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Desistance as an Intergenerational Process

Christopher Wildeman^{1,2} and Robert J. Sampson³

¹Department of Sociology and Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, USA; email: christopher.wildeman@duke.edu

²ROCKWOOL Foundation Research Unit, Copenhagen, Denmark

³Department of Sociology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

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Keywords

intergenerational transmission, family criminality, family troubles, multigenerational processes, family complexity, desistance

Abstract

Nearly 35 years ago, Sampson and Laub popularized the concept of desistance from crime and isolated core factors that promote and inhibit this process. In this article, we introduce the concept of intergenerational desistance and provide guidance on measuring and explaining this process, encouraging researchers to think of the life-course of crime in terms of both individuals and generations. We first review research on the intergenerational transmission of family criminality and criminal justice contact, relying also on research outside of criminology to highlight how using broader conceptions of the family, including social parents, entire generations, and three (or more) generations could enliven this area. Bridging these literatures allows us to then introduce the concept of intergenerational desistance and elaborate on the concept of intergenerational escalation and demonstrate how they can be measured using data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN). We close by developing a research agenda for considering intergenerational desistance and escalation in ways that enhance our understanding of how the life-course of crime, criminal justice contact, and other troubles in life (e.g., with alcohol, drugs, and mental health) progress through families.

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He [Willie Bosket] knew that it was too late to save himself, but he watched with alarm as his favorite niece, a bright, ebullient nine-year-old, started to get into trouble at school. He wanted to do something to stop her. . . from following his path. – Fox Butterfield (1995, p. xiii)

Tim [Bogle] was acutely conscious that this was the moment to change at least one Bogle's destiny. "When Ashley was born, my dad and I were sitting in the hospital, and I told him, 'This is where the chain breaks. Ashley will be raised differently'". . . – Fox Butterfield (2018, p. 206)

INTRODUCTION

Nearly 35 years ago, Sampson & Laub (1990) foregrounded the concept of desistance from crime in a series of articles leveraging data from a classic study of delinquents in Boston (Glueck & Glueck 1950, 1968).¹ According to Sampson & Laub (1990, 1992; see also Laub & Sampson 2001, 2003), desistance from crime is an often-gradual movement away from criminal activity that could—but might not—lead to complete cessation from crime. Empirical analyses, moreover, indicated that most individuals who engaged in crime in adolescence followed one of two patterns: heavy offending in the transition to adulthood followed by a rapid drop-off in offending and heavy offending in the transition to adulthood with a prolonged period of crime that was disrupted later in life. Of course, some men violated these patterns—some continued offending well into later life and some dipped in and out of crime. But by and large, men who were criminally active as youth followed one of these patterns. Parallel work in psychology confirmed these patterns, although some work has proposed a very small group of life-course persistent offenders who never fully desist (Moffitt 1993).

Relying on insights from life-course theorists (Elder 1974, 1985), Sampson & Laub (1990) argued that this gradual move away from criminal activity was driven by a series of turning points that came about because of the informal social controls prompted by core prosocial transitions such as joining the military, settling into a steady job, and marrying and starting a family (Laub & Sampson 2001, 2003).² They were also quick to note that the desistance process need not be conceptualized as starting the moment criminal activity began to wane. Instead, the desistance process could be conceived of as starting before there was any discernible shift in criminal activity but as the structures that would buttress these eventual declines in crime started to fall into place. As desistance became a core feature of criminological knowledge and debate, Sampson and Laub tightened their theoretical framework by specifying how the quality of attachments over time was also central to desistance (e.g., Laub et al. 1998). At the same time, a large body of research began debating how other factors—ranging from weakening ties with antisocial peers after marriage (e.g., Warr 1998) and gaining even entry-level work among individuals who had been chronically unemployed (e.g., Uggen 2000) to processes of cognitive transformation (e.g., Giordano et al. 2002, Maruna 2001)—could also facilitate desistance.

As such, previous research on desistance from crime is fundamentally intragenerational in nature, considering how once-criminally active individuals start to diminish their ties to a life of crime as they build stakes in conformity (Toby 1957). Although it is reasonable to consider desistance in this framework, in this article we foreground desistance not just as an intragenerational

¹The term was used by Wolfgang and colleagues as early as the 1970s (Wolfgang 1973, Wolfgang et al. 1972).

²For a review of turning points in life-course criminology, see Nguyen & Loughran (2018). The prosocial nature of turning points can vary by social and historical context, however. Serving during the Vietnam War had different consequences than serving during WWII, for example, and the nature of both work and marriage has changed markedly in the past half-century (Bersani et al. 2009, Laub & Sampson 2020). We return to this point when discussing social change.

process but also an intergenerational one.³ In so doing, we develop the concepts of intergenerational desistance and intergenerational escalation. We define intergenerational desistance as the often gradual and uneven process through which entire generations of families move away from criminal activity and decrease criminal justice contact while simultaneously engaging with society more broadly in increasingly prosocial ways. We define intergenerational escalation as the often gradual and uneven process through which entire generations of families move toward criminal activity and increase criminal justice contact while simultaneously engaging with society more broadly in increasingly antisocial ways.

Our core arguments are that the ways in which criminally active families move, over the course of one or several generations, away from criminal activity are important for understanding social change in the same way as cross-cohort differences in family structure, education, and residential attainment. Understanding these processes necessitates using a broader conception of family—one that includes social parents, entire generations of family members, and broader familial networks—and considering both families that were highly criminally active initially and those whose starting levels of criminal activity were moderate or nonexistent. In advancing this conceptualization, our review provides theoretical insights into the family's role in producing both criminal activity and a move away from criminal activity in ways that will enhance criminological research on intergenerational transmission processes. Most importantly, the theoretical insight that families can desist from crime offers key benefits over existing paradigms for understanding the intergenerational transmission of crime and deviant behavior that focus on the resilience or agency of individuals (e.g., Loughran et al. 2018, Paternoster et al. 2015).

