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## **Young People's Early Offending: The Context of Strained Leisure Careers**

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Title: Young people's early offending: The context of strained leisure careers.

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## Abstract

Criminology has witnessed a growth of interest in the later stages of criminal careers with less attention given to providing an understanding of the onset of offending which goes beyond identifying precipitative or 'risk' factors. Drawing on findings from a study of young people's offending careers in Ireland, this paper provides a contextualized understanding of the onset of crime located in young people's biographical experiences and transition through youth more specifically. It focuses on one particular dimension of this process, suggesting that early offending can be understood as emerging in the context of strained leisure careers. The findings also highlight the close interaction between the development of young people's leisure careers and their experiences of the local neighbourhood and social networks. It argues that responses to the early stages of youth offending must widen their focus from the individual to incorporate an understanding of broader socio-economic and cultural contexts.

## Key words

Youth offending, criminal careers, leisure careers, life history, Ireland.

## Introduction

The criminal career perspective incorporates an approach to studying offending which examines criminal activity over time, acknowledging the connection between offending and the life course. However, the ways in which the concept of a criminal career has been adopted within the discipline of criminology differ significantly. Broadly, one approach lies within the positivist paradigm, concerned with 'predicting' criminal careers using a list of 'risk factors'. An alternative approach privileges the individual's subjective experiences and acknowledges the potential for change during the life course. This latter approach, conceptualising offending as a process of change connected to life events, requires an understanding that not only incorporates criminological theory, but additionally considers the social, cultural and political processes that impact on individuals' lives (France and Homel, 2007). Some recent examinations of youth offending, therefore, have drawn on youth sociology, presenting offending in the wider context of young people's biographies and their transition into adulthood, thus taking account of larger social contexts and processes of change. Drawing on selected findings from an in-depth biographical study of a group of young people's offending careers in Ireland, this article provides an analysis of those processes associated with the onset of offending. Specifically, it examines one dimension of this process by considering the context of young people's 'leisure careers' as part of their broader transition through youth.

## Conceptualising criminal careers

Prospective, longitudinal studies based on large scale quantitative surveys (see Blumstein and Cohen, 1987; West and Farrington, 1973), located within a positivist approach to the study of criminal careers, aim to identify ways in which certain 'risk factors', such as offender characteristics, social environmental factors and criminal justice interventions, can predict the onset, frequency, persistence and exit from criminal activity over time (Ulmer and Spencer, 1999). The replication of a number of findings across these studies has led to a consensus on the precipitative factors of offending (Muncie, 2009: 27), such as low IQ, family breakdown, low family income, deviant peers, criminal parents, impulsivity, substance use and low parental supervision/control (Farrington, 2003; Glueck and Glueck,

1950; Monahan and Piquero, 2009). While '[f]or some people, risk factor research represents the most important and significant breakthrough in understanding and explaining juvenile delinquency' (Case and Haines, 2009: 1), at the same time, the approach has been heavily critiqued for its limitations. A consistent critique is the ability of such studies to identify 'causes' of offending or desistance and arguments that risk factors are 'merely correlates of relatively vague proxies for criminality' (O'Mahony, 2009: 101) abound. The risk factor approach also fails to fully unravel the complexity of individual pathways and/or to provide insight into the meaning of life events, therefore shedding little light on the ways in which individuals make choices about their lives (France and Homel, 2006). Put differently, prediction studies ignore the effects of *unpredictable* 'critical moments' and life events which have been found by others to 'turn' individual's biographies, either away from or towards offending (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007: 349). Linked to this, prediction studies have been criticized for their individualisation of the phenomenon of offending and for ignoring the wider socio-economic effects and questions about immediate social contexts (France and Homel, 2006: 296). Such an emphasis on individual risk factors, to the exclusion of the biographical and social structural contexts, also has the potential to lead to a policy focus which blames individuals alone for their propensity to offend, making them responsible for their offending and often doing so through punitive means (Barry and McNeill, 2009: 11-12).

An alternative approach to studying criminal careers evolved within the symbolic interactionist paradigm, concerned with presenting a view of the world which emphasizes the flexibility of individual approaches to social situations. An interactionist approach to criminal career research (see Ulmer and Spencer, 1999), which informed the current study, conceptualizes the criminal career as a process that is indeterminate, unpredictable and susceptible to change over the life course and privileges the perspectives of research participants and the meanings and understandings they attach to their lives and experiences. Central to the process are notions of constraints and contingencies whereby individuals face 'structurally constrained' (Ulmer and Spencer, 1999: 110) opportunities at key moments in their lives. In the face of these constraints, individuals make choices that may take them in different offending pathways. Additionally, 'contingencies' – or 'factors on which mobility from one position to another depends', including both 'objective facts of

social structure and changes in the perspectives, motivations, and desires of the individual' (Becker, 1963: 24) – affect the constraints and opportunities available to an individual. Contingencies heighten an individual's consciousness of what has happened in the past and what might happen in the future (Stebbins, 1970: 35) and can encourage a period of reflection which may contribute to variation in the career. Such a perspective on offending careers allows for the same events or contingencies to result in variable outcomes since each person has the potential to react differently. In comparison to risk analysis studies, therefore, the subjectivity of the interactionist approach allows for certain events or contingencies to turn the course of an offending career one way *or another*. The emphasis within interactionist accounts on the structurally constrained nature of contingencies and the situational nature of choices made removes the focus of policy intervention from the micro-level of individuals' lives and alternatively:

'[p]olicies...would be directed at the social structures, institutional structures, communities, peer groups, and families that present the situational constraints and opportunities within which developmental processes take place, biographies unfold, and within which people make choices between conventional and criminal activity' (Ulmer and Spencer, 1999: 117).

