. They are all white and their annual incomes ranged from 0 to $135,000 (mean = $29,642). Fathers’ education ranged from 8 to 20 years of education (mean = 13.5 years); mothers’ ranged from 8 to 18 years (mean = 13.4 years). Fathers ranged in age from 31 to 68 (median = 40); mothers ranged from 29 to 53 (median = 38). Because families of less than four were excluded from the sampling frame, the families in the
study are larger on average than would be expected from a general population survey. Family size ranged from 4 to 13 members with an average of about 5 members.

Part of the data collection for the IYFP involved annual visits by interviewers to each family during each of the four waves (when the target child was in grades 7-10). Each family member—the target child, father, mother, and sibling—completed a set of questionnaires focusing upon family processes, individual family member characteristics, and socio-economic circumstances. On average, it took about two hours to complete this visit. Further data was collected on the target subjects via questionnaires administered in ten waves as part of the Transitions Project. 424 of the original 451 families participated in the second wave in 1990, 407 participated in the third wave in 1991, and 404 participated in the fourth in 1992. 426 of the original families participated in the first transition wave in 1994, 422 participated in the second transition wave in 1995, and 429 participated in the third (only the first three transition waves will be used in this analysis).

Since it is my intent to help explain youth crime continuity, I must find such a pattern in the data before proceeding with the analysis. Specifically, I must find delinquency at time 1 to be related to delinquency at time 3, which is then related to adult crime at time 5, as exhibited in the model to be tested (Figure 3). There was no continuity in illegal behavior among the females in the sample. In fact, they reported very low involvement in delinquent behavior. This continuity was present among males, however. Thus, it is necessary that the analysis be restricted to a male sample. The final sample to be analyzed consists of 153 target males who provided complete
questionnaire data during each of the four IYFP waves as well as follow-up questionnaires from the first three Transition waves.

**Analytic Strategy**

Structural equation modeling (SEM) will be used to test the model in Figure 3. Since research suggests that lower SES youth are more susceptible to labeling processes than higher SES youth (Matsueda, 1992; Sampson, 1986; Sampson and Laub, 1997), family SES will be considered as a possible control. Since the sample is fairly class homogenous, a relationship between family SES and the model variables will be examined. An accounting of family SES in the models will be contingent upon statistically significant relationships between family SES and the model variables. Variables in the model will be analyzed in temporal progression. The model begins with deviant peer association and delinquency during 7th grade (Wave A of the IYFP data set). Next, criminal justice system involvement during 8th and 9th grade (Waves B and C combined) is added. Next, deviant peer association and delinquency during 10th grade (Wave D) is added. Next, criminal justice system involvement during 12th grade and the first year out of high school (Transitions Waves 1 and 2 combined) is added. Finally, deviant peer association and adult crime during the second year out of high school (Transitions Wave 4) are added as outcome variables.

**Measures**

**Family Socio-Economic Status.** Mothers and Fathers were asked to report the highest grade of education they had completed. Responses were coded as 00 =
Kindergarten or none; actual number up to 12th grade; 13 = 1 year of college, vocational, or technical training; 14 = 2 years of college, associate degree; 15 = 3 years of college, 16 = B. S., B. A.; 17 = Bachelor's plus; 18 = M. S., M. A.; 19 = Master’s plus; 20 = Ph.D., J. D., D. D. S., M. D., D. V. M., etc.. Fathers’ education levels ranged from 8-20, with a median of 13. Mothers’ education levels ranged from 9-18, also with a median of 13. The levels for both parents were combined to provide total parents’ years of education. They were also asked to report the actual amount of family income they received during the previous year from all sources. Family incomes ranged from $-308.00-$176,000, with a median of $34,662. The correlation between parents’ education and family income was .398 (p < .001, 2-tailed test). Parents’ years of education and family income were each standardized and then summed to form a composite measure of family SES.

**Deviant Peers.** Respondents self-reported their association with deviant peers using an instrument adapted from the National Youth Survey (Elliot et al., 1985, 1989). They were asked how many of their close friends (1 = none, 2 = few, 3 = half, 4 = most, 5 = all) had engaged in each of 15 delinquent acts during the last year. These acts varied from relatively minor offenses, such as skipping school, to more serious violations, such as stealing something worth more than $25 (see the Appendix for a list of the questionnaire items). Responses to these items were summed to obtain a total score concerning the extent to which the respondents’ peers engage in deviant behavior. 15 items were also used to measure adult deviant peer associations, although the acts were slightly different to accommodate adulthood (see Appendix).
The Cronbach reliability coefficients were .72 for the time 1 measure, .83 for time 3, and .91 for time 5.

**Delinquency/Crime.** Respondents self-reported their illegal behavior using a *delinquency checklist* adapted from the National Youth Survey (Elliot et al., 1985, 1989). The instrument asked respondents to indicate whether they had engaged in any of 20 delinquent acts during the preceding year. These acts varied from relatively minor offenses, such as skipping school, to more serious offenses, such as attacking someone with a weapon, selling drugs, or stealing something worth more than $25 (see the Appendix for a list of the questionnaire items). An ordinal response format (0 = Never; 1 = Once; 2 = 2-3 times; 3 = 4-5 times; 4 = 6 or more times) was used for each item, and responses to these items were summed to obtain a total score concerning the extent to which respondents engaged in a wide variety of illegal acts. For adults, crime was measured differently, using only 12 items (see Appendix). The number of acts was reduced largely because of the omission of status offenses. The same ordinal scale was used for adults. The Cronbach reliability coefficients were .61 for the time 1 measure, .76 for time 3, and .67 for time 5.

**Criminal Justice System Involvement.** Respondents self-reported their involvement with the criminal justice system using three items adapted from the National Youth Survey (Elliot et al., 1985, 1989). Respondents were asked to indicate how often during the preceding year they had been arrested, been placed in juvenile detention or jail, or gone to court or been placed on probation for something they had done (see the Appendix for a list of the questionnaire items). An ordinal
response format (0 = Never; 1 = Once; 2 = 2-3 times; 3 = 4-5 times; 4 = 6 or more times) was used for each item, and responses to these items were summed to obtain a total score concerning the extent to which respondents became involved in the criminal justice system. Criminal justice system involvement was measured across a two-year period, repeating the above items over two waves. This resulted in a 6-item scale for the time 2 measure (waves 2 and 3). The court or probation item was available for wave 5 but not for wave 6. Thus, the repeated (time 4) criminal justice system measure consisted of 5 items.
RESULTS

To begin, family socioeconomic status was correlated with each of the variables in the Figure 3 model. Only one relationship was found. Family SES was significantly correlated with time 4 criminal justice system involvement (-0.171) at the .05 level (2-tailed test). This result reveals that family SES has an unimportant impact upon the hypothesized relationships. Thus, it will not be included in the analysis as a control.

At times 1, 3, and 5, all of the target males reported some level of association with deviant peers. At time 1 (wave 1), their deviant peer association scores ranged from 15 to 34, with a mean score of 19.1. Three years later at time 3 (wave 4), their scores ranged from 15 to 47 and the mean rose to 20.93. At time 5 (wave 7), the adult deviant peer association (measured slightly different) scores ranged from 15 to 45, with a mean of 22.48.

