

Crime, Criminals, and Cures: Medical Model Revisited

Robert J. Sampson

University of Chicago

ABSTRACT David Lykken's target article assesses the causes of crime and advocates a controversial "cure"—parental licensure. Although Lykken gets many of the facts about criminals right, ultimately the disease metaphor breaks down. *Crime* requires three things—motivated offenders ("criminals"), suitable targets or victims, and the absence of capable guardians to prevent the act. Typical of medical model approaches, failure to consider the convergence in time and space of the three necessary elements for crime results in a misdiagnosis. In this invited commentary, I briefly note three reasons why Lykken's cure, along with the medical model in general, is unlikely to bear fruit.

Childhood Prediction Fallacy

Faith in our ability to predict and thus control crime has a long history, as does the fascination with bad parents. Perhaps the most famous prediction model in the United States was devised by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (1950) in their major work, *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency*. Much like Lykken, the Gluecks proposed that those families with lax discipline combined with erratic and threatening punishment, poor supervision, and weak emotional ties between parent and child, generated the highest probability of delinquency. They constructed a prediction table based on five factors: the discipline of the boy by the father, the supervision of the boy by the mother, the affection of the father for the

Direct all correspondence to Robert J. Sampson, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, 1126 E. 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637 (e-mail: rjsam@src.uchicago.edu).

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boy, the affection of the mother for the boy, and the cohesiveness of the family (Glueck & Glueck, 1950, p. 261).

There is no doubt that these family factors are major correlates of delinquency. On this Lykken is correct, as he is about many of the central facts on criminals. But predicting the progression of criminal careers is another matter, as the Gluecks famously discovered. Their prediction scheme, like all prediction schemes, failed to deliver what it promised. Reiss (1951, pp. 118–119), for example, found that the Glueck prediction table led to an embarrassingly low 10% reduction in the expected errors in prediction. More recent attempts have fared no better, as research on selective incapacitation has demonstrated (see Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Vischer 1986; Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Why is this so and what does prediction have to do with assessing Lykken's cure? The answers can be found in research on crime and the life course. One of the fundamental findings of developmental research concerns an apparent paradox: Although antisocial behavior in children is one of the best predictors of antisocial behavior in adults, most antisocial children do not become antisocial as adults (Robins, 1966). Instead there is far more heterogeneity in criminal behavior than individual-difference models allow, and many juvenile offenders do not become career offenders. In fact, it turns out that antisocial behavior is stable and consistent only in a relatively small number of males whose behavior problems are quite extreme. Moffitt (1993) builds on this information to argue that stability is a trait among those she terms "life-course persistent" delinquents. That is, whereas change is the norm for most adolescents, stability characterizes those at the tail of the antisocial-conduct distribution. This insight points to the dangers of relying on measures of central tendency that mask divergent subgroups. More relevant, the evidence suggests that social factors may work to modify childhood trajectories for the majority of youth who are not "life-course persistent."

In a recent study of desistance from criminal careers, my colleagues and I analyzed trajectories of criminal offending across more than 25 years for the 500 adjudicated delinquents originally the subjects of the Gluecks' *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* (Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998; Sampson & Laub, 1993). The basic fact we discovered about these serious and persistent juvenile delinquents was marked heterogeneity in their adult life outcomes. Take childhood family differences. None of our variables measuring family background—that is, poverty, parental criminality, and child-rearing practice—distinguished juvenile delinquents in

terms of their trajectories of adult offending. Individual characteristics fared no better. Validated measures of boys who in their childhood were extroverted, egocentric, aggressive, difficult temperamentally, or prone to tantrums all failed to distinguish the persisters from the desisters. By contrast, the best predictors of desistance from offending were found in the transition to young adulthood (i.e., marital stability, employment, and military service) and could not be explained by family background. Conditional on being in trouble as a youth, in other words, desistance from a criminal career is not traceable to the cradle or its family progenitors.

The relevance to Lykken thus becomes clear. Distinguishing offenders from non-offenders in adolescence is not the same thing as distinguishing trajectories of offending through time. While prior research (as Lykken correctly notes) has shown that childhood and family differences are sturdy cross-sectional predictors of antisocial behavior, their capacity to predict future desistance from such behavior is quite limited. Because recidivism among active offenders comprises the majority of crimes (Blumstein et al., 1986), policy treatments based on child and family factors alone will therefore fail to make a large dent in the crime problem.

This observation bears on a larger methodological point that applies to the explanation of crime. Looking back over the careers of adult criminals exaggerates the prevalence of stability. Looking forward from youth reveals the successes and failures, including antisocial adolescents reared in troubled families who go on to be normal functioning adults (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Hence the paradox noted earlier—adult criminality seems to be always preceded by childhood misconduct, but most conduct-disordered children do not become adult criminals.

Taken as a whole, then, the lengthy history of research on prediction reveals childhood variables to be surprisingly modest prognostic devices. Known as the false positive problem, childhood prediction scales invariably result in the substantial overprediction of future criminality. Likewise, prediction attempts often fail to identify accurately those who will become criminal even though past behavior suggests otherwise (false negatives). Research has also established large variations in later adolescent and adult criminal behavior that are not accounted for by childhood propensities. Furthermore, and most devastating to Lykken, such changes in criminality over time appear to be explained by social transitions and life events in the adult life course—*not pathologies in the family of origin* (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Longitudinal research on the adult outcomes

of those raised in single-parent families matches this finding with respect to a host of behaviors (Furstenberg, 1994).