Early offending: The process of onset of offending careers

Both qualitative and quantitative research on the patterning of criminal careers identify important characteristics of crime and 'criminals' that have served as the backbone of many criminological and developmental/life-course theories (Monahan and Piquero, 2009: 653). Across these studies, broad consensus on certain patterns has emerged including the age of onset of offending occurring between 8 and 14 years, the prevalence of offending peaking in late teenage years (Monahan and Piquero, 2009) and that most people will desist from crime at some point, few having a career extending beyond the age of thirty (Blumstein and Cohen, 1987). Although criminology has witnessed a growth of interest in the later stages of criminal careers and, in particular, the stages associated with desistance from crime (Gadd and Farrall, 2004: 123), onset of offending remains a key issue in criminal career research (Galloway and Skarðhamer, 2010). It is considered by some a significant predictor of future

offending, with early onset suggesting long-term offending (Farrington, 1992; Piquero et al., 2007), high frequency of criminal activity (Monahan and Piquero, 2009) and more serious offending (LeBlanc and Fréchette, 1989). However, while the age of onset may be a useful marker and provides potentially important knowledge about age-related risk factors for offending, it is nonetheless only one dimension of initiation to offending and tells little about the context or experience of the first offence(s).

Alternatively, initiation to offending is more usefully conceptualized as a process, linked to other transitions and 'careers', that emerges over time. In this way, youth offending can be located in the wider context of young people's biographies, taking account of the number of life course events related to offending careers. The limitations of criminological theory alone in explaining young people's offending are noted (Barry, 2006) and it is argued that sociological theories of delinquency are unable to account for the relationship between age and crime (Greenberg, 1977: 192). Indeed, as MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 172) assert, '[i]t would be difficult to comprehend an individual criminal career without also considering concurrent, wider experiences of transition not normally surveyed in criminology'. Thus, recent research has drawn on the contribution of youth studies, and a youth transitions framework in particular, in order to more fully understand young people's engagement in offending through youth and into adulthood (see Barry, 2006; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005).

Traditionally, research considering the transition to adulthood focused on the school-to-work transition but more recent attention has been given to wider aspects of transition, reflecting recognition that there is more to becoming adult and to understanding youth than movement into the labour market (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). This broader conceptualisation of transition has thus incorporated an examination of housing and family careers, exploring young people's move into independent living and to becoming a parent. MacDonald and Marsh (2005: 67) additionally argue that a more holistic study of transitions should push the boundaries further to include an 'investigation of young people's leisure, social networks and, in particular, their affective engagement with the informal youth cultures of 'the street''. Thus they stress the importance of criminal and drug-using careers

in understanding some youth transitions and the interconnection of these with young people's 'leisure careers'.

'Leisure careers' are defined as 'the dominant modes of free-time, leisure activity and socialising engaged in by a person and how they change or persist over time' (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007: 341). Exploring young people's leisure involves accounting for 'their changing free-time associations, peer networks and leisure activities and their significance in explaining their current life situations (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005: 69). Opportunities to occupy oneself during leisure time differ between young people and according to what is available to them. A young person's socio-economic position at an individual and community level can thus shape the development of their leisure careers. For example, Parker (1974) identified parents in the neighbourhood not in a position, because of structural constraints, to offer a viable alternative to street leisure. Consequently, conditions in the family home encouraged a young person out to the streets. Constrained leisure opportunities led Murray (2009) to consider the concepts of 'outdoor child' and 'indoor child'. Whilst it can be argued that young people are spending increasing amounts of time indoors with the advent of technologies, Murray argues that this is not the case for all young people. The 'outdoor child', who spends much of their leisure time on the streets, has limited or no space at home and faces financial constraints to accessing formal leisure activities (Murray, 2009: 126). Loader (1996) similarly identifies young people for whom the use of public space 'looms large'. At the same time, the 'choice' to occupy public spaces is one which is constrained by young people's exclusion from both autonomous private spaces and cultural resources, resulting in a lack of choice, having nowhere to go, nothing to do and no money to spend (Loader, 1996: 50).