At time 1 (wave 1), 74 (48.37%) of the target boys reported some level of delinquency. Targets’ delinquency scores ranged from 0 to 14, with a mean score of 1.81. Three years later at time 3 (wave 4) the number of boys reporting some level of delinquency rose to 104 (67.97%). Targets’ scores at this time ranged from 0 to 28, and the mean rose to 3.48. At time 5 (wave 7), 113 reported some level of adult crime. Targets’ adult crime (measured differently) scores at this time ranged from 0 to 22, with a mean of 4.37.

At time 2 (waves 2 and 3), 23 (15.03%) of the target boys reported some level of involvement with the criminal justice system. Of those who reported involvement,
16 reported one confrontation with authorities within the two-year period, 4 reported two, and 3 reported three. Three years later at time 4 (waves 5 and 6) the number of targets reporting some level of criminal justice system involvement rose to 61 (39.87%). Targets' criminal justice system involvement scores at this time ranged from 0 to 9, with a mean score of 1.01.

Table 1 presents the correlations, means, standard deviations, and ranges of the study variables and family socio-economic status. Deviant peer association is abbreviated “dpeer,” delinquency is abbreviated “delin.” “crime” refers to the adult measure of illegal behavior, criminal justice system involvement is abbreviated “sysinv,” and family socio-economic status is abbreviated “famses.” The variables are designated by time period; for example, “T1 dpeer” refers to deviant peer association at time 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>T1dpeer</th>
<th>T3dpeer</th>
<th>T5dpeer</th>
<th>T1delin</th>
<th>T3delin</th>
<th>T5crime</th>
<th>T2sysinv</th>
<th>T4sysinv</th>
<th>Famses</th>
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N = 153 *p < .05 **p < .001 (2-tailed test)
Standardized path coefficients were obtained through structural equation modeling using the Amos 4 computer program. The model is presented in Figure 4. With regard to goodness-of-fit, the model had a chi-square of 18.33 (DF = 9; p = .032.), a GFI of .97, and an AGFI of .87. For the sake of parsimony, a second model was run excluding paths with t-values less than 1. These paths were time one deviant peer association to time 2 system involvement, time 3 deviant peer association to time 4 system involvement, and time 1 deviant peer association to time 3 delinquency. This model is presented in Figure 5. The reduced model did not result in formerly insignificant relationships becoming significant (or vice versa). The path coefficients and t-values for both models are displayed in Table 2. With regard to goodness-of-fit, the reduced model had a chi-square of 19.35 (DF = 12; p = .081), a GFI of .97, and an AGFI of .91. The difference in chi-squares between the two models (1.02; DF = 3) is insignificant at the .10 level.

To begin, Figure 5 shows that there is no significant path from time 1 deviant peer association to time 3 deviant peer association, but there is a significant path from time 3 deviant peer association to time 5 deviant peer association (.34). Thus, continuity in deviant peer relationships was restricted to the period between time 3 and time 5. There was, however, continuity in illegal behavior across the span of the model. Time 1 delinquency was associated with time 3 delinquency (.38), which was then associated with time 5 crime (.28).

Figure 5 shows the following positive correlations: time 1 deviant peer association and time 1 delinquency (.50), the error terms for time 3 deviant peer
Figure 4. Full structural equation model

\[ \chi^2(9) = 18.331 \quad p = .032 \]

GFI = .972  AGFI = .886
Figure 5. Reduced structural equation model

\[ \chi^2(12) = 19.347 \quad p = .081 \]
\[ GFI = .970 \quad AGFI = .909 \]
Table 2. **Path coefficients and t-values**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Path</th>
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<th>Reduced Model</th>
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association and time 3 delinquency (.64), and the error terms for time 5 deviant peer association and time 5 crime (.38). These results do not distinguish support for either social control or social learning theory, as the related variables are not temporally ordered. However, they were temporally ordered elsewhere in the model. There were no significant paths from time 1 deviant peer association to time 3 delinquency or from time 3 deviant peer association to time 5 crime. Thus, no social causation relationships were found and social learning theory was not supported here. On the other hand, time 1 delinquency was associated with time 3 deviant peer association (.27) and time 3 delinquency was associated with time 5 deviant peer association...
With these apparent social selection relationships, social control theory receives support here.

In Figure 5, system involvement played an important part in a path significant across all waves. Time 1 delinquency was associated with time 2 system involvement (.38), which was associated with time 3 delinquency (.24). Thus, time 2 system involvement mediated the relationship between time 1 and time 3 delinquency. The indirect effect of time 1 delinquency on time 3 delinquency due to time 2 system involvement is .091 (.38 x .24), which accounts for 19.4% of the zero-order correlation between time 1 and time 3 delinquency (.469; see Table 1). Next, time 3 delinquency was associated with time 4 system involvement (.33), which was associated with time 5 crime (.17). Thus, time 4 system involvement mediated between time 3 delinquency and time 5 crime. The indirect effect of time 3 delinquency on time 5 crime due to time 4 criminal justice system involvement is .056 (.33 x .17), which accounts for 13% of the zero-order correlation between time 3 delinquency and time 5 crime (.434; see Table 1). These results support the basic proposition of labeling theory and contradict rational choice and deterrence theories.

Further, time 2 system involvement was associated with time 3 deviant peer association (.23), and time 4 system involvement was weakly associated with time 5 deviant peer association (.12; p < .06). Thus, time 2 system involvement mediated the relationship between time 1 delinquency and time 3 deviant peer association, and time 4 system involvement slightly mediated between time 3 delinquency and time 5 deviant peer association. The indirect effect of time 1 delinquency on time 3 deviant
peer association due to time 2 system involvement is .087 (.38 x .23), which accounts for 22% of the zero-order correlation between time 1 delinquency and time 3 deviant peer association (.400; see Table 1). The indirect effect of time 3 delinquency on time 5 deviant peer association due to time 4 system involvement is .04 (.33 x .12), which accounts for 8% of the zero-order correlation between time 3 delinquency and time 5 deviant peer association (.508; see Table 1). These results support the social segregation argument made in labeling theory. However, since deviant peer association and further illegal behavior were not associated in the model, a labeling/learning theory hybrid received incomplete support.

Finally, the model did not offer support for the proposition that one may be labeled via association with deviant peers (a "guilt-by-association" effect). Time 1 deviant peer association was not associated with time 2 system involvement, and time 3 deviant peer association was not associated with time 4 system involvement.
DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Results

Stewart et al. (2001) also supported labeling theory using the IYFP data, finding that "legal sanctions" at "time 2" amplified the positive relationship between "time 1" and "time 3" delinquency. The focus of their analysis was on showing that legal sanctions play a large part in promoting poor parenting practices, and they accounted for labeling in their model. The model in this analysis differs from theirs in that the focus is on labeling, the span of labeling effects is extended by two more time periods, and the third variable accounted for is deviant peer association. My findings are, of course, consistent with those of Stewart et al. (2001).

Consistent with prior research, this analysis found continuity in illegal behavior. Delinquency during grade 7 was positively related to delinquency during grade 10, which was then positively related to crime three years after high school. Thus, the empirical groundwork for studying factors related to criminal continuity was established. The next task was to examine how criminal justice system involvement, along with deviant peer relationships, help explain this continuity.