In building our argument, we first review research on intergenerational transmission, with emphasis on the intergenerational transmission of criminality and criminal justice contact and on broader intergenerational processes. In this section, we argue that criminological research would do well to consider change in criminal activity and criminal justice contact across generations and engage more deeply with how family members other than biological parents, especially social parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, siblings, and broader familial networks, play a role in intergenerational processes of continuity and change in criminal activity and criminal justice contact. We then introduce the concept of intergenerational desistance, further elaborate on the concept of intergenerational escalation, and show how to operationalize both processes using data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN). The results from these analyses highlight the ubiquity of intergenerational desistance and escalation in the PHDCN as well as how a more expansive definition of family enhances our understanding of these processes. We close by providing preliminary suggestions for a research agenda considering both intergenerational desistance and escalation. Here, we discuss how to measure intergenerational desistance and escalation, how familial continuity and change in other domains and broader historical shifts, including mass incarceration and the great crime decline, shape these processes, and how race/ethnicity, class, and gender also do so.

PRIOR RESEARCH ON INTERGENERATIONAL PROCESSES

Reflecting on their lives from their prison cells in Oregon, Bobby and Tracey Bogle did not seem surprised in the least by where they—and several of their siblings and cousins—had ended up, nor did they have any doubts about how they had ended up there (Butterfield 2018, pp. 3–6). As Tracey aptly put it, “If I’d been raised in a family of doctors, I’d probably be a doctor. But I was

³For a recent review of intragenerational desistance, see Bersani & Doherty (2018).

raised into a family of outlaws who hated the law” (Butterfield 2018, p. 6). Born into a family in which both crime and criminal justice contact were endemic, Bobby and Tracey were also exposed to what Neil & Sampson (2021, pp. 1146–48) called the “family troubles” that often accompany incarceration. For example, Bobby and Tracey’s parents struggled with troubles like untreated and, hence, poorly controlled mental illness, addiction disorders, and often crushing poverty. As a result, Bobby and Tracey Bogle’s family was more often than not the scene of violence, a place of abject chaos, and, maybe most importantly, a training ground for crime and later criminal justice contact. The childhoods that their cousins endured appeared, at least to Bobby and Tracey, much the same, as did the levels of criminal activity and criminal justice contact that their cousins later experienced.

The story of the Bogles, which is borne not from social scientific inquiry but from a rigorous journalistic inquiry into the intergenerational transmission of crime (Butterfield 2018), nonetheless resonates deeply with some of the founding strains of criminological research, both theoretical and empirical. Classic criminological work was fascinated by both the concentration of crime within families and the factors that led to the intergenerational transmission of criminal activity (e.g., Dugdale 1877, Ferguson 1952, Glueck & Glueck 1950, Goddard 1912, Shaw et al. 1938, West & Farrington 1973). This classic research aligns in core ways with what we see in the Bogle’s family: high levels of crime and criminal justice contact throughout multiple generations, including among family members who avoid long prison stays, and criminality even into later life, with deep dysfunction there every step of the way to prompt criminal activity in the next generation. And, moreover, it largely aligns with what we see in recent research considering the intergenerational transmission of criminal activity (e.g., Besemer et al. 2017) and criminal justice contact (e.g., Wildeman 2020) in more contemporary cohorts of children in various contexts.

Although there are exceptions to this rule (which we review in short order), most research in this literature focuses on the intergenerational transmission of criminal activity and criminal justice contact (*a*) between biological parents and their children in a two-generational model⁴ and (*b*) between high crime–high crime or high criminal justice contact–high criminal justice contact. In the following sections, we review this literature and suggest some extensions of it, with emphasis on the need to broaden and deepen our understanding of the family and focus not just on families that start criminally active and stay that way in subsequent generations.

Expanding the Definition of the Family

Most directly, we argue that, using the small amount of research that deviates from this paradigm, a broader conception of family—one that includes social parents⁵ in addition to biological ones, entire generations (including aunts, uncles, and cousins) in addition to parents and children, and more than two generations—is both intellectually and pragmatically necessary given the ways in which broader family units may shape intergenerational processes and the increasing diversity of contemporary family life (e.g., Bengtson 2001, McLanahan 2004, Seltzer 2019, Smock & Schwartz 2020). More directly put, our argument is that it is only by conceptualizing “the family” expansively that it is possible to comprehend the intergenerational transmission of crime and criminal justice contact, especially in the contemporary era in which a high percentage of children are exposed to social parents and in which the probability of this event is so unequally distributed by race/ethnicity and educational attainment (e.g., McLanahan 2004).

⁴This research is also typically focused on one specific parent, the father, and one specific child, the son.

⁵We define social parents as stepparents, adoptive parents, and any nonbiologically related individual who resides in the household with the child, is romantically involved with one of their parents, and participates in parenting.

As a large body of social scientific research has acknowledged over the past several decades, social parents have become a more common feature in children's lives and exert substantial influences on the well-being of children throughout the life-course (e.g., Bzostek 2008, Cherlin & Furstenberg 1994). Although some research on youth delinquent behavior (e.g., Apel & Kaukinen 2008) and the intergenerational transmission of crime and criminal justice contact specifically (e.g., Anker & Andersen 2021) has engaged with research on how social parents shape several different intergenerational transmission processes (e.g., Bloome 2017, de Leeuw & Kalmijn 2020, Erola & Jalovaara 2017, Kalmijn et al. 2019), research on the intergenerational transmission of crime and criminal justice contact has largely continued to focus on biological parents. This oversight is unfortunate, as existing research on poor and minority families and families with low levels of education—precisely the families for whom contact with the criminal justice system is especially prevalent—are most likely to be composed of some combination of biological parents and social parents (e.g., McLanahan 2004).

Of course, parents are not the only people who shape children's lives, as a large body of social scientific literature on intergenerational processes has shown. And, indeed, researchers across the social sciences have demonstrated that a vast array of types of family members ranging from aunts and uncles to siblings and cousins powerfully shape intergenerational transmission (e.g., Jæger 2012; Loury 2006; Mare 2011, 2014; Stack 1974; Warren et al. 2002). Here again, scholars of the intergenerational transmission of crime and criminal justice have engaged in these discussions in only a limited way, with some scholars engaging with a vast number of family members (e.g., Farrington et al. 2001; Robins et al. 1975; Thornberry 2005, 2009; Thornberry et al. 2018) and others engaging with how more specific family members such as siblings (e.g., Lauritsen 1993) and, in an interesting turn, brothers-in-law (e.g., Andersen 2017) may shape criminal activity and criminal justice contact.