It is the 'arrival' of the young person in the neighbourhood which is significant in the emergence and development of young people's offending careers: '[i]t is to the street-corner worlds in which many...youngsters become immersed that we must look to understand the creation of delinquent action' (Parker, 1974: 60-61). There are a number of elements to this 'street corner world' that are connected to the initiation of offending. At an individual and familial level an inability to finance an increasingly costly life can lead to, for example, theft as a response to the disjunction between the desire to participate in social



activities with peers and the absence of legitimate sources of funds to finance this participation (Greenberg, 1977: 197). At the neighbourhood level, young people in areas suffering from a lack of accessible leisure amenities typically refer to boredom, with 'nothing' to do being a constant complaint (Corrigan, 1979). Consequently, alternative sources of entertainment may be sought or engaged in and, for some, may lead to illegal activity or 'acts of transgression' (Katz, 1988). Crucially, according to Parker (1974), the context of the 'street corners' introduce young people to the cultural traditions and skills to be learnt through interaction with social networks. In other words, street life 'both transmits delinquent traditions and provides an atmosphere for innovation and creation' (1974: 61). Thus, whilst focussing on one particular dimension of the onset of offending, the development of young people's leisure careers, in interaction with their broader transition through youth and their lived experience of the local neighbourhood, offers a contextualized understanding of the emergence of young people's offending.

### The study

The research aimed to provide a detailed analysis of the offending careers of a group of young people in contact with criminal justice agencies in Dublin, Ireland. The study was initiated against a backdrop of changing discourse around youth justice in Ireland. The reform of the youth justice system in Ireland had been underway since the Children Act was passed in 2001 (Kilkelly, 2008) and its legislative provisions introduced a number of key areas of change, perhaps most notably in a shift towards a focus on the prevention of offending and the diversion of young people from the criminal justice system. More recently, the *National Youth Justice Strategy 2008-2010* (Irish Youth Justice Service, 2008) set out a holistic response to youth offending on the one hand – including universal aims to promote child well-being – yet the individualisation of the social problem continued with a commitment in the same document to deliver programmes and services targeted at 'at risk' individuals and families, considered readily identifiable through a process of risk assessment, and the requirement for young people to be held accountable for offending and to develop 'socially responsible behaviour'. Although some developments in Irish youth justice policy have been welcomed, these have occurred against a backdrop of a dearth of

empirical research on youth crime and justice in Ireland (Seymour, 2006). This study thus aimed to go some way in addressing these gaps in knowledge.

The research aimed to identify and understand the processes related to young people's offending transitions, including their initiation to offending and the subsequent course of their offending careers. Broad criteria were used to identify young people who were eligible to participate in the study in order to facilitate a sample that was diverse in age, gender and offending history. Thirty-seven young people, twenty-six males and eleven females, participated in the study between December 2007 and August 2009, aged between fourteen and twenty-three, and the vast majority (thirty-two) reported as 'White' and 'Irish'. They were recruited from probation projects, individual probation officers and a Garda Youth Diversion Project (community based, multi-agency crime prevention initiative). Participants had lived most of their lives in Ireland's most prosperous times, growing up in a time of unprecedented economic growth, with 1987 marking the start of a 'sustained and well-balanced economic boom' (Sweeney, 1998: 1) in Ireland before entering recession in mid-2008. After twenty years of economic growth, Fahey et al. (2007: 10) assessed that 'subjective well-being and national morale are among the highest in Europe, living standards have risen and have done so more or less for everyone'. However, the rising economic tide did not lift all boats. Ireland always had a high degree of income inequality which persisted during the boom years and the income gap between those at the top and those at the bottom of the income distribution widened (Nolan and Maître, 2007: 41). Furthermore, many local communities within Dublin city did not benefit from the economic boom and continued to experience high levels of deprivation (Haase and Pratschke, 2008). Nearly all the young people in this study were residing in one of the RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development) areas – 'the most disadvantaged communities in Irish cities and towns' (Pobal, 2013) – and in areas where levels of disadvantage had increased between the years 1991 and 2006 or had remained 'very' or 'extremely' disadvantaged (Source: [www.pobal.ie](http://www.pobal.ie)).

An interactionist conceptualisation of criminal careers necessitated a method which would prioritize young people's interpretations of events and the sense that they make of their social world. Thus, the biographical mode of interviewing was employed, focussing on the

understandings and significance that people give to their lives (Chaitin, 2004: 4) with human conduct studied and understood from the perspective of the persons involved (Denzin, 1970:22). The life history method facilitated an understanding of offending as it interacted with multiple dimensions of young people's lives, portraying a somewhat more complex picture than a list of 'risk factors'. At the outset of the interview young people were requested to tell their life story and subsequently guided through this story, prompted to share memories and offer reflections, interpretations, and insights (Haglund, 2004: 1309). While not a prescriptive adherence to the steps set out by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the analysis was influenced by a grounded theory approach, adopting some of its defining components: simultaneous data collection and analysis; identifying analytic codes and categories from the data; theoretical sampling – where later interviews aimed to extend, refine and check categories which had emerged from the initial coding of data (Charmaz, 2003: 325); and memo-writing. In addition to a cross-sectional, thematic approach to analysing participants' narratives, the life history approach necessitated the production of methodologically and theoretically grounded individual accounts (Goodey, 2000:478). Thus a 'case summary' for each individual was prepared including insights and observations on a young person's offending career and significant turning point moments, that is, 'interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people's lives' (Denzin, 1989: 70).