Continuity in deviant peer association was not found across the entire span of the model. Deviant peer association during grade 7 was not significantly related to deviant peer association at grade 10, but deviant peer association at grade 10 was positively related to deviant peer association three years after high school. The change in the strength of the relationship between the two time periods is actually somewhat striking (.08 compared to .34). It is interesting to note that prior deviant
peer association was not related to later deviant peer association until after criminal justice system involvement during grades 8 and 9 (which was positively related to deviant peer association at grade 10). This finding may suggest that criminal justice system sanctions may help to solidify deviant peer relationships. Also, the finding may indicate a developmental difference. Deviant peer stability from junior high to early high school may not have been found because children did not proceed completely enough from one stage of institutional social control—largely, that involving the family—to the next—that involving high school, peers, and for some, the criminal justice system.

Relatively impressive correlations between deviant peer association and illegal behavior were found at all three time periods—grade 7, grade 10, and three years after high school. These findings are also quite consistent with prior research. Since these are same-time correlations, there is no support for arguing a causal direction between the two, or in favor of a particular theory of crime. However, these variables were temporally ordered elsewhere in the analysis for the purpose of making theoretical arguments.

Results did not support a social causation argument explaining the relationship between deviant peer association and illegal behavior. According to social learning theories such as differential association, neutralization, and differential reinforcement, deviant peer groups provide individuals with the means and support to commit deviant acts. Accordingly, this analysis examined the hypothesis that prior deviant peer group membership is positively related to later illegal behavior. Deviant peer
association during grade 7 was not significantly related to delinquency during grade 10, and deviant peer association during grade 10 was not significantly related to crime three years after high school. Thus, this analysis failed to show that that relationships with deviant peer groups lead to individual offending. In this analysis, support for social causation would have required that deviant peer groups have an influence on individuals’ behavior three years later. Perhaps a closer temporal ordering between the two variables would result in a significant effect of deviant peer groups on individuals’ illegal behavior.

This analysis did support a social selection argument regarding the relationship between deviant peer association and illegal behavior. According to control theories such as Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) theory of low self-control, anti-social children with poor bonds with conforming individuals develop a preference to associate with other anti-social children. Of course, a more precise test of this theoretical approach would involve some kind of measure of anti-social tendency or low self-control. This kind of a measure was not included in this analysis, but if social selection were to take place, we should expect illegal behavior to predict deviant peer association better than vice versa. Accordingly, this analysis examined the hypothesis that prior illegal behavior is positively related to later deviant peer association. Delinquency during grade 7 was positively related to deviant peer association during grade 10, and delinquency during grade 10 was positively related to deviant peer association three years after high school. Thus, it appeared that the youth in this sample strengthened their association with deviant
peers after committing illegal acts. It would be interesting to see if contact with the criminal justice system amplified this relationship.

The focus of this study was to examine outcomes of youths’ contact with agents of the criminal justice system. First, a rational choice/deterrence argument regarding the relationship between criminal justice system involvement and future deviant behavior was not supported in this analysis. According to deterrence theories of criminal punishment, sanctions delivered by agents of the criminal justice system are somehow painful to the offender and give the offender good reason to avoid offending in the future. Accordingly, two hypotheses were entertained. First, if offenders respond to punishment “rationally,” then prior criminal justice system involvement should be negatively related to later illegal behavior, as well as deviant peer association. Second, accommodating popular accusations that criminal justice system sanctions are often too lenient, one might argue that a failure to find a deterrence effect is reconcilable with deterrence theory. Then, there would be no relationship between prior criminal justice system involvement and later illegal behavior and deviant peer association.

Findings contradict both hypotheses. First, delinquency during grade 7 was positively related to criminal justice system involvement during grades 8 and 9, and delinquency during grade 10 was positively related to criminal justice system involvement during grade 12 and the first year after high school. This finding simply supports the idea that committing illegal acts increases the likelihood that youth will get into trouble with the law. More relevant to deterrence theory are the findings that
criminal justice system involvement during grades 8 and 9 was positively related to delinquency during grade 10, and criminal justice system involvement during grade 12 and the first year after high school was positively related to crime during the third year after high school. Thus, not only were the youth in this sample not deterred much by their criminal justice system involvement, they actually increased their deviant behavior following it.

Since criminal justice system involvement was positively related to later illegal behavior, in two phases, this analysis offers support for labeling theory. According to labeling theory, powerful individuals, groups, organizations, or segments of society define certain behavior, and the individuals committing the behavior, as somehow offensive. These individuals are subsequently treated as deviant, largely in a punitive way so as to deter future deviance. In doing this, agents of social control socially differentiate “deviants” from “conformists,” retaining social privileges for the conformists and denying them to the deviants. Thus, “labeled” persons become stigmatized and segregated from the mainstream community, resulting in an increased likelihood that the person defined as deviant will continue engaging in deviant behavior. All of this considered, it could be hypothesized that prior illegal behavior will be positively related to later criminal justice system involvement, and that criminal justice system involvement will be positively related to later illegal behavior. The structural equation model (Figure 5) revealed a path significant across the entire span of the model that may be seen as support for the general contention of labeling theory. Youth engaging in illegal behavior in early
junior high school tended to be system-involved by early high school, which increased the likelihood that they would engage in illegal behavior again later in high school. The path continued—repeat offenders during high school tended to be system-involved by their first year out of high school, which increased the likelihood that they would commit crime in early adulthood.

As discussed previously, this analysis found that youth increased their deviant peer association after committing illegal acts. Additionally, youth increased their deviant peer association after involvement with the criminal justice system. The process of defining and reacting to individuals as deviant results in their segregation away from conforming others and toward relationships with deviant others. Through these relationships, one is provided with increased opportunity and motivation to commit further deviance, and may even come to socially identify with deviant peer groups. With this in mind, it makes sense to integrate labeling theory with social learning theory, as there appears to be some overlap between the two. This analysis tested the hypothesis that prior criminal justice system involvement would be positively related to later deviant peer association. Criminal justice system involvement during grades 8 and 9 was positively related to deviant peer association during grade 10, and criminal justice system involvement during grade 12 and the first year after high school was weakly positively related to deviant peer association during the third year after high school. Thus, it appears that criminal justice system involvement may facilitate law-breaking individuals’ preference to associate with deviant peers. However, since deviant peer association was not shown to predict
further illegal behavior, the results did not completely support a labeling/learning theory hybrid.

This analysis did not reveal a "guilt by association" labeling effect. Consistent with labeling theory, it may be proposed that "hanging out" with peers that are known to engage in illegal behavior increases one's exposure to law enforcement authorities, and these relationships may be used as cues in defining one as deviant. Police, for instance, may "be on the look-out" for kids who are "running with the wrong crowd." This analysis tested the hypothesis that deviant peer association would be positively related to criminal justice system involvement. Deviant peer association during grade 7 was not significantly related to criminal justice system involvement during grades 8 and 9, and deviant peer association during grade 10 was not significantly related to criminal justice system involvement during grade 12 and the first year after high school. In this sample, it did not appear that having friends who engage in illegal behavior was enough, in itself, to increase one's chances of getting into trouble with the law.