In addition to thinking about both biological and social parents and expanding from the two parents—one child paradigm in favor of a perspective that includes a broader range of actors at both the parental generation—aunts and uncles—and the child generation—siblings, cousins, and siblings-in-law—there are also good reasons to expand the conceptualization of the family to three (or even more) generations. Recent research highlights the core role that grandparents play in the lives of children (e.g., Dunifon 2013), and the broader body of social scientific literature on how intergenerational processes unfold has increasingly come to see the need to consider three generations (e.g., Anderson et al. 2018, Daw et al. 2020, Mare 2011, Song & Mare 2019, Warren & Hauser 1997). In this specific area, the study of the intergenerational transmission of crime and criminal justice contact is more up to speed with the broader social scientific literature, as a group of researchers, most of whom are working on the Rochester Intergenerational Study (RIS) (Thornberry et al. 2018), has devoted considerable energy to understanding how the intergenerational transmission process plays out across three generations (e.g., Thornberry 2005, 2016; Thornberry et al. 2003). As important as these three-generation models are within the context of crime and criminal justice contact, virtually all these models focus on grandparents, parents, and children, which means that the broader family context is ignored.

Strengthening the Focus on Intergenerational Change

We further argue that more research on intergenerational transmission processes should focus on families in which the parents were engaged in little to no crime and experienced little criminal justice contact initially and also focus on change in crime and criminal justice contact. We make this argument because many of the families in the PHDCN data that started with little to no criminal justice contact in the parental generation experienced a profound escalation in criminal justice contact across even one generation. As a result, focusing only on transitions away

from crime and criminal justice contact across generations—what we will call intergenerational desistance—offers an incomplete view of how crime and criminal justice contact shift across generations. This emphasis on intergenerational continuity and discontinuity and all starting points of the family distribution (i.e., high- and low-education parents, high- and low-income parents, high- and low-wealth parents) has long been prevalent in the literature on the broader intergenerational transmission process but largely absent in the study of crime and criminal justice (e.g., Andersen et al. 2021, Bloome 2014, Cheng & Song 2019, Egeland et al. 1988).

As a starting point, the conceptual typology in **Figure 1a** reflects the emphasis in most existing literature on understanding how families in which the parents were highly criminally active

a Traditional

		Parental criminality	
		High	Low
Child criminality	High	X	
	Low		

b Intermediate

		Parental criminality	
		High	Low
Child criminality	High	Continuity in criminality	Escalation
	Low	Resilience	Continuity in noncriminality

c Expansive

		Parental generation criminality	
		High	Low
Child generation criminality	High	Persistence	Escalation
	Low	Desistance	Nonparticipation

Figure 1

Three conceptualizations of the intergenerational transmission of crime. (a) The traditional conceptualization of this process that considers only highly criminally active parents and highly criminally active children. (b) The intermediate conceptualization of this process that considers four different intergenerational categories for parents and children only. (c) The expansive conceptualization of this process that considers four different intergenerational categories for the entire parental generation and the entire child generation.

produce children who were highly criminally active. This narrow focus on the continuity of high criminal activity and criminal justice contact across time, which we could call high–high,⁶ is problematic for two reasons. First, it means there is little empirical attention paid to families in which the parents are not criminally active or engaged with the criminal justice system. As we show empirically below, this amounts to ignoring a very large share of families. Second, it means that there is minimal empirical attention paid to families that experience a change in criminal activity and criminal justice contact. This further means that the combinations that we could call high–low and low–high are ignored in much of this existing literature, even though the high–low combination is the implicit reference group in all high–high analyses.

As with our suggested increase in emphasis on three-generation intergenerational transmission models, research using data from the RIS has provided important insights into the need to both consider families with high and low levels of crime and criminal justice contact initially and focus on change between generations (e.g., Larroulet et al. 2021; Loughran et al. 2018; Thornberry 2005, 2016; Thornberry et al. 2018). **Figure 1b**⁷ provides an articulation of how one might simultaneously consider these issues, drawing on the work of Loughran and colleagues on substance use (Loughran et al. 2018). Whereas most existing research has focused on the one cell we highlighted in **Figure 1a**, which Loughran and colleagues refer to as continuity in use, Loughran and colleagues also focus on families in which the children engaged in more substance use than the parents (escalation), the parents engaged in more substance use than the children (resilience), and neither the parents nor the children engaged in substance use. Based on this conceptualization, Loughran and colleagues (Loughran et al. 2018, p. 1634) show that, at least for substance use, continuity in high use (40.3%) and resilience (36.3%) were much more common in their sample than continuity in low use (13.1%) and escalation (10.3%). Interestingly, the category that has received the most attention in research on the intergenerational transmission of crime and criminal justice contact (high–high) was the most common category in the RIS, maybe suggesting why this group has received so much attention.

Although this conceptualization of continuity and change offers important insights into the intergenerational transmission of substance use, it remains unclear whether the same prevalence results will be found when crime and criminal justice contact rather than substance abuse are considered. Nonetheless, this research provides vital insights into improvements in conceptualizing the intergenerational transmission of crime and criminal justice.

DESISTANCE AS AN INTERGENERATIONAL PROCESS

As Bersani & Doherty (2018) note in their recent review of intragenerational desistance, desistance is generally conceptualized as a process in which criminally active individuals begin to move away from criminal activity, often slowly, in response to internal or external stimuli.⁸ Our argument here is that the conceptual frame of desistance can also be usefully applied to the intergenerational transmission paradigm in ways that will enliven research in that space. As such, we argue that research on the intergenerational transmission of criminal activity would do well to consider not just broader definitions of family and more generations but also both continuity and change in

⁶The four intergenerational transmission categories are high–high (persistence), high–low (desistance), low–high (escalation), and low–low (nonparticipation). See **Figure 1c** for a visual depiction.