### Biographical backdrop

There is a danger with studies on youth offending that young people will be presented solely in terms of their offending histories, thus neglecting their complex biographies. A life history approach permits an unravelling of biography, thereby providing a critical contextual backdrop to offending careers. Thus, instead of portraying young people in contact with criminal justice agencies primarily as 'offenders', the biographical data revealed multiple experiences that surrounded offending behaviour, thereby locating rather than isolating offending from broader aspects of life experience.

Young people typically highlighted the disrupted nature of their lives in their opening life story. Whilst not a homogenous group in terms of their experiences or responses to life

events, nevertheless, accounts of particular difficulties and challenges featured noticeably in their narratives. Family and home life were often discussed with reference to negative and/or traumatic events – parental separation, illness/death and domestic violence – while family poverty was set in the wider context of living in poor neighbourhoods. Attempts to move from the family context, often in search of independence, were also characterized by disruption as respondents struggled with housing instability and continued to face difficulties previously characteristic of their earlier home life.

Negative experiences of school and/or training were most typically followed by ‘fractured’ or ‘extended’ transitions (Coles, 1995) into the labour market as young people, at best, took up sporadic, casual, part-time employment or entered training schemes. Those still attending school cited suspension, expulsion and discouragement which also formed much of the educational narratives offered by the sample’s early school leavers. Friends were referred to as an important source of support and reference point in the gradual move away from the family context. Outdoor spaces, occupied by friends and acquaintances, began to take on great significance in the daily routines of participants. Within the peer group, young people reported exposure to and engagement with new activities which began to characterize their leisure time.

These particular experiences in participants’ lives are not presented as ‘predictive’ of future offending given that they are shared by non-offending young people (Webster et al., 2005). Nonetheless, young people faced particular constraints in light of which they made choices about their lives. Indeed, many life events or ‘critical moments’ (Thomson et al., 2002) were identified as implicated in the process of beginning to offend. While not causal factors, such moments did become a significant marker of change for some, taking the individual along a different path. It is against these ‘strained’ contexts that criminal careers were understood as young people respond to and manage these experiences with varied offending histories. The following analysis draws on those biographical experiences that were bound up in young people’s accounts of initiating offending and focuses specifically on one dimension, their strained leisure careers.

Initiation of offending: Age of onset and first offence(s)

Young people were asked to identify the 'point' or age at which they started to offend. For the total sample, the onset of offending ranged from 8 to 18 years, with an average age of 12.7 years. The types of first offences reported extended to nine in total, most reporting having committed only one offence at this point. A smaller number reported multiple offences, yet were unable to identify a specific sequence since they had occurred simultaneously or in close succession.

Young women predominantly initiated their offending careers with shoplifting, others reporting selling stolen goods and drug dealing among their first offences. Accounts of shoplifting also dominated young men's accounts of their first offence(s) although joyriding and other types of theft featured strongly. Criminal damage, selling goods without a trading licence, arson, begging (illegal in Ireland until 2007) and selling stolen goods completed the first offences of young men, with all but the latter being reported by males exclusively. This does not deviate to any great extent from the broader picture of onset of youth offending in the literature (Barry, 2006; Block et al., 2010). However, to understand how young people's offending emerged requires these data to be considered in conjunction with the situational context of young people's biographical accounts.

### Context of social environment

The importance of locality was strongly implicated in participants' narratives as they described strong bonding networks located in the immediate neighbourhood. They described 'close knit' communities within which they knew 'everyone' and were 'known' and thus the neighbourhood held particular relevance: 'All me family and friends and everyone I know is here and everything I do is in [neighbourhood] really' (Patrice, 16). Such networks could provide important support in young people's lives who highlighted the benefits of close relationships with friends and family, as well as the notion of familiarity, for wanting to remain within their communities. However, narratives also depicted the lack of mobility in young people's lives with the majority unable to envisage a future outside of their community, reflective of their inability to 'get out'. Their narratives thus alternated between wanting something different in the future and not wanting to move 'too far from

the castle' (Eamon, 21). This lack of mobility was perceived by some to have further implications as, residing in a particular neighbourhood, young people's options were depicted as bounded rather than characterized by choice.

They know what kids are growing up into...They're not going to have jobs and big houses...If you're raised here you're staying here... I'd never move out of [neighbourhood], I wouldn't be able to...Do I want to stay here? I'd love to get out of it but I can't. (Ronan, 17)

In this way, young people's narratives reflected strong 'bonding' social capital – a sense of 'connectedness' which enabled them to 'get by' – but relatively little 'bridging' social capital (Putnam, 2000) – which may aid a young person to 'get ahead' (Webster et al., 2006) through access to wider social resources outside the local community. Growing up in a particular neighbourhood was raised by some as impacting on the likelihood of their becoming involved in criminal activity: 'you're bollixed if you grow up here, put it that way' (Seán, 16). A sense of futility permeated the accounts of young people who conveyed a strong awareness of the constraints associated with living in certain communities or neighbourhoods – for them, offending behaviour was considered inevitable. Some participants clearly recognized that their situations differed quite dramatically from young people growing up in other parts of the city, especially compared to those who grew up in nearby 'posher' areas. It was this sense of relative deprivation (Lea and Young, 2003), linked to the area where one is born and 'brought up', which was depicted by Eamon as a determining factor in his criminal justice involvement.