Lastly, these results indicated that criminal justice involvement has mediating effects. Generally, labeling theory posits a mediating relationship: deviant behavior at some point will lead to societal reaction to suppress it, which will then bring about more deviant behavior. Thus, it may be hypothesized that prior deviance is indirectly related to later deviance through societal reaction. Two labeling arguments involving mediation were supported in the Figure 5 model. First, in addition to being directly related, prior and later illegal behavior was indirectly related through criminal justice
system involvement twice. Time 2 system involvement explained 19.4% of the relationship between time 1 and time 3 delinquency, and time 4 system involvement explained 13% of the relationship between time 3 delinquency and time 5 crime. This path supports the general causal relationship proposed in labeling theory.

Second, in addition to being directly related, prior delinquency and later deviant peer association was also indirectly related through system involvement. Time 2 system involvement explained 22% of the relationship between time 1 delinquency and time 3 deviant peer association, although time 4 system only explained 8% of the relationship between time 3 delinquency and time 5 deviant peer association. This path supports the labeling argument that sanctions have a way of segregating individuals away from conforming peers and toward deviant peers. A model summarizing all of the relationships that were found in this study is presented in Figure 6.

While these results suggest that criminal justice system involvement help to explain chronic criminal behavior, they also obviously show that the part it plays is very limited. The indirect effects produced by system involvement are not heavily incriminating. Most of the criminal continuity in the analysis is left unexplained. Based on these results, it may be argued that there are other factors explaining most of the relationship between prior and later crime. There could be other environmental factors or personality or "latent traits" that could account for the rest of this relationship. Also, system involvement could interact with these other factors in
Figure 6. Model of significant relationships
developmental processes to produce criminal continuity. In any case, holding the criminal justice system solely responsible for re-offending seems to be unwarranted.

Limitations of this study stem from the fact that such a narrowly defined sample was studied. The sample consisted of rural white males from two-parent families who share about the same social class. Consequently, results here cannot be generalized to other populations. The results of this study should be viewed in relation to studies done using samples of other populations. It would have been desirable to make comparisons across social categories in this study, as we would expect illegal behavior and labeling effects to vary according to race and ethnicity, class, and sex/gender. For example, the positive association between criminal justice system involvement and illegal behavior may have be stronger for racial and ethnic minorities, while it may be weaker or non-existent for (white) middle class youth. Unfortunately, the existing data set used in this study did not allow for most of these comparisons, and the females in the sample did not exhibit the criminal continuity needed to conduct the analysis. Examining gender interactions with labeling is needed to see if control agents are at times less likely to label females, due to some form of chivalry, while at other times are more likely to label them, as may be the case with deviant sexual behavior (such as prostitution). However, the results of this analysis are consistent with the way labeling theory would predict young lower/working class males to behave. The strength of this study lies in that it shows that it is possible to increase some youth’s illegal behavior by formally sanctioning it.
Another limitation stems from the measure of criminal justice system involvement used in this analysis. The measure detected only a few types of light to moderate involvement with the criminal justice system: getting arrested, going to detention or jail, and going to court or being placed on probation. More non-reintegrative types of sanctioning—those that should show the strongest labeling effects, such as long-term incarceration, were not included in this measure. Further, the sample reported very little involvement, especially for the time 2 measure. On the other hand, it seems rather impressive that despite these measurement limitations, this study found that youth increased their illegal behavior after even light trouble with the law. It might be supposed that more serious involvement with the criminal justice system would have a greater impact on continued illegal behavior.

Also, there is more than one possible interpretation of the results of this study. The data show that youth increased their illegal behavior after contact with the criminal justice system. While most labeling theorists would expect this relationship, they offer many different avenues as to how contact with social control agents create deviance. The data does not make it clear why system involvement is followed by more crime or exactly who is responsible, nor does it offer conclusive evidence that labeling, per se, is even taking place. We cannot assume that since system involvement is statistically related to future illegal behavior, it must be the one "sticking" the deviant label on individuals. Consistent with statements made earlier by theorists such as Becker (1973), Erikson (1964), and Kituse (1964), it may be the community outside of the criminal justice system—families, friends, neighbors,
school, etc., that responds to facilitate continued crime on the part of individuals. Further, this analysis did not include more precise societal reaction variables that would indicate that labeling is indeed taking place. These might include individuals’ actual experiences while involved with the system, incarceration records, definitions of them made by community members, or observable behavioral reactions to them. Some of this data would have to be gathered using qualitative research methods.

Suggestions for Future Theory and Research

The empirical analysis in this study is limited in that it does not tell us “why” criminal justice system is positively related to later illegal behavior. The criminal justice system involvement measure used in this analysis dealt with relatively minor confrontations with the law. More research is needed to expose the relative predictive power of more specific legal sanctions. For example, it may be true that certain types of societal reactions to deviance put offenders at higher risk for re-offending, not sanctioning deviant behavior in general. Labeling research may be used to find out which sanctions reduce crime and which ones increase it.

This analysis was successful in supporting propositions from labeling theory using longitudinal data spanning across developmental stages—from late childhood/early adolescence (junior high school) to recent high school graduate (early adulthood). This is further cause to propose that labeling theory may be conceptually improved by incorporating a life-course perspective. In particular, propositions drawn from Sampson and Laub’s (1997) life course theory of cumulative disadvantage should be more thoroughly tested. The present study only begins to test
a life course labeling theory by using longitudinal data to examine the relationship between criminal justice system involvement and crime across different stages of youth. A more thorough model would include separate measures of legitimate opportunities, social bonds, and perhaps even "self-control." These are the variables Sampson and Laub (1997) use to explain why formal and informal sanctions lead to future deviant behavior. In Figure 7, I present a conceptual model that I believe would serve as a basis for a more thorough test of Sampson and Laub's (1997) version of labeling theory. The model summarizes a labeling theory argument that focuses on the segregation effects of labeling which operate to mortgage the future of those defined and treated as deviant.

Life course perspectives are used widely within the social sciences, with sociology holding a primary focus on the social life course. The perspective focuses on the dynamics that evolve over individuals' life spans within specific historical contexts. Social changes occurring at some point in history alter the life course of individuals (and their age cohorts), and the impact of this relationship is dependent upon the developmental stage in life at which individuals experience these changes (Elder, 1985). Life course analyses are useful in that they reveal the importance of life histories in explaining life outcomes. The perspective draws a connection between later and earlier life phases: through knowledge of earlier periods in the life course, we come to a better understanding of individuals' behavior and circumstances at later ages (Elder, 2001). The life course may be viewed prospectively or retrospectively, depending upon analytic strategy (Elder, 1985), and clearly, life
Figure 7. An integrated model of labeling theory featuring segregation effects
course analyses require the use of longitudinal data. Farrington (1997) charges that
more research on the escalation of individual offending is needed, especially on the
prediction of offending. The possibility that criminal justice system is a factor in
escalation may be explored, and a life-course labeling theory would provide a suitable
framework.

It is important to understand the key concepts used in the life course
perspective and how they might apply to an integrated labeling theory. First of all,
life course is defined in Caspi, Elder, and Herbener (1990: 15) as the “sequence of
culturally defined age-graded roles and social transitions that are enacted over time.”
Elder (2001: 4-5) defines it as “the interweave of age-graded trajectories, such as
work careers and family pathways, that are subject to changing conditions and future
options, and to short-term transitions ranging from leaving school to retirement.”
More generally, “the life course can be viewed as a multi-level phenomenon, ranging
from structured pathways through social institutions and organizations to the social
trajectories of individuals and their developmental pathways” (Elder, 2001: 4). The
concepts of trajectory and transition are used to describe the life course (Thornberry,
1997).

