

# BOOK REVIEW

BEN MATHEWS\*

**Terence P Thornberry and Marvin D Krohn (eds), *Taking Stock of Delinquency: An Overview of Findings from Contemporary Longitudinal Studies* (Kluwer, 2003) 332 pp**

In one volume, Thornberry and Krohn's *Taking Stock of Delinquency* collects summaries of seven of the most extensive longitudinal studies of youth criminal offending ever undertaken. Conducted over several decades (the British study, for example, began in 1961 and is still running), these studies have provided a wealth of evidence about the causes and conduct of persistent child criminal offending, and of its consequences through the lifespan. The seven studies – the Denver Youth Survey, the Pittsburgh Youth Study, the Rochester Youth Development Study, the Houston Longitudinal Study, the Seattle Social Development Project, the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, and the Montreal Longitudinal and Experimental Study – demonstrate common causal and consequential factors present across child criminal experiences in the United States, Canada and Britain. This collection of synopses of the studies has added value because they are written by chief investigators of the projects, who, as might be expected, constitute a panel of the most respected scholars in the field.

A core goal of the studies is to identify important predictors of childhood offending, and in particular, serious offending that continues through adulthood. In general, although some studies have stronger findings on some factors than others, it seems reasonable to suggest that the studies reveal several important factors that tend to be present in the lives of serious child offenders. Possibly the most significant of these is poor parenting and its effect on the development of attributes such as impulsivity and aggression. Tremblay, for example, in the Montreal study, finds that family functioning predicts physical aggression at age two ('the basic control of physically violent impulses is learned in the first two to three years of life'),<sup>1</sup> which is then a significant predictor of future aggression and antisocial behaviour including criminal activity. Based on this, Tremblay argues for the concentration of preventative and intervention efforts on at-risk girls and mothers – before, during and after pregnancy - to enhance their parenting skill. Other major factors identified by multiple studies include the criminal behaviour of parents, poor and or incomplete school performance, and association with delinquent peers.

In identifying these risk factors, these studies effectively transcend mere description of causal factors, and suggest to policymakers which social and psychological factors tend

---

\* Dr Ben Mathews LLB (JCU), BA (Hons) PhD (QUT) is a Lecturer in the School of Law, Queensland University of Technology.

<sup>1</sup> T Thornberry and M Krohn (eds), *Taking Stock of Delinquency: An Overview of Findings from Contemporary Longitudinal Studies* (Kluwer, 2003) 244.

to produce non-offending children, and which factors assist those who do offend to eventually desist. The studies therefore form a significant part of preventative and early intervention literature. Furthermore, as Farrington points out when discussing the Cambridge Study, because serious criminal offending is often accompanied in childhood and adulthood by other undesirable behaviours – risky behaviour such as unprotected sexual intercourse, drink driving, substance abuse, unemployment and family violence – the importance of preventative and early intervention measures offers multiple benefits beyond just the reduction of criminal offending.

The studies possess immediate relevance for Western jurisdictions. However, since the predictors of child offending, criminal careers and desistance appear to be common to human development and experience and are not particularly bound to culture, they are arguably of value worldwide. Due to the breadth of the studies and the weight of the evidence gained from them, this collection is of immense significance to researchers and policymakers. As well, both the number of social and psychological factors that contribute to child criminal offending, continuation of offending through adulthood, and desistance, and the numerous consequences of offending to the individual offender, families, victims, the community and the state, mean that this collection of evidence is also of great relevance and interest to professionals working in numerous fields. These would include educators, psychologists, medical professionals, social workers, and lawyers. This is an invaluable collection of discussions and results from some of the most important and significant longitudinal studies that exist, and it is to be hoped that they have a continuing influence on future research and practice.