If I was brought up around [nearby village] it would be a different story. I don't think I'd be sitting in this room [probation project] if I was brought up [there]. (Eamon, 21)

At the same time, living intensely localized lives and growing up in high crime areas meant that young people's main relationship with crime was as witnesses. Alana, for example, described leisure spaces in her neighbourhood as potentially unsafe because of the presence or threat of crime.

All the little kids do is stand around at the corners all day... And then all the robbed cars come along and all the little kids have to go in. Junkies, that's all the kids ever see around here. (Alana, 17)

Alana's representation presents public spaces as places where young people meet and socialize and, simultaneously, as potentially dangerous places where they come into contact with crime, both as victims and witnesses (Anderson, 1999: 65). Young people's accounts of their neighbourhoods repeatedly incorporated images of criminal activity including burning stolen vehicles and vandalism.

You have to walk the long way everywhere, you can't take the shortcuts through the fields... there used to be robbed cars in them every night. (Dearbhla, 15)

Accounts also made reference to the sound of joyriding, which was perceptible from inside their homes, and some reported the impact of murders in their locality. The cumulative effect of these experiences can be that young people come to accept crime as an inevitable, everyday part of their existence and, as a result, tolerate its presence and downplay its importance, contributing to a feeling that 'crime is everywhere' (Anderson, 1999: 62). It was in this highly localized context of the neighbourhood that young people's leisure careers evolved.

#### Leisure careers and leisure poverty

Young people identified transitions in their leisure careers marked by spending less free time in their homes or the street on which they lived, accessing instead larger public spaces in the community. Thus, public spaces took on greater significance in their daily lives and peer activities. Arguably normative behaviour for those in their teenage years, some, however, like the 'outdoor child' (Murray, 2009), depicted a sense of being driven on to the streets given the spatial constraints encountered in their homes.

We had nowhere else to go so we were hanging around the roads, housing estates... If someone had a free house, all of us couldn't go into the free house cos we wouldn't fit in. (Kate, 22)

Of course, the street has positive attractions given the freedom and autonomy experienced by young people in these settings and it is 'the place where something might just happen' (Corrigan, 2006: 85). Nonetheless, the leisure activities of young people in this study suffered from the confines of local possibilities. Given the particular nature of the public spaces accessible to young people in these areas of deprivation, the lack of amenities and the consequent engagement in unrestrained activities, the neighbourhood was the setting for the onset of young people's offending careers. Eamon, for example, identified the lack of recreational facilities for young people in his community and described a sense of exclusion in this regard.

We had nothing to do and all day to do it. We just had fields, we never had a community centre until the new estate got built. We had fuck all, they never done anything for us, society kicked us in the bollix. (Eamon, 21)

Caoimhe, growing up in a community adjacent to Eamon's, identified no significant change in more recent years (despite years of economic prosperity) and claimed that young people continued to have few options in terms of where and how to spend their time.

There's nothing around here for us. That was our excuse, saying 'What else do you want us to do? You're wondering why we're doing this but you aren't doing anything about it'. All we have is fields and they're waiting for us to go out drinking and do stuff and wreck things. (Caoimhe, 16)

Almost without exception, the complaint of having 'nothing to do' and 'nowhere to go' echoed throughout the narratives and was a reality used to explain behaviours such as substance use and offending. Initial use of public spaces for leisure usually coincided with processes or events, particularly truancy or school exclusion, resulting in much more free time at young people's disposal. While the 'choice' to access public spaces for leisure was,



to an extent, structurally bounded by the lack of alternative opportunities, so too were the 'choices' of activities in which they were engaged. Additionally constrained by their personal financial resources, their narratives almost always suggested levels of 'leisure poverty' (Banks et al., 1992; 59, cited in MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007: 345). For some, attempts to circumvent these challenges of filling time and accessing finances resulted in the emergence of offending as they engaged in criminal activity either as a source of entertainment or as a way to fund leisure activities – thus resonating with classic strain theory (Merton, 1938) with the 'goal' of enjoyment or entertainment perceived as unattainable through legitimate means.

### Crime and leisure

Whilst this section depicts the onset of offending as emerging alongside strained leisure careers, it is important to emphasize that, similar to previous studies identifying the majority of time in young offender's life as crime-free (Little, 1990; MacDonald and Shildrick, 2007), during the early stages of their offending careers crime formed only a minor part of participants' lives and leisure time, both in terms of the importance they attributed to crime and the amount of time spent involved in offending. Indeed, young people reported that most of their time could be accounted for by participation in legitimate activities as they described rewarding and lawful ways to be entertained.