Elder (2001: 5) states that a “core premise of life course study” is that
“developmental processes and outcomes are shaped by the social trajectories that
people follow, as through advancement and demotion.” Trajectories represent
relatively long time spans in which life course dynamics take place. A trajectory is a
“line of development over the life span” (Sampson and Laub, 2001: 23). Elder (1985:
defines a "life trajectory," inclusively, as "a pathway defined by the aging process or by movement across the age structure..." regardless of the "...direction, degree, or rate of change of its course." Further, "Life trajectories can be charted by linking states across successive years" (Elder, 1985: 31), such as states of employment, education, or health. According to Thornberry (1997: 4), "Trajectories are long-term, age-graded patterns of development in major social institutions such as family, education, occupation, and crime." Therefore, as examples, we may speak of trajectories of work, marriage, child bearing and rearing, schooling, and even crime. Of course, not everyone enters into all trajectories, and some will have more success than others might in "accomplishing the developmental tasks that are embedded in the trajectories they do enter" (Thornberry, 1997: 4). The concept of trajectory is often associated with the study of “careers,” without restriction to employment or occupational careers (Elder, 1985). Thus, a life-course perspective on crime involves analyses of “criminal careers.”

A long-term focus on trajectories involves the connection between childhood experiences and adult outcomes, but transitions represent a shorter-term view (Sampson and Laub, 2001a). Life transitions mark shorter time spans in which these dynamics evolve; they represent an individual’s change in state, as in from single to married, from employed to unemployed, or becoming incarcerated. Related to the concept of transition is the concept of life event. Transitions are activated by more specific life events such as starting or graduating college, getting married or divorced, and starting or leaving a job (Elder, 1985; Thornberry, 1997). As stated by Elder
"Transitions are always embedded in trajectories that give them distinctive form and meaning" and "Each trajectory is marked by a sequence of life events and transitions, changes in state that are more or less abrupt." Thornberry (1997: 4) states that transitions "can deflect the trajectory's arc or growth curve." The meaning and implications of a life event and transition depend on when they occur within a phase of a particular trajectory, as in some point during young or late adulthood for example. [However, it should be noted that not all events are age-graded, such as unexpected life events (Elder, 1985).] Transitions serve as both the result of past processes (as a "dependent variable") and the instigator of new ones (as an "independent variable"). In this way, transitions are temporally linked--chains of life transitions mark pathways across the life course (Rutter, 1989). With respect to labeling theory, a confrontation with an agent of social control serves as a life event that disrupts an individual's successful transitions across trajectories such as school and employment while helping to direct one along a crime trajectory.

Also important is the concept of duration. With respect to events and transitions, duration refers to the periods of time between changes in state (Elder, 1985). Depending on the presence of other factors in people's lives, duration, itself, has consequences for the life course. For example, prolonged incarceration may decrease one's ability to integrate into the community after being released.

According to Elder (2001: 5), "the life course perspective offers a framework for exploring the dynamics of multiple, interdependent pathways" through life. Thus, interdependence is a key concept to the perspective. "Interdependence refers to the
interlocking nature of trajectories and transitions, within and across life stages. This interweave of lifelines may generate turning points or a change in course” (Elder, 1985: 32). Not only will trajectories such as work, child rearing, and marriage shape each other, but they are also interdependent with transitions such as those from school to work or from work to retirement (Elder, 1985). Another type of independence central to life course study involves interdependent lives, or what Elder (2001) refers to as the “principle of linked lives.” It is through social relationships, through interactions with family, friends, co-workers, etc., that our existence is regulated and supported throughout the life span. It is this principle that is especially important to social interactional theories of crime such as labeling.

Transitions and life events may serve as turning points, another concept relating to a shorter-term focus within trajectories. Elder (1985: 35) states, “...events and transitions modify life trajectories. Some events are important turning points in life—they redirect paths.” A dependent relationship exists between widely separated transitions and between widely separated life events; experiences in one social phase are dependent upon the “tempo and character” of earlier phases. For example, the ending of a work career may be partly shaped by the way in which the career began. Turning points may involve more sudden, discrete life events that significantly changes one’s life such as the death of a loved one or winning the lottery. However, turning points may also involve processes over time that bring about incremental, less dramatic changes such as the changes coming about after getting married or finding a job (Laub and Sampson, 1993). Experiences with the criminal justice system may
serve as a turning point in one’s life, which may be relatively sudden and discrete or prolonged. Thus, turning points may be used to predict changes in crime, including desistance. For example, work by Sampson and Laub has been successful in showing that transitions to involvement with informal social control institutions, particularly attachment to work and cohesive marriages, seem to discourage criminal behavior, independent of differing individual criminal propensities (Laub and Sampson, 1993).

The timing of life events may be as significant as their mere occurrence. The life stage principle holds that the effect changes have on individuals depend on when these changes occur in their lives. “Social timing refers to the incidence, duration, and sequence of roles, and to relevant expectations and beliefs based on age” (Elder, 2001: 6). Social meanings are attached to age with regard to when social roles are occupied and events are experienced. Off-time events may have dire consequences, as when teenage parenthood leads to trouble finding a job and socioeconomic disadvantage in adulthood (Elder, 1985; Thornberry, 1997). The timing of multiple trajectories also has important consequences with respect to whether they are synchronous or not, as is illustrated when couples “juggle” family and work events or when children physically mature early or late (Elder, 2001). Not only should we expect that the effects of labeling vary according to the life stage at which they occur, as an age-graded labeling theory would suggest, but they should also depend on what else is going on in an individual’s life in other social institutional settings.

The life course perspective allows for recognition of human agency and individual differences. Individuals make choices within environmental constraints
that play a major part in selecting future circumstances and constructing their life course (Elder, 2001). The way in which people adapt to events serve as the link between events and future events and the subsequent life course: “Lines of adaptation represent a process of constructing the life course. The same event or transition followed by different adaptations can lead to very different trajectories” (Elder, 1985: 35). Thus, in addition to their occurrence and outcomes, the negotiation of transitions must be considered (Rutter, 1989). Some events and turning points act as disruptions of individuals’ plans for the future life course—as crises. The individual responds with efforts to restore control over the course of one’s life. With this in mind, the individual may be seen as an active agent in shaping one’s own trajectories. It is important, then, to recognize personal and social resources used in adaptation, or, “what they bring to the situation” (Elder, 1985). Rutter (1989) explains that people help shape their future social environments through the choices and steps they take earlier in life (such as choice of a marriage partner). Caspi, Elder, and Herbener (1990) focused on how individuals use interactional styles to meet role demands and role changes along the life course and select future situations and environments. Individuals may tend to select situations and environments that are compatible with their dispositions. They found that ill-temperedness, shyness, and dependency were associated with trouble in meeting age-graded role demands and transitions, beginning during childhood. In many instances, anti-social behavior—behavior that is labeled and punished—may represent maladaptive ways of negotiating transitions from home to school to work and so on.
Consistent with the life course perspective is the view that what one does at some point in life has an effect on what happens later. This is the basic idea behind the concept of state dependence—an act or circumstance present at one point in time has a direct or an indirect influence on the probability that an act or circumstance will exist at a later point in time. Applied to crime, we have the basic idea of labeling theory—committing crime at one point determines a higher likelihood that one will commit crime later (Sampson and Laub, 2001a). Although the connection between past and future crime may be direct, it may also be indirect in that crime disrupts individuals' relationships with conforming individuals and mainstream social institutions, relationships that may deter them from committing future crime. According to Sampson and Laub (2001b: 247), "weak social bonding serves as a mediating and hence causal sequential link in a 'chain of adversity' between childhood delinquency and adult criminal behavior."