⁷In the interest of consistency across the panels, we have replaced “substance use” with “criminality” in **Figure 1b**.

⁸For a list of other reviews of this literature, see especially Bersani & Doherty (2018, p. 312). For a discussion of the various different empirical definitions of desistance as a process, see especially Bushway et al. (2001).

crime across generations and to conceptualize those changes using a life-course perspective that is tied to the desistance (rather than the resilience) paradigm.

Before doing so, however, it is worth again defining our terms. We define intergenerational desistance as the often gradual and uneven process through which entire generations of families move away from criminal activity and decrease criminal justice contact while simultaneously engaging with society more broadly in various prosocial ways. We define intergenerational escalation as the often gradual and uneven process through which entire generations of families move toward criminal activity and increase criminal justice contact while simultaneously engaging more broadly in antisocial conduct. As these definitions make clear, our thinking is focused on the family, broadly defined, rather than specific individuals within it; this distinction is especially important later in this section.

The typology we propose (**Figure 1c**) extends research beyond the tried-and-true frames (**Figure 1a**) and beyond the thoughtful typology offered by Loughran and colleagues (Loughran et al. 2018, p. 1627) (**Figure 1b**). We would argue that there are at least two conceptual ways in which the desistance paradigm goes beyond the resilience paradigm for considering these intergenerational transmission processes: because desistance is more appropriate for considering how entire families come to change and because desistance offers a more theoretically satisfying and rich way to understand the precursors to change in criminal activity and criminal justice contact across generations. As such, we would argue that the concept of desistance better aligns with both our focus on the family and our focus on change.

Resilience is usually understood as an individual-level process whereby a “high-risk” person, often a child or adolescent in the original conceptualizations, is able to avoid some negative outcome, often drug or alcohol abuse, poor mental health, suicidal ideation, high school dropout, or even criminal activity, even though such an outcome could be expected given some combination of motivating background factors, often exposure to trauma or long-term poverty (e.g., Masten 2001, 2014; Rutter 1987, 1993). Although this framework can usefully be applied to intergenerational processes for individual children exposed to some risk factors through their parents, we would argue that it becomes a less conceptually useful frame as the circle of individuals—especially in the younger generations—is expanded to include all siblings, cousins, and even siblings-in-law and the individuals that their cousins go on to partner with.

Put differently, although it is easy to think of how an individual might be resilient, it becomes harder to conceptualize how an entire sibling set or a generational set, some of whom are unlikely to be biological relatives, could be resilient. Family members are also diverse in criminal risk factors at the individual level. As a result, we argue that desistance is a more useful frame here, as it allows for the possibility of families gradually moving into lower levels of criminal activity between generations just as an individual would during their life-course. In that sense, the many individuals could be conceptualized in much the same way as the many points of time in an individual’s life-course, where one small relapse to criminal activity would not undo the desistance process in the same way that one wayward cousin would not do so. As such, in our view desistance provides a better generational frame than resilience.

We also see intergenerational desistance—and a parallel form of understanding escalation that is also built around the life-course—as a more conceptually useful frame for understanding these processes because it provides a stronger theoretical basis for considering the precursors to family change. Consider the case of Tim Bogle, for instance, who provided one of the examples with which we opened this article (Butterfield 2018). Tim had been in and out of trouble for much of his youth and, as such, he would (quite correctly) have been counted as high on the parental criminality and criminal justice contact scale. Yet Tim’s solid marriage to Chris—a woman whose father worked in the criminal justice system, no less—and his desire to change the family

fortunes through their daughter Ashley, led to her being the only Bogle in generations who would have been seen by society as successful by almost any metric.⁹ Within a resilience framework, this change could appear to be just about Ashley and not at all about changes that happened in her broader family system—that Ashley was the exceptional one who single-handedly broke the criminogenic cycle.¹⁰ Yet when conceptualized within the desistance framework, it becomes clear that the precursors to desistance—including the cognitive transformation in the family that launched that event—had actually taken place because of the intragenerational desistance that Tim had gone through and how his own changes and marriage had led to him prompting a break in the intergenerational transmission of criminality.

The utility of this life-course frame can also be seen in how we conceptualize escalation. Under an individualistic framework, escalation would be understood as a situation in which some individual in the family was simply unable to cope or had abnormally strong antisocial leanings despite all other forces pointing toward being a productive member of society who did not engage in criminal activity. Yet a broader perspective that considers the life-course of both individuals and families might see that the poor outcomes of an individual in the escalation category were driven not by some innate deficits but instead by changes in the family that might have launched the entire family in a dangerous direction—that the criminal activity of someone in the younger generation was driven not by something about them but instead by a job loss that led to alcohol abuse, divorce, and housing instability that disrupted the life-course of parent and child alike. As a result, the more holistic frame we propose is better suited to understanding intergenerational escalation and desistance, especially because children do not choose families.

Figure 1c combines the various conceptual issues we highlighted in terms of family, continuity and change, and desistance and escalation into four categories of intergenerational transmission that we see as holistically situating this field of study: persistence (high–high); nonparticipation (low–low); desistance (high–low); and escalation (low–high).

Figure 1 provided a conceptual introduction to how we might think of desistance within an intergenerational framework. We have argued that this conceptualization has three key benefits over most traditional research on the intergenerational transmission of crime and criminal justice contact. First, it better aligns with a broader conceptualization of family that includes biological and social parents, entire generations of family members (including aunts, uncles, siblings, cousins, and in-laws), and grandparents (and even great-grandparents). Second, it considers both families in which parents were highly criminally engaged and those who were not and also provides an emphasis on (sometimes-gradual) change in familial criminality and criminal justice contact across generations. Finally, it highlights the ways in which desistance and escalation provide useful theoretical constructs around which to build this new area of research. The full conceptualization of these contributions is highlighted in **Figure 1c**.