Secular Trends, or Crime Reduction Sans Family Policy

It is common to think that present-day crime problems are somehow much worse than in the past. Yet Lykken's time frame is curious, for his nostalgia of a bucolic past is quite limited historically. It is well known that the low rates of violence found, say, in the 1950s and early 1960s, form an anomaly. Staggering amounts of violence have been common throughout American history (Friedman, 1993). But more importantly, Lykken underestimates the remarkable variations in crime rates over the recent course of time. New York City in 1998 experienced fewer than 650 murders, down from over 2,000 just a few years back. In fact the current rate of violence is at its lowest level since 1964—the very era Lykken pines for!

It is not the case, of course, that families in New York radically changed over a couple of years or that unfit parents have been quickly socialized. Indeed, it is likely that nothing at all has changed in terms of the constitutional or family makeup of New York City's youth. The large declines in crime (now reflected throughout most of the country) are simply beyond the province of Lykken's theory and policy recommendation. At the other end of the spectrum, so too is the doubling of the violence rate among youth in just four years (1988–1992).

In short, crime rates fluctuate dramatically over time irrespective of the characteristics of families and the pool of motivated offenders. What this means is that policies on crime can (in principle) effect large changes in the realization of criminal events without changing the basic family situations of potential offenders. Space limitations preclude a discussion of what these policies or changes might be (e.g., for the decrease, aggressive policing strategies to get guns off the street; changing norms of violence; neighborhood collective efficacy).

Societal- (or Aggregate-) Level Fallacy

Lykken's review is decidedly American in flavor, masking the full import of the facts about crime cross nationally. It turns out that many other countries fare much worse than the United States with respect to

nonmarital childbearing, but without the social problems we experience. As but one example, the United States leads the industrialized world in the homicide victimization of young males, with a current rate of 37 per 100,000, compared to 2.1 for the United Kingdom, 1.8 for Sweden, and 1.4 for France. These appallingly large differences take on a new light when we consider that each of our European counterparts has gone to hell in a handbasket according to Lykken's framework. France, the United Kingdom, and Sweden each have marital birth ratios and marriage rates *lower* than the United States. In fact, the marital/birth ratio in Sweden is an amazingly low 50% (Hueveline, 1998). I do not think Lykken would see fit to ask that Swedes suddenly start marrying as a cure for their extraordinarily low rate of violence.

I raise these examples merely to illustrate that aggregate societal patterns do not reflect in an isomorphic fashion what is happening at the individual or even family level. Social norms and structural features of society intervene to transform the meaning of individual and family patterns. It is quite possible, for example, that the stigma attached to nonmarital childrearing is less in Sweden and thus part of the reason for its low violence rates. It also may be that Swedish parents are more mature and committed to their children than American parents, but being married appears not to be a reason. Whatever the explanation for the comparative differences, violence in American society is a complex problem that cannot be reduced to family configuration.

Consider next community- or neighborhood-level variations within the United States. Lykken correctly cites the basic finding of my research on racial similarities in the association of violence with rates of single-parent families (Sampson, 1987). But the level of analysis was not appreciated—these were aggregate *city-level* variations. The finding that family disruption had a stronger association with juvenile violence than adult violence, in conjunction with the inconsistent findings of previous research on individual-level crime and “broken homes,” suggests that the effects of family structure are related to macro-level patterns of social control and guardianship, especially of youth and their peers (the pool of potential offenders). One reason is that high concentrations of single-parent families with children facilitate crime by decreasing local networks of informal social control. Examples of informal social control include neighbors taking note of or questioning strangers, watching over each others' property, assuming responsibility for the

supervision of youth activities (e.g., peer groups), and intervening in local disturbances.

The important point to be noted is that this framework does not require that it is the children of divorced or single parents that are engaging in crime. Youth in areas dominated by two-parent families, regardless of their own family situation, appear to have more controls placed on their leisure activities, particularly with peer groups. A well-documented fact is that delinquency is a peer-group phenomenon, and hence the ecological concentration or segregation of single-parent families (which, parenthetically, is much higher than found in the European countries noted above) is likely to be important in determining the extent to which neighborhood youth are provided opportunities to form a peer-control system free of the supervision or knowledge of adults. Once again, then, family factors can have emergent contextual properties and influences on crime that are not necessarily the same as at the individual or family level.

Whither Policy: Crime or Criminal?

I give Lykken credit for taking seriously the high rates of violence among our nation's youth. Although declining, the rates we experience are still too high and much needs to be done. Moreover, he gets many of the facts right, including important ones like the racial similarity in causes of crime. It is also easy for scholars such as myself to criticize policy initiatives without offering constructive alternatives.

From a sociological perspective, however, I believe that a focus on "criminals" (or in this case their parents) is not only a small part of the crime story but possibly one with oppressive policy consequences. That the realization of a criminal event requires much more than motivated offenders Lykken ultimately seems to realize in his discussion of the redeemability of vulnerable youth and the family contexts that convert propensities into crime. The secular trends, national differences, contextual community effects, and heterogeneity in life-course trajectories noted above suggest that these conversions are not reducible to the absence of biological parents or the immaturity of parents within individual families. Contra the current mantra of "early prevention," the explanation of crime by reference to the childhood experiences of criminals is simply bad science. And even if Lykken's diagnosis were correct, I for one would not have confidence in the governmental regulation of sexual reproduction. Rather than saddle the government with the

alienating burden of policing procreation, perhaps we should simply let them police crime.

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