The connection between past and future behavior may be a matter of interactional continuity, whereby behaviors elicit responses from others that ensure that these behaviors, or similar ones, will be repeated. For example, consistent with a labeling argument, anti-social acts are acts hostile to sanctioning agents such as parents, teachers, and law enforcement. Sanctioning agents retaliate with hostility—punishment, perhaps delivered with anger. In response, the person being sanctioned returns the hostility with more anti-social behavior (Caspi, Elder, and Bem, 1987).

Also, the connection between past and future behavior may be a matter of cumulative continuity, whereby one's behavior elicits responses from others that
determine the availability of future opportunities. For example, again consistent with a labeling argument, responses to illegal behavior such as incarceration interferes with one's ability to acquire legitimate opportunities such as education or gainful employment, thus making illegal activities more likely. Social disadvantages accumulate over time to interfere with successful adult development (Moffitt, 1993). Sampson and Laub (2001b: 247) write, "The idea of cumulative continuity suggests that delinquency incrementally mortgages the future by generating negative consequences for life chances, especially among stigmatized and institutionalized youth." In other words, crime and its elicited social reactions result in the "knifing off" of one's future legitimate opportunities.

Sampson and Laub (2001b: 247) recognize here that the cumulative continuity of disadvantage is also "a result of stable individual differences in criminal propensity." To make a state dependence argument in explaining criminal continuity is not to deny that population heterogeneity regarding relatively stable individual attributes also play a part. Sampson and Laub (2001b: 250) also state, "...

heterogeneity and state dependence need not be mutually exclusive phenomena—both operate over the life-course of individuals."

Life course perspectives on crime utilize a developmental approach. With respect to anti-social behavior, Loeber and Le Blanc (1990: 405) define trajectories as "developmental sequences--of activation, aggravation, and desistance--that span more than one developmental period of individuals' lives, such as childhood, adolescence, and adulthood." As they point out, "Individuals may progress or regress on
developmental sequences, but they rarely move through an entire sequence or trajectory" (420). Therefore, they define the term "path" as "segments that individuals travel along a developmental sequence or trajectory" (420). Consistent with the state dependence hypothesis, developmental criminology assumes that these paths consist of multiple linear relationships between variables and employs a "stepping-stone approach," a wider causal perspective whereby "formerly dependent variables may become independent variables over time" (433). The stepping stone model "allows the identification of factors that are uniquely associated with particular developmental processes of offending and allows specification of the sequence and duration of potential causal factors along the developmental time line" (433). The "timing" of specific causes is important in that individuals may be vulnerable to them during some life phases more than others or when they are present in conjunction with other factors. With the stepping-stone approach, factors from different age periods are used to predict distal outcomes, and a number of risk factors may be combined to jointly predict future delinquency (Loeber and Le Blanc, 1990).

As Thornberry (1997: 5) states, “Thus, an individual’s development can be described in terms of the trajectories the person enters, the successful accomplishment of developmental tasks in those trajectories, and the timing of transitions along those trajectories. In turn, all of these attributes, in multiple trajectories, can be used to enhance our understanding of delinquent and criminal behavior.” Thornberry (1997) recommends that developmental and life-course concepts and perspectives may be
used to enhance the explanatory power of traditional theories of crime. Labeling theory seems to be easily receptive to a developmental/life course influence.

Considering the utility of the life-course perspective, and since it has been argued that early labeling theory and research was ill conceived and improperly studied, perhaps the traditional self-concept approach should be reconsidered and restudied using a developmental/life-course perspective and longitudinal data. Future research, then, should also focus on a revised self-concept approach.

**A Revised Self-Concept Perspective on Labeling**

The traditional “self-concept approach” to labeling theory may be revised adhering more strictly to developmental/life-course principles. As I mentioned, the earlier approach was to examine how labels influence the development of self—how we, especially as children, look for information from others in trying to figure out who we are. This approach has been the most refuted. However, it may still prove to be worthwhile if labeling and self-concept development is re-conceptualized and studied properly. The “self-concept” approach still has merit as long as it presents the effects of labeling on self-development as an ongoing process. Since social control agents, deviant behavior, and self-cognition change as children proceed through life stages, we should expect the nature of labeling processes and their outcomes to be different accordingly. This is to say that the relationship between societal reactions to deviance and self-identity formation is age-graded. One of the ways we can account for these kinds of changes is to consider the effects labeling has on children who are
in later stages of development of self. It may prove worthwhile to look for alternative relationships between self-identity and societal reactions.

We should not restrict ourselves to examining the impact of labels on changes in self-concept, but we should include an examination of the relationship between definitions of persons as deviant and pre-existing salient self-concepts. Focusing on changes in self-concept may be more appropriate during earlier stages of development of self, when children's social identities are less solidified (in other words, when they are more "impressionable"). Mead (1934) distinguished between the "play" stage and "game" stage. Early in life, through play, children learn to take the roles of others and form a subjective understanding of the general view of the community—the "generalized other." It is through play that children learn to see themselves as objects, through the eyes of others. When children acquire a sense of the generalized other, they are able to enter the game stage, which involves a more complex understanding of the "rules" of organized social interactions as expected by the others in the community. Further, they are more able to understand their relationship with the generalized other. After children move from play to game, defining and treating them as deviant may take on a different significance, as they have grown older and perhaps formed more salient self-concepts.

At later points in development, labels may serve as signals of affirmation from others that one's desired sense of self is secure, even for people defined and labeled as deviant. In other words, the reflected appraisals that form when the labeled person interprets the responses of the labeler serve to validate the labeled person's self-
concept(s). Here, the label may provide one with cognitive consistency about oneself. In this way, a label term (criminal, poor student, etc.) can work directly and immediately, sending information to those defined as deviant that others see them the way they wish to be seen, which is important when we consider adolescence as a time of identity struggle. For example, one might expect a child who proudly self-identifies as a "gang member" would, at times, desire reactions from certain authorities that confirm s/he is a gang member. Societal reactions such as formal records that identify gang members can serve as the basis for reflected appraisals. Here, we tell the youth that s/he is indeed a gang member. In contrast to traditional versions of labeling and stigmatization processes, this is a case in which a "label" does not insult the person but actually complements one’s sense of self. Figure 8 depicts a conceptual model summarizing an identity affirmation argument to labeling theory.

Similarly, deviant behavior may involve a case of "impression management." When we engage in impression management, we use gestures to induce desired behavior from others that will leave them with a desired impression of us (Goffman, 1959). Again in contrast to traditional versions of labeling theory, we can turn the way we view the label—self-concept relationship around. If reactions to deviant behavior can affirm identities, then it stands to reason that individuals may purposely choose deviant behavior to bring about these reactions. Thus, some deviant behavior may be purposive behavior performed to sustain one’s social identity. In this case, the danger of definitions of the person as deviant and their corresponding actions is that
Figure 8. An identity affirmation model of labeling theory
they may reinforce deviant behavior. Figure 9 depicts a conceptual model summarizing an impression management argument to labeling theory.