We now consider how one might measure intergenerational desistance using data from the PHDCN. Although a full accounting of the PHDCN data, measures, and methods is beyond the scope of this article, there are four features of the analysis that are worth noting.¹¹ First, we use

⁹Remarkably, Ashley became the first Bogle to graduate from college in 150 years (Butterfield 2018, p. 201).

¹⁰There are, of course, core ways in which Ashley was exceptional relative to others in her family. For instance, Ashley finished her associate's degree with honors while juggling work, attending school, and being a single mother, and all this while living with her aunt Debbie, who struggled with bipolar disorder, methamphetamine addiction, and frequent psychotic episodes when not taking her medication (Butterfield 2018, pp. 211–13).

¹¹For further details, see Sampson et al. (2022). Because we consider our review to be conceptual in nature, we do not provide exhaustive details about our analyses, which we intend to be illustrative rather than definitive. Nonetheless, three issues merit brief mention here. First, our illustrative analyses focus on criminal justice

Table 1 Family history of criminal justice contact in older cohorts, Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods

Parental Generation			
Fathers	Mothers	Aunts/uncles	Any parental generation
16.1%	5.1%	21.4%	35.6%
Respondent Generation			
Respondent	Siblings	Cousins	Any respondent generation
26.7%	14.3%	13.4%	42.9%

N = 718. Only includes respondents from cohorts 12 and 15 without missing data on self-reported and familial criminality. Data are weighted.

data from the first three waves for birth cohorts, who were roughly 12 and 15 years old when the study was started in the mid-1990s, because these are the cohorts that would have been most likely to be criminally active and experience contact with the criminal justice system during the initial survey waves. Second, our indicator of criminal justice contact (Wildeman et al. 2023) is based on questions drawn from the first three waves of the survey that asked which individuals in the family had experienced official criminality or trouble with the law, which included problems with the police and having been arrested, charged, or convicted of a crime ever (Wave 1), since the last interview (Wave 2), and in the past year (Wave 3). Third, we measure legal problems for two generations of biological and social family members: the parent (biological, step, social, and adoptive fathers, mothers, and aunts and uncles) and respondent generations (respondent, siblings, and cousins). We do not focus on the grandparent generation because rates of incarceration in that generation were so much lower, because rates of recall bias are likely substantial, and because other research on intergenerational transmission has already considered three-generation transmission models (e.g., Thornberry 2005, 2016; Thornberry et al. 2018). The measures we use for the analysis are based on the sum of the wave-specific counts of family members experiencing “legal troubles” across all three waves.¹² Finally, all analyses use combined survey design and attrition weights to make children representative of their birth cohorts in Chicago. This exercise is important because we are interested in highlighting the size of each of the groups that we consider later.

Table 1 provides descriptive information on how common familial criminal justice contact was in the PHDCN. Just over one in three (35.6%) individuals had ever had someone in the parental generation experience legal troubles, with aunts and uncles (21.4%) and fathers (16.1%) being more likely to have experienced legal troubles than mothers (5.1%). Rates of legal troubles were even higher for the respondent generation (42.9%), with high rates among respondents themselves (26.7%) and their siblings (14.3%) and cousins (13.4%). In both of these generations, it is important to keep in mind how moving from considering the parents and child to the broader generation changes the proportion of individuals in the sample who reported some legal troubles. For the child generation, for instance, expanding beyond the respondent (26.7%) to the entire

contact rather than crime. Second, our measures of criminal justice contact for children and, likely, siblings and cousins, are based largely on adolescence and thus do not fully reflect their criminal justice contacts in adulthood, whereas our measures of the parental generation measures likely more accurately gauge contact in adulthood. Finally, our analyses of counts of family members in each generation are based on a family member type by wave construction. And, as such, there is more imprecision in our measures of familial criminal justice contact than is optimal.

¹²In the interest of simplicity, for all the analyses presented in this portion of the article we exclude respondents who are missing any waves for either self-reported offending or family legal troubles.

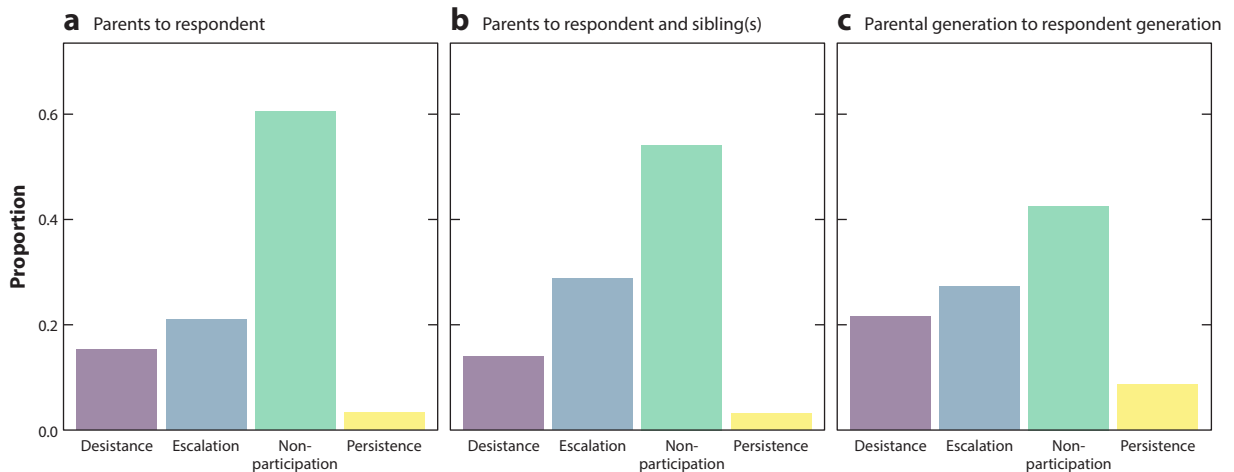


Figure 2

Intergenerational transmission of criminality for different classifications of family in the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods. Intergenerational proportions are weighted. (a) Transmission only from parents to one child. (b) Transmission from parents to the child and all of their siblings. (c) Transmission from the entire parental generation to the entire respondent generation.

respondent generation (42.9%) increased the share of the sample who had experienced that event by 16.2 percentage points, representing a 65% increase.