We try and think of new things every week. Say one week we'd all go go-karting... Something to keep us amused and look forward to at the weekend. I think this week it's paintballing... The Fridays and Saturdays do be grand but the Sundays you do be too bored and you have to go out and do something. (Jack, 19)

Periods of 'boredom' or 'nothing to do' were therefore often interspersed with engagement in legitimate activities. Nevertheless, participants described large sections of free time in which there was 'nothing to do'. It was in these periods of 'doing nothing' (Corrigan, 1979) that they attempted to account for their free time and to create excitement. In this context, much of young people's early offending emerged. That 'crime can be fun' (Anderson *et al.*,

1994: 122) or, alternatively, that crime becomes a way to fund leisure, was therefore relevant to understanding the onset of offending.

Accounts of high levels of boredom were attached to explanations of engagement in criminal activity 'just for the fun' (Ronan, 16) and 'getting in trouble' was directly linked by some with unoccupied time. Joyriding, theft and criminal damage were presented as activities that created an 'adrenalin buzz' or 'thrill', the attraction of the 'emotionality' of the criminal act (Hayward, 2002) most evident among male participants. Similar to the 'weird ideas' of young men in Corrigan's (1979) study, Seán, depicted how opportunities to 'do something' would present themselves such as in the form of an abandoned car.

Just for the sake of it, nothing to do...and when something good like that [arson opportunity] comes round you can't miss the opportunity of doing something fucked, you have to do something otherwise you're just going to regret it... thinking, 'I should have lit that poxy car on fire'. (Seán, 16)

Participants' accounts thus suggested that the onset of criminal activity occurred in the context of leisure time but some also dismissed the notion of choice in this regard, suggesting instead that they were 'driven to doing things' in reference to criminal activity (Eamon, 21). Such offending was not necessarily planned activity and, instead, arose in the context of 'hanging around' and coming across opportunities. For example, Mark's first offence at the age of 15 occurred incidentally when in the company of a friend. While they were 'hanging around' he stumbled on an unattended pushbike and simply seized the opportunity to steal it: 'It was a nice push bike...just wanted it...I went over and grabbed it and was buzzing around with them' (Mark, 19). He later explained that although he felt nervous at the time, with 'butterflies in [his] stomach', he simultaneously felt 'happy' having derived positive emotions and experienced an 'adrenalin rush'.

The potential benefits of offending, however, were not perceived in isolation. Rather, it was in interaction with social networks at a neighbourhood level – typically older peers – that young people began to appreciate crucial elements of offending and in this sense echoed some key assertions of differential association theory (Sutherland and Cressey, 1974). For

example, Eamon explained a desire to start joyriding having witnessed others in his estate engaged in similar behaviour.

It was at a young age...you'd see all the joyriding...You got a buzz off seeing everyone doing that...You see a robbed car you want to rob a car. I done what the generation ahead of me done...It's like monkey see, monkey do (mimicry).  
(Eamon, 21)

While the enjoyment of the offending act was more evident in young men's accounts of early offending, both males and females had developed an awareness of the potential of attaining money or goods – and the positive implications for leisure – through their observations of older peers. The illegal acquisition of money or goods was motivated, for some, by a desire to enhance leisure time or to fund a lifestyle which almost always incorporated alcohol and drug use. For example, Louise described wanting 'a load of money for drink' at the time she initiated offending by shoplifting and selling stolen goods. Adam likewise explained that he and his friends wanted to make money to buy cannabis: 'I started robbing things to make money. Building sites and things. Tools and stuff...We'd only sell them on for hash, small little things' (Adam, 17). While Adam was motivated by the prospect of making money, importantly, he and his friends had come to appreciate the potential benefits of these activities by witnessing older acquaintances in the community who were engaged in similar types of offending.

All of the older lads would have been doing it... and making money off it and we'd think 'they're making money, let's do that'. (Adam, 17)

Dearbhla located the onset of her offending as coinciding with her immersion in a new peer group and also at the time she began to drink alcohol. Peer group activity and the behaviour she observed in this context encouraged her to steal and sell stolen goods.

We started hanging around with different groups, young fellas. They were all doing it (theft and selling stolen goods) so we just done it...'cos they were getting

away with it and we were still paying for everything and they had their money for drink and we wouldn't. (Dearbhla, 15)

While Dearbhla's assessment of peer activity and the perception that others were 'getting away with it' without detection was an important dimension of her account, for others, co-offenders provided the expertise or tutelage required to carry out the offence(s) successfully. For example, Ronan explained that he was introduced to joyriding by other young men in the locality who taught him how to 'hotwire' a car – 'Someone that knew how to do it, someone would be there with you and you'd just fiddle around with (the ignition)' (Ronan, 17) – providing a crucial element to his success at the task.

#### 'Critical moments'

While respondents' narratives of the onset of offending depicted its processual nature, nevertheless, 'turning points' (Laub and Sampson, 1993) or 'critical moments' (Thomson et al., 2002) were identified in young people's stories of transition and offending. As young people respond in diverse ways to significant life events or experiences, these 'moments' are not presented as 'causal' in the onset of offending but are considered as potential markers of change which may take an individual along a different path.