Labeling research traditionally relied on analyses of cross-sectional data (Sampson and Laub, 1997), which may help explain labeling theory's deficiency in empirical support. Evidence from longitudinal studies is needed to discover ways in which childhood personality determines the nature and course of later development (Caspi, Elder, and Herbener, 1990). Thus, the self-concept approach may receive better support from analyses utilizing longitudinal data. For example, Matsueda (1992) used longitudinal data to examine the relationship between reflected appraisals and delinquency. He proposed that earlier delinquency influences future delinquency through reflected appraisals of juveniles as delinquent—delinquent behavior affects parents' definitions of their children as delinquent, which affects their children's self-definitions as delinquent, which leads to more delinquent behavior on the part of their children. The following results of his research supports a conceptualization of labeling processes that work through self-definitions. First, parents' initial appraisals of their children as "rule violators" were related to their children's self-appraisals as "rule violators." Second, prior delinquency was related to further delinquency, as well as children's self-appraisals as rule violators, directly and indirectly through parent's initial appraisals of children as rule violators. Third, children's self-appraisals as rule violators were related to later delinquent behavior, and it mediated between parental appraisals of them as rule violators and later delinquency. Fourth,
Figure 9. An impression management model of labeling theory
parental appraisals of their children as rule violators were directly related to later delinquency on the part of their children.

Although it is important for labeling research to take another look at self-concept development, it is not the empirical purpose of this analysis to support a re-conceptualized self-concept approach to labeling theory. Labeling theory may also be improved by considering alternatives to the self-concept approach. It is, then, the empirical purpose of this analysis to study a more "structural" version of labeling theory, presented next.

**Conclusion: Implications for Treatment of Youth Offenders**

In general, labeling theory suggests that we avoid criminal justice system involvement for youth as much as possible, especially when public safety is not threatened. Thus, one controversy surrounding labeling theory is its implication for dealing with law violators. If the theory has merit, then the community is put in a double bind. As the theory, and this study, suggests, responses from the criminal justice system may play a part in worsening our crime problems. So what do we do in response to crime? Should we not punish offenders? Other theory and research does well in showing us that not responding to anti-social behavior may also make matters worse. Without some kind of response, the offender may have a behavioral problem that will persist. Further, members of a community must be protected from offenders, which may involve negative sanctions and/or some form of offender incapacitation. This double bind may be resolved. Labeling theory does not implicate social responses in general as the cause of future deviance, but a certain
type—those that stand in the way of future conformity. It is erroneous to draw the implication from labeling theory that we should be “soft on crime.” Instead, we should draw the implication that we need to be very careful about how we attempt to deter the offender. All of this leaves us with the question, then: “How do we respond to crime?” Some answers may be found in the labeling literature.

To begin, it is important to remember that labeling a person as deviant may turn into a destructive self-fulfilling prophecy. Merton (1957) tells us what we can do about the self-fulfilling prophecy. He explains that the key to breaking them lies in the definition of the situation. If a situation defined as real can no longer be defined as real, then different consequences are likely to come about. Being eternally optimistic, I would also add that defining the situation differently to begin with would prevent socially destructive consequences. However, Merton said that challenging erroneous definitions of the situation is not easy, and he is right. He goes so far as to question the human will to do this: "In and of themselves, moral sentiments are not much more effective in curing social ills than in curing physical ills" (488). He reasons that since our ability to be aware of what we are doing and the moral motivation to do the "right thing" are both the products of social forces, we cannot simply decrease our propensity to engage in self-fulfilling prophecies out of conscious choice alone. With this in mind, he goes on to say that simply "educating" people about the nature of self-fulfilling prophecies will not itself disrupt them.

Merton (1957) is more optimistic about putting an intentional halt to the dysfunctional consequences of self-fulfilling prophecies on the macro-social
behavioral level. Merton's functionalism recognizes that some social arrangements and patterns are socially dysfunctional. In the case of the self-fulfilling prophecy, he believes the solution lies in institutional change. He said that we couldn't expect this change to happen automatically. Merton (1957: 500) wrote, "The self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby fears are translated into reality, operates only in the absence of deliberate institutional controls." Certain institutions can provide the sustenance for erroneous definitions of situations. Thus, changes in social policies can lead to the destruction of self-fulfilling prophecies.

I agree with Merton (1957) that institutional change is a necessary way to disrupt self-fulfilling prophecies. But will attacking self-fulfilling prophecies at the institutional level will be enough to disrupt them? I am more optimistic than Merton about our potential to realize our own tendencies to commit self-fulfilling prophecies. Merton's solution does not suggest what counselors, teachers, parents, law enforcement and correctional personnel, and anyone else who works closely with troubled youth can do to counter the effects of labeling in their everyday interactions with these youth. I am also more optimistic about our ability to make conscious moral choices to disrupt them. As active agents, humans have the potential to construct different social realities. It is certainly not impossible to neutralize our tendency toward self-fulfilling prophecies through introspection. And I would not think it impossible to identify individuals who have learned from experience and changed their definitions of situations accordingly.
Merton (1957) referred to examples involving social institutions and organizations, and how they treated entire social categories of people. I would add that self-fulfilling prophecies could, and should, also be disrupted at the individual behavioral level. Examples of self-fulfilling prophecies that can be disrupted at the interpersonal level may include ones made when a parent defines a child as a "bad kid," a teacher defines a child as a "bad student," or a counselor defines a child client as "incorrigible." Often times, self-fulfilling prophecies arise from interpersonal interaction, and thus it may be that disrupting them at the micro-social level is the most appropriate strategy in some cases.

Further I make the case that, sometimes, a self-fulfilling prophecy can be a good thing. A statement about reality that is not "true" at the moment it is made initiates a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, the statement does not necessarily contradict an essential truth; it may simply be something that is just not true yet. Why can't the thing we make true be a good thing? Also, I would go as far to recommend that we use "favorable" labeling even in instances when we find it hard to resist the notion that a label of deviance is warranted. I am talking about a sort of pro-social "false definition of the situation" here, or, perhaps, counter-labeling. Even if it appears that a child really is a "bad kid," "poor student," or a "gang member," let's call this child a "good kid," "good student," or "member of our community." This way, the child does not receive appraisals from us that affirm their senses of selves as deviant. We can define someone in a flattering way, even without any objective essential character of the person to legitimate the definition, and then treat that person
in a way that empowers that person to be socially constructive. After all, many kids commit delinquent acts, sometimes repeatedly, but do not get defined and labeled as deviant; many probably are still defined as "good kids." And I speculate that many turn out to be "good adults."

Tannenbaum (1994) suggested that we avoid what he called "the dramatization of evil" in responding to a child's deviant behavior. If we are not careful, we can make more out of deviant behavior than what it could be. It is this dramatization of evil that establishes the importance of being defined as deviant to the persons being labeled. If we can downplay or even fail to recognize this importance, then our reactions to the deviant behavior of children can have less of an unwanted impact on children's self development and maintenance. Tannenbaum (1994: 296) writes about those who react hastily to deviant behavior, "The harder they work to reform the evil, the greater the evil grows under their hands." Whether we are talking about a child who first begins to act in a manner defined as deviant or a young person who actively seeks appraisals of themselves as deviant, we may need to go as far as ignoring the behavior whenever possible. Tannenbaum (1994: 296) writes further, "The way out is through a refusal to dramatize the evil. The less said about it the better. The more said about something else, still better."