Figure 2 combines parental and respondent generational counts of legal troubles into four intergenerational patterns: desistance, escalation, nonparticipation, and persistence. We define desistance as any decrease in legal troubles from the parental generation to the respondent generation, escalation as any increase in legal troubles from the parental generation to the respondent generation, and nonparticipation and persistence as experiencing either no legal troubles in either generation (nonparticipation) or a consistent level of nonzero legal troubles across the generations (persistence).¹³ The three panels show how common each of these intergenerational patterns is depending on how family is defined. In the first panel, we use the more typical criminological conception of family by focusing exclusively on parents and the one child respondent, although we do still significantly extend research in this area by considering biological and social parents. In the second, we broaden the respondent generation to include siblings. In the third, we broaden the parental generation to include parents, aunts, and uncles and the respondent generation to include the respondent and their siblings and cousins.

Figure 2 highlights three features of intergenerational processes of familial criminal justice contact. First, regardless of which way we measure family, nonparticipation in criminal justice troubles is far and away the most common trajectory (ranging from about 43% to 60%), escalation is the second most common (ranging from roughly 21% to 29%), desistance is the third most common category (ranging from roughly 14% to 22%), and persistence, which never exceeds 9% of the sample, is the least common category. Second, the broader the definition of family, the more common desistance and escalation become, with the two categories combined representing roughly half of all families in the sample under the broadest definition of family. Finally, and related to the first two points, more than half of all families in this sample have some form of legal troubles across the two generations using the broadest definition of family, suggesting the need to further interrogate processes of desistance, persistence, and escalation.

¹³We fully recognize that this initial way of conceptualizing these trajectories is somewhat crude.

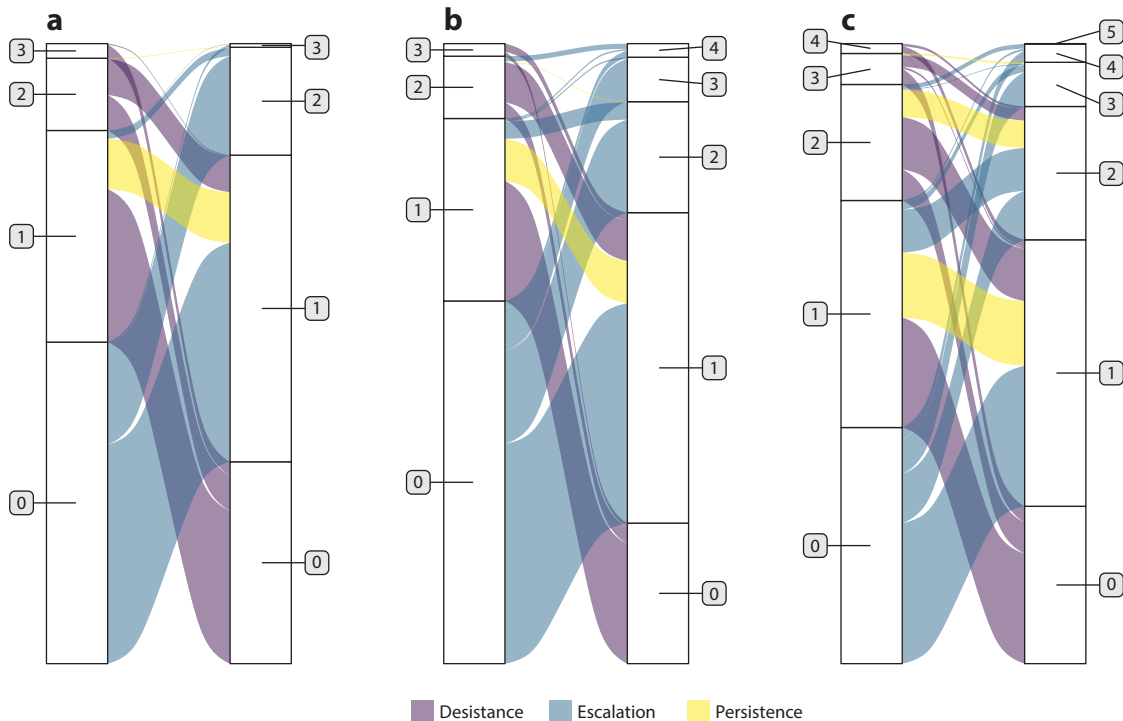


Figure 3

Visual representations of intergenerational transmission flows of criminality in the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods. Data are weighted and units are person-wave reports of legal troubles. Figure excludes the intergenerational transmission of nonparticipation in criminal activity. (a) Transmission only from parents to one child. (b) Transmission from parents to the child and all of their siblings. (c) Transmission from the entire parental generation to the entire respondent generation.

Figure 3 provides three different visual representations of what intergenerational desistance, persistence, and escalation could look like, depending on how family is measured in both generations. (Nonparticipation is removed from the figure in the interest of making each of the other three trajectories as clear as possible.) Alluvial plots like these are somewhat rare in criminology (and, indeed, in most social sciences), so we provide a brief description of how to think through **Figure 3**. On the left side of each of the three figures is the level of criminal justice contact that we observe in the parents (**Figure 3a,b**) and the entire parental generation (**Figure 3c**). The range here is from 0 criminal justice contacts to 3 (**Figure 3a,b**) or 4 (**Figure 3c**). On the right side of each of the panels is the level of criminal justice contact that we observe in the respondent (**Figure 3a**), the respondent and their siblings (**Figure 3b**), and the entire respondent generation (**Figure 3c**). The range here is from 0 criminal justice contacts to 3 (**Figure 3a**), 4 (**Figure 3b**), or 5 (**Figure 3c**) criminal justice contacts. In each of the three figures, purple represents what could be considered intergenerational desistance, where the parental generation experiences more criminal justice contact than the respondent generation; blue represents escalation, where the respondent generation experiences more criminal justice contact than the parental generation; and yellow represents persistence, where the two generations both experience the same nonzero levels of criminal justice contact. In each instance, the thicker the line is, the larger the share of the population in that trajectory.