Absence from school, either through truancy, exclusion or early school leaving, meant that young people had increasing amounts of spare time which often compounded feelings of boredom. For some, offending became a way to account for this time. However, the significance of school absence was often amplified with the occurrence of other processes. For example, while Conor (aged 23) noted – 'I done me secondary school and left after (public examination). Just got into trouble ever since' – this development also coincided with the removal of his source of leisure (horses) from his home neighbourhood. In a similar vein, the impact of school leaving for Peter was compounded by the fact that it was not replaced by another activity: 'I was doing nothing when I left school' (Peter, 18). Carly, too, identified multiple events that coincided with her early school leaving, including her father's death and the emergence of new peer relationships. She identified that she subsequently 'went a bit wild' and started to offend.

I just left school, hanging around the wrong crowd, drinking, getting arrested and downhill from that...I was never in trouble before with the police... it was just when I hit like secondary school and then me dad died and just everything fucked me up. (Carly, 21)

While there appeared to be a cumulative effect in Carly's story, she put forward her father's death as the 'critical moment': 'If me da hadn't died I wouldn't have bleedin' went astray the way I did'. Other young people faced difficulties associated with parental marital breakdown or a parent's substance use. Their responses to these events involved criminal activity among other developments such as the initiation or increase in substance use. Such accounts perhaps suggest the relevance of Agnew's (1992) revised strain theory, since young people often sought to escape the adverse conditions and experiences at home. For example, Joe enjoyed the 'adrenalin buzz' he experienced when joyriding with his friends, this activity providing a distraction from home-based difficulties which included his mother's heavy drinking and inability to care for her children.

Marital breakdown was presented in participants' accounts as an event to which they reacted with negative consequences. As a result of parental separation, Dara identified less supervision at home, feeling that, at the age of 14, his parents viewed him as an 'adult', and he began to spend increasing amounts of time socialising in the neighbourhood at which point he 'went bad'. Similarly, Cathal located his first experience of joyriding during the period his parents separated: 'Me ma and da separated then as well and then I started getting robbed cars and doing drugs and drinking and staying out all night and getting in trouble with the Garda' (Cathal, 21). He continued to explain that this problematic behaviour emanated from the anger felt due to the minimal post-separation contact with his father.

I didn't like it. Me da...was an alcoholic and he used to tell me he'd be up to me at the weekends and I'd be sitting there waiting on him and he wouldn't come up. (Cathal, 21)

Finally, young people who moved to new neighbourhoods with their families often reported immersion in new peer groups as well as exposure to new behaviours. In the following account, Jack explained that he ‘started getting in trouble’ during the period subsequent to moving to a different area of the city.

I just got into a bit of trouble when I moved up to the other place. I started mixing with the wrong crowd, started getting in trouble, going around doing stupid things, going around in cars. (Jack, 19)

While such events – parental separation, death, leaving school, moving neighbourhood – emerged as critical moments in the lives of young people and were implicated in their offending careers, these moments interacted with other developments or experiences. For example, in Sean’s account, the connection between the removal of a father figure and the onset of his offending was mediated by the availability of an alternative (negative) role model.

And then when you don’t have an auld fella and you need someone to look up to, who are you going to look up at? You’re going to look up to the lads standing at the corners so that’s it, you’re bollixed then. (Seán, 16)

In this way, as Thomson et al. (2002) suggest, critical moments must be understood as related to their social and geographical location. Clearly, many young people experience the events detailed above yet only in a minority of cases does this lead to the initiation of offending careers. The ability to respond to these circumstances is subsequently shaped by available social and cultural resources (Thomson et al., 2002); the response of the young person, rather than the event itself, constitutes if a moment is ‘critical’.

## Discussion

Participants’ experiences of onset broadly reflected those documented in the literature, with most commencing offending in early teenage years and engaging in acquisitive and expressive crime as typical first offences. These ‘facts’ of onset were set against young

people's biographical backdrops, characterized by disruption and disadvantage and punctuated by 'critical moments' which they often located at the same time as their initiation to offending. Concurrently, young people depicted a period of transition where they moved along those lines traditionally associated with approaching adulthood – school-to-work, housing and domestic – and those more recently incorporated into such an understanding – drug, criminal and leisure. Leisure careers were central to understanding the earliest phases of young people's offending careers. They evolved in interaction with other processes as young people bought into 'age-related scripts' (Giordano et al., 2003), aspiring to the culturally expected goals of 'exciting' leisure pursuits and quality time spent with friends in their teenage years. This coincided, for most, with the replacement of the family home as a site of leisure, as young people's lives were largely played out in the neighbourhood milieu. The significance of leisure, or at least of accounting for time, was most heightened for those who had left school or who sought to escape adverse home circumstances. Growing up in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the city, where they also experienced strong exposure to crime, their experiences of 'leisure poverty' were not only linked to structural disadvantage at an individual and familial level, but were also connected to the limited leisure amenities available in the neighbourhood, leading to prolonged periods of 'nothing to do' spent unsupervised in public spaces. Whilst an almost homogenous group in terms of class and ethnicity, the analysis does point towards certain nuances illustrative of gendered experiences at the early stages of offending. Most notably, while the interaction of community, leisure and peers holds relevance for both males and females, young women were less likely to perceive enjoyment in the act of offending *per se* and, rather, viewed criminal activity as a way to fund an enhanced leisure experience.