Treatment practices should be informed by research implicating the part that societal reactions play in generating delinquency continuation factors. Delinquent behavior may be sustained by reinforcement (needs satisfaction), deviant self-identity, presence of weak social controls, and availability of illegal opportunities.
Conversely, if these factors do not exist, delinquent behavior should discontinue.

Kaplan (1984: 150) writes:

The decrease in or discontinuation of delinquent behavior is likely to occur to the extent that (1) the delinquent patterns do not appear to satisfy the needs that stimulated the delinquent responses, (2) the delinquent behaviors stimulate threats to the satisfaction of other needs such as those associated with the desire for continuing involvement with conventional morality or with fear of formal sanctions, and (3) changes in the youth’s needs or in the availability of conventional opportunities render delinquent behavior unnecessary.

For example, as Laub and Sampson (1993) suggest, a good job or a good marriage increases an ex-offender’s stake in conformity and commitment to mainstream institutions by eliminating reinforcement of illegal behavior, punishing illegal behavior, reinforcing legal behavior, eliminating illegal opportunities, and presenting legal opportunities. Thus, our societal reactions to delinquency, such as treatment, should not only focus on making illegal behavior unattractive, but we should avoid inadvertently reinforcing illegal behavior and narrowing opportunities in favor of illegal ones. Our goals should be to facilitate offenders’ participation in mainstream activities—to integrate them or keep them integrated—as much as possible.

Braithwaite (1989) argues that the process of labeling and treating persons as deviant involves disintegrative shaming (or, non-re-integrative punishment)—societal reactions to deviance that prevent offenders from re-entering conventional social
environments. Idealistically, in most cases, offenders are allowed a chance to get full
citizen privileges back after “paying their debt to society.” However, certain
sanctions, making incarceration records known to employers for example, stand in the
way of community re-integration. This is quite important in that community
integration reduces the likelihood that one will offend, while community
disintegration may lead to integration into deviant sub-groups. Punishment delivered
by agents of social control has a way of attacking the “person.” As a way of
responding to crime, Braithwaite (1989) recommends “reintegrative shaming.” His
well-conceived general model asks us to (1) condemn the harmful behavior
committed by a person, (2) refrain from defining the person as a deviant object (don’t
label), and (3) keep the person tied to conventional society. I think Braithwaite is
suggesting here that we punish the behavior, not the person. Whereas disintegrative
shaming involves practices such as incarceration, reintegrative shaming involves
programs such as non-punitive community service, conflict management/resolution
training, victim-offender mediation, and church-sponsored rehabilitation—the same
types of programs that may also fall under the rubric of “restorative justice” or
“peacemaking criminology” (Akers, 2000).
APPENDIX. MEASUREMENT ITEMS

Items Used to Measure Deviant Peer Association (Times 1 and 3)

During the past 12 months, how many of your close friends have...

1. Run away from home
2. Skipped school without an excuse
3. Purposely damaged or destroyed property that did not belong to them
4. Stolen something worth less than $25
5. Stolen something worth $25 or more
6. Gone joyriding, that is, taken a motor vehicle such as a car or motorcycle, for a ride or drive without the owner's permission
7. Hit someone with the idea of hurting them
8. Attacked someone with a weapon or with the idea of seriously hurting them
9. Used a weapon, force, or strong arm methods to get money or other things from people
10. Used tobacco (cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, etc.)
11. Used alcohol (beer, wine, bourbon, vodka, etc.)
12. Used illegal drugs like marijuana, hashish, LSD, cocaine, downers, crack, etc.
13. Used prescription drugs for fun or to get “high”
14. Used inhalants such as solvents, gasoline, rush, or glue
15. Used nonprescription drugs for fun or to get “high” like Vivarin, No Doz, or diet aids

Items Used to Measure Adult Deviant Peer Association (Time 5)

During the past 12 months, how many of your close friends have...

1. Stolen money or something else that does not belong to them
2. Purposely damaged or destroyed property that does not belong to them
3. Beat up someone who made them mad
4. Physically forced someone to do things against their will
5. Used marijuana (pot, grass)
6. Used some other illegal drug
7. Done something that could get them arrested by the police
8. Used a weapon like a knife, club, or gun to get their own way
9. Sold stolen goods
10. Cheated at school or other places
11. Used someone else’s credit card without permission
12. Written bad checks
13. Sped or driven recklessly
14. Driven after drinking
15. Sold illegal drugs

**Items Used to Measure Delinquency (Times 1 and 3)**

The following is a list of behaviors related to laws and rules. We'd like to know whether you've done any of these things during the past 12 months. This is personal and confidential. No one will know how you answered these questions. Please be honest in answering them. During the past 12 months, have you...

1. Run away from home
2. Taken something worth less than $25 that didn't belong to you
3. Taken something worth more than $25 that didn't belong to you
4. Cut classes, or stayed away from school without permission
5. Beat up on someone or fought someone physically because they made you angry (other than just playing around)
6. Snatched someone’s purse or wallet without hurting them
7. Driven a car when drunk
8. Been drunk in a public place
9. Purposely damaged or destroyed property that did not belong to you
10. Broken into or tried to break into a building just for fun or to look around
11. Taken a car or other vehicle without the owner's permission, just to drive around
12. Broken into or tried to break into a building to steal or damage something
13. Thrown objects such as rocks or bottles at people to hurt or scare them
14. Attacked someone with a weapon, trying to seriously hurt them
15. Sold illegal drugs such as pot, grass, hash, LSD, cocaine, or other drugs
16. Used a weapon, force, or strong arm methods to get money or things from someone
17. Set fire to a building or field or something like that for fun
18. Sneaked into a movie, ballgame or something like that without paying
19. Gotten into trouble for driving a car without a license
20. Gotten a ticket for speeding or other traffic violations in a car

**Items Used to Measure Adult Crime (Time 5)**

The following is a list of behaviors related to laws and rules. We'd like to know whether you've done any of these things during the past 12 months. During the past 12 months, about how many times did you... (Your best guess please)

1. Steal money or take something that did not belong to you
2. Beat up or fight with someone because you were mad at them
3. Purposely damage or destroy property that did not belong to you
4. Attack or threaten to attack someone with a weapon like a knife, club, or gun
5. Use a weapon, force, or strong arm methods to get money or something else you wanted
6. Drive a car recklessly
7. Drink and drive
8. Cheat at school or other places
9. Sell illegal drugs
10. Sell stolen goods
11. Write bad checks
12. Used someone else's credit card without permission

**Items Used to Measure Criminal Justice System Involvement**

The following is a list of behaviors related to laws and rules. We'd like to know whether you've done any of these things during the past 12 months. This is personal and confidential. No one will know how you answered these questions. Please be honest in answering them. During the past 12 months, have you...

1. Gone to court or been placed on probation for something you did
2. Been placed in juvenile detention or jail
3. Been picked up by the police for something you did
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