Because we argue that the broadest definition of family possible is most appropriate for considering intergenerational processes, our discussion is focused on **Figure 3c**. Two important findings merit attention here. First, although a one unit change in familial criminal justice contact is the most common shift for both desistance and escalation, shifts of two or even three units are not uncommon. As a result, although much of the change in familial criminal justice contact could be thought of as quite gradual—assuming subsequent generations followed a similar trajectory—the shifts for other families could be more abrupt. Second, although the majority of existing research on intergenerational transmission has focused on persistence at high levels of criminality and criminal justice contact, the approach we offer here suggests that intergenerational persistence at very high levels is quite uncommon relative to intergenerational desistance or escalation at those levels, suggesting that it may be the case that some combination of sample selection and insufficient theory could be driving much of our understanding of the intergenerational life cycle of offending in families that are sometimes highly criminally active.

Here, we reflect on how our results, which consider criminal justice contact, align with the findings from Loughran and colleagues, which focused on substance abuse (Loughran et al. 2018). When we use what we call their intermediate conceptualization (considering all four quadrants, only considering parents and one child), which is featured in **Figure 1b** and **Figure 2a**, our findings diverge quite sharply from theirs. Maybe most remarkably, the rates of nonparticipation that we find (60%) are roughly five times as high as those they find (13%), and the rates of persistence they find (40%) are roughly 13 times as high as those we find (3%). Rates of desistance (ours: 15%; theirs: 36%) and escalation (ours: 21%; theirs: 10%) are somewhat more similar but still diverge in core ways. Although there are differences in sample selection, measures, and historical context, this empirical exercise highlights that even when using similar types of categories to consider intergenerational transmission, both the starting point in terms of the sample—broadly representative versus more targeted—and the outcome considered—criminal justice contact versus substance use—can be vitally important in shaping how common each of these four trajectories is in the population.

DESISTANCE AS AN INTERGENERATIONAL PROCESS: A RESEARCH AGENDA

To this point, we have introduced the concepts of intergenerational desistance and escalation and shown how those concepts might be operationalized in the PHDCN data. This section points toward four ways in which a new research agenda around these concepts might emerge by concentrating on three core issues that researchers seeking to work in this emergent field could focus on: (a) measurement; (b) the micro-, meso-, and macrolevel factors that could contribute to intergenerational persistence, escalation, and desistance; and (c) racial/ethnic, class, and gender differences.

Measurement

There are several measurement issues that could be usefully considered in this area. On the most basic level, considering how one models the relationship between the numerator (crimes or criminal justice contact) and the denominator (number of family members at risk of crime or criminal justice contact) is absolutely central because findings from models using the difference between the absolute counts of criminal justice contact across generations (as we did above) might differ significantly from models that also adjusted for family size in some way. Future research should also consider differences in these intergenerational processes based on whether the focus is on crime or criminal justice contact, both of which merit investigation in an era of mass incarceration and the great crime decline, and how much emphasis one places on the frequency, duration,

and severity of both criminal activity and criminal justice contact. Should research focus only on relatively serious crimes? How should families in which petty offenses abound but relatively serious offenses are either infrequent or completely missing be counted? Should research focus on lower levels of criminal justice contact such as arrests or even brief jail stints, or should only longer stretches in prisons likely caused by a felony conviction be considered? As importantly, how much change is necessary to identify desistance or escalation? For our illustrative analyses, we relied on any change as evidence of desistance and escalation. Yet future analyses must have a stronger rationale for what is categorized as intergenerational desistance or escalation.

Each of these issues is also driven by the sorts of measures available in both existing data sets and new data sets, including longitudinal survey data that are collected specifically to consider this process. Although registry data in many of the Scandinavian countries make it possible to identify intergenerational desistance and persistence based on extensive data on prisons and jails, new longitudinal survey data collection efforts will be essential to make mapping this process possible in the United States context. Based on our own analyses, we would advocate for more broadly representative samples as the starting point of analyses, as such samples are better able to represent each of the four trajectories we highlighted above and to show changes in the prevalence of those across time and space. This would represent a core departure from most sampling strategies in criminology.

How one chooses to measure family and, especially, extended kin networks is also likely to play a central role in the advancement of this research area. Much of our analysis in this introduction to the concepts of intergenerational desistance and escalation was focused precisely on how three different sets of measures of family could change the prevalence of each of these concepts in the population. Of special interest here is how many generations of family members can usefully be included in this process, how one should consider the importance of the level of contact family members had with each other, how the families of in-laws should be considered in the broader family tree, and how individuals who are family members neither by blood, marriage, nor cohabitation—people who function as kin in the way Stack (1974) originally used the term—should be considered when seeking to understand these processes. As with the other issues we raised above, data availability is key and measurement challenges are present as well, so it is highly likely that new data collection efforts will be needed to provide the best measures of family possible.

Factors That Shape Intergenerational Desistance and Escalation

Of course, how these processes are measured is central to the research program we propose here. Yet as is the case with intragenerational desistance, the factors that shape intergenerational desistance and persistence are at least as important. Such processes could occur at the microlevel, the mesolevel, and the macrolevel. Again, this parallels the intragenerational transmission process, as the stable jobs and cohesive marriages that Sampson & Laub (1990, 1993; see also Laub & Sampson 2003) found to be so central to the desistance process were both important for individuals and extremely common in that era in a way that they no longer are for working-class Americans because of deindustrialization and changes in American family life, suggesting just how vital a role the historical experiences of cohorts are for familial desistance.

At the microlevel, future research in this area might consider, for instance, how a conscious decision on the part of one relative could contribute to the process of intergenerational desistance, as the example of Tim and Ashley Bogle highlights, or how significant improvements in the financial situation or a “knifing off” of antisocial familial ties due to a move might contribute to such a process (Kirk 2020). At the same time, one might usefully consider how significant shocks to family life—a mental health crisis or loss of stable employment for a parent or the abrupt death

of a parent—might contribute to intergenerational escalation. And other more seemingly mundane things like parental age at birth could also play a key role in these processes. To return to the PHDCN, the average age of parents in the birth cohort was just under 29 years. However, because the standard deviation was nearly 7 years, many children would have been born after their parents had largely exited the period where crime and criminal justice contact were common, whereas others would have parents whose highest levels of crime and criminal justice contact would all happen during their childhoods. Of central interest for all these processes is the degree to which the factors that facilitate intragenerational change in offending do or do not align with those for intergenerational shifts.