The focus in this article on young people's leisure careers and the depiction of crime emerging as a 'solution' to the strain experienced in this regard, indicates common ground with previous research highlighting emotional motives and benefits of early offending particularly in the context of seeking fun, excitement and relieving boredom (Barry, 2006; McAra, 2005). Respondents' accounts suggesting that crime was primarily a 'creative leisure pursuit' (Stephen and Squires, 2003: 150) resonated with cultural criminological explanations which emphasize the foreground experiences of offending and depict crime as fun, the act of transgression itself having attractions (Hayward and Young, 2004). This focus

on foreground factors, however, must be balanced by an appreciation of the background structural factors and particularly with recognition of the restrictions to participants' leisure careers and the ways in which opportunities for leisure were structurally bounded through the lack of access to legitimate funds at an individual level and suitable amenities at a community level. Furthermore, the interaction of participants' social networks with their ability to perceive and enjoy the benefits of offending, as well as to carry out offences successfully, suggest that these relationships help foster criminal activity where illegitimate opportunities exist and are condoned in a social milieu where little else is available. Thus, 'the way that youth cultures emerge as localized, class-based 'solutions' to material inequalities' (MacDonald et al., 2001: para.4.17), resonating with early theories of subculture, point towards implications of this explanation at a neighbourhood level. Most specifically, the interaction of 'street corner' leisure with the early stages of young people's offending suggests prevention strategies which include the provision of leisure amenities which are accessible both financially and by virtue of location. Such leisure services must allow for meaningful interaction between young people, fostering positive relations through 'pro-social' activities. Of course, street corner leisure is not without its attractions, given its unsupervised nature and potential for 'excitement', thus calling for creative thinking on leisure amenities for young people to rival and replace the pleasure derived in the early stages of offending.

While not all young people living in disadvantaged areas offend and not all 'offenders' come from a disadvantaged background, the biographies of participants in this study, nonetheless, suggested their offending, and lives more generally, was embedded within social and economic environments characterized by high deprivation. Thus, since the process of offending among young people originated and was located in experiences of social disadvantage, addressing social inequalities and relative deprivation is a necessary prerequisite to effectively tackle the origins of youth offending in poor communities. This suggests that attempts to prevent or respond to youth crime need to shift in focus from strategies that centre on criminal justice to those that strive to attain social justice, defined as 'largely redistributive justice, concerned with limiting, reducing or redressing the inevitable disparities that arise in modern societies' and which provides 'fair and decent treatment for all citizens' (O'Mahony, 2010). A focus on social justice, therefore, would 'be



most concerned to create social structures that limit inequalities and genuinely open up opportunities for personal advancement to all citizens' (O'Mahony, 2010). Thus, the lens through which we focus on youth offending must be widened from the individual to incorporate the broader socio-economic and cultural contexts in a holistic response to youth crime. Moving towards a model of social justice will serve to tackle the issues that a focus on criminal justice, through neglecting the needs of economically deprived communities, thus far, has served to perpetuate.

This study aimed to provide an understanding of young people's offending careers and this article has provided a contextualised analysis of the process of onset of offending. While the focus in recent criminal career research has been on the latter stages of the criminal career and processes of desistance in particular, close examination of the earliest stages of offending is of equal importance, particularly when we consider the potential for such research to provide policy-relevant information on ways to prevent youth crime. The neighbourhood milieu emerged as crucial to understanding the development of young people's leisure careers and initiation of offending. This points towards the potential benefit of conducting research in alternative locations such as smaller cities, towns and rural areas, to examine whether this theoretical stance can be applied more generally to other types of locale. While the framework of strained leisure careers was able to account for the early offending by both male and female respondents, the gendered experiences in terms of the benefits derived from offending would support a call for more dedicated research focussed on young female offending. Finally, offending careers were set within the wider context of making the transition to adulthood. As Barry (2006: 7) has argued, the concurrent examination of youth transitions allows for the conceptualisation of offending in youth as a temporary or 'transient occupation' and incorporates an understanding of crime as dependant on external structural factors and individual self-determination. Setting offending experiences within the broader life histories of young people highlights the relevance of the transitions they make across multiple areas of life. Consequently, literature relating to the sociology of youth and, more specifically, youth transitions, help to frame an understanding of the experiences of young people who become involved in criminal activity. This approach would be further strengthened by a longitudinal design which would follow participants' 'stories' and the ways in which young people's lives will change, perhaps in

significant ways, as they approach and enter adulthood, both in relation to their offending careers and in wider, but connected, contexts.

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