At the mesolevel, future research must engage with how neighborhood-level processes shape intergenerational transmission processes. It may be the case, for instance, that the factors that lead African-American families to be “stuck in place” in other domains also lead to high levels of intergenerational persistence among African-American families (Sharkey 2008, 2012). In a similar vein, historical changes in neighborhood conditions, especially the massive declines in the violent crime rate in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods and the astronomical rise of incarceration rates in precisely the same neighborhoods that saw these declines in crime might play key roles in shaping intergenerational trajectories in ways impossible to identify absent neighborhood-level data (e.g., Clear 2007, Sampson & Loeffler 2010, Sharkey 2018).

At the macrolevel, in addition to shocks to the structure of American families and the nature of the American labor market for individuals with lower levels of education that obviously merit further investigation, the dramatic increases in criminalization under aggressive policing and imprisonment under mass incarceration require serious attention from researchers, as patterns of criminal justice contact at the macrolevel are certain to influence intergenerational processes of desistance and escalation. For example, the birth lottery of history and its implications for our understanding of official criminality, and, more broadly, criminal character (Neil & Sampson 2021, Sampson & Smith 2021), apply to parents and not just children. Parents age through distinct kinds of social changes and social structures compared to their children, after all, which could interrupt or prolong criminality across generations in ways we do not typically think about because they reverberate beyond the individual experiences of the parent.

Imagine two children of the same age and with the same exact risk characteristics, but their parents (and potentially siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, and grandparents) differ in age; thus, their experiences will differ, with, for example, the onset of mass incarceration and the crack cocaine epidemic, with implications for family caregiving, family attitudes toward the law, and family exposures to trauma and intergenerational labeling (Hagan & Palloni 1990). Or consider changes in criminal activity in society more broadly that have come about during the great crime decline followed by large recent increases and the gradual but substantial decline in imprisonment since approximately 2000, especially among Black Americans (Muller & Roehrkasse 2022). Each of these changes—and many other changes such as those that shape the healthcare Americans have access to and the broader governmental supports families can receive—are central to establishing a research program in which intergenerational desistance and escalation are more completely understood.

Race/Ethnicity, Class, and Gender

Of course, processes of intergenerational desistance and escalation likely differ on the basis of race/ethnicity, class, and gender, and any vibrant research program in this area must attend to how these factors intersect with these processes. Consider the case of gender, for instance. Females are well-known to be less criminally active than males. As a result, the gender composition of families

might have important implications for intergenerational processes of desistance or escalation, as one generation having significantly more boys than girls (or vice versa) could change levels and trajectories of criminal activity or criminal justice contact in families. Differences in the relationship between intergenerational processes by social class may also be substantial and moderated by historical processes. The loss of solid working-class jobs during deindustrialization, for instance, could have led to a significant increase in intergenerational escalation for families in which the average level of educational attainment was low but could have little to no effect on families unlikely to be in such jobs in the first place as a result of their higher average level of educational attainment.

Race/ethnicity likely also plays a central role, as African Americans and Native Americans, both of whom have lifetime risks of imprisonment far in excess of those of other groups (Roehrkasse & Wildeman 2022) and often extensive family experiences with violence, poverty, and criminal justice contact (Natl. Acad. Sci. Eng. Med. 2022), could navigate these processes differently on the basis of those much higher starting rates of criminal justice contact and compounded adversities, even in the face of relatively small differences in criminal activity.

CONCLUSION

Scholars across many social scientific disciplines have long been fascinated by how criminally active men gradually move away from a life of crime and how crime seems to run in families. Yet as our review of the research has shown, these two veins of research have by and large not been in conversation with each other, which we see as an unfortunate oversight. In this article, we have therefore sought to show how these research traditions might profitably be linked by introducing the concept of intergenerational desistance and more explicitly tying the concept of intergenerational escalation to the broader study of the life-course, showing how they might both be measured and introducing some considerations for future research in this new area.

Our core argument is that our current conceptions of intergenerational transmission in criminology have been limited in three ways. First, research in this area has been limited by an emphasis on continuity in high levels of offending and criminal justice system contact in families and a virtually complete neglect of how other intergenerational trajectories—what we call intergenerational desistance and intergenerational escalation—play out. Second, research in this area has, with few exceptions, been focused mostly on how biological fathers transmit criminal activity and criminal justice contact to their sons. Drawing on a wide body of research on intergenerational transmission processes, we have argued that broader conceptualizations of family that include both biological and social family members, three (or more) generations, and more complete information on all individuals in each of those generations have the potential for significantly expanding our understanding of how these intergenerational processes play out. Third, even when researchers have considered all four possible combinations of generational offending—high-high, high-low, low-high, and low-low—the emphasis in terms of change in offending has been on the individual who is resilient or fragile; we argue for a broader focus that considers how families change rather than on how specific individuals change trajectories.

In their work on intragenerational desistance, Sampson & Laub (1990, 1993; see also Laub & Sampson 2003) laid the foundation for a new area of inquiry in crime that highlighted both how and why criminal activity shifted across the life-course of individuals. A productive line of criminological inquiry on desistance ensued. Our hope is that this conceptual review article, supported by an initial empirical exploration of the main theoretical argument, has the potential to do the same for the intergenerational transmission of criminal activity and criminal justice contact by introducing the concept of intergenerational desistance, honing our understanding of

intergenerational escalation, showing how each concept might be measured in terms of crime and criminal justice contact, and establishing directions for a new research agenda. Although all review articles seem to end with a call for more data collected primarily for the purposes of advancing that area, we see theoretically guided investments in expanding existing data sets and building entirely new data sets as essential for our understanding of these core intergenerational transmission processes to reach the levels necessary for scientific growth.

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