

# Situational Action Theory

## Explaining crime as moral actions

### A brief overview and key policy and prevention implications

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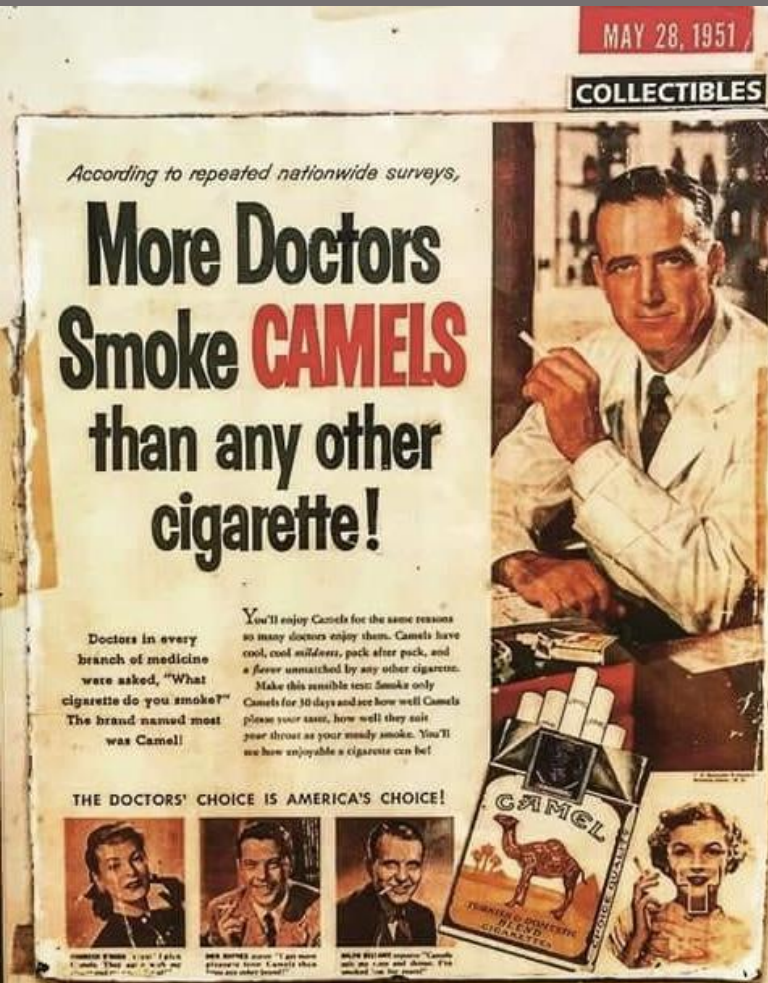
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# Why do the acceptability of behaviour change?



- Smoking
- Cannabis use
- Drink and drive
- Sexual harrasment
- Wearing seat belts
- Picking up dog poo

## KEY ARGUMENTS OVERVIEW

- 1. People commit an act of crime because they see it as an acceptable action alternative in the circumstance (and there are no relevant and strong deterrent), or they fail to adhere to their own morality (i.e., fail to exercise self-control) in circumstances when they are externally pressurised to act otherwise.**
- 2. The central question is thus why people, and some more often than others, come to see crime (specific kinds of crime) as an acceptable action alternative and/or are vulnerable to external pressure (e.g., peer pressure) to commit acts of crime.**
- 3. The key to effective policy and prevention is to develop interventions that influence people not to see crime (specific kinds of crime) as action alternatives and helps them resist external pressure to engage in acts of crime.**

# Situational Action Theory

**Crime is essentially  
moral actions**

**(actions guided by right  
and wrong views)**

## ANALYSING CRIME AS MORAL ACTIONS

1. **Moral actions** are *actions (including intentional inactions) guided by value-based and emotionally grounded rules of conduct about what is the right or wrong thing to do in particular circumstances.*
2. **The law** is *a set of prescriptions about what is the right or wrong thing to do or not to do in particular circumstances.* Its aim is to make people behave in one way or another. The law may be regarded as a prime form of 'moral social engineering' in society.
3. **Crimes** are *actions that breaches rules of conduct stated in law* and should be analysed and explained as such. That is what all crimes, in all places, at all times have in common.
4. There is essentially no difference between explaining why people follow and break the rules of law and other rules of conduct. Explaining acts of crime may therefore be considered as a special case of the explanation of why people follow and break rules of conduct more generally.

# Situational Action Theory

**Basic assumptions**

# Situational Action Theory

## Key basic assumptions

***People are essentially rule-guided creatures***

*People express their desires, and respond to frictions,  
within the context of rule-guided choice*

Rules of conduct tell us what we ought to do or not to do in response to motivators in particular circumstances. We can agree or disagree with particular rules, and we can abide by or break particular rules. Guidance means guidance.

***People are the source of their actions***

*(people perceives, choose and execute their actions)*

***but the causes of action are situational***

*(people's particular perception of action alternatives, process of choice and execution of action are triggered and guided by the relevant input from the person-environment interaction)*

# **The importance of rules and rule-guidance for human action (a tool for cross-disciplinary integration)**

## **Neuropsychology**

**The use of explicit rules to control behavior is one of the hallmark of executive function – the conscious control of thought, action, and emotion  
(Bunge & Zelazo, 2006)**

## **Social psychology**

**Human beings must be treated as agents acting according to rule**

**It is the self-monitored following of rules and plans that we believe to be the social science analogue of the working of generative causal mechanisms in the process which produce the non-random patterns studied by natural scientists**

**(Harré and Secord 1972)**

## **Sociology**

**Social theory, as distinct from psychological theory, consists of theory about the working out of various rules within which sets of persons act**

**(Coleman, 1994)**



# Situational Action Theory

Why crime happens  
(the causes of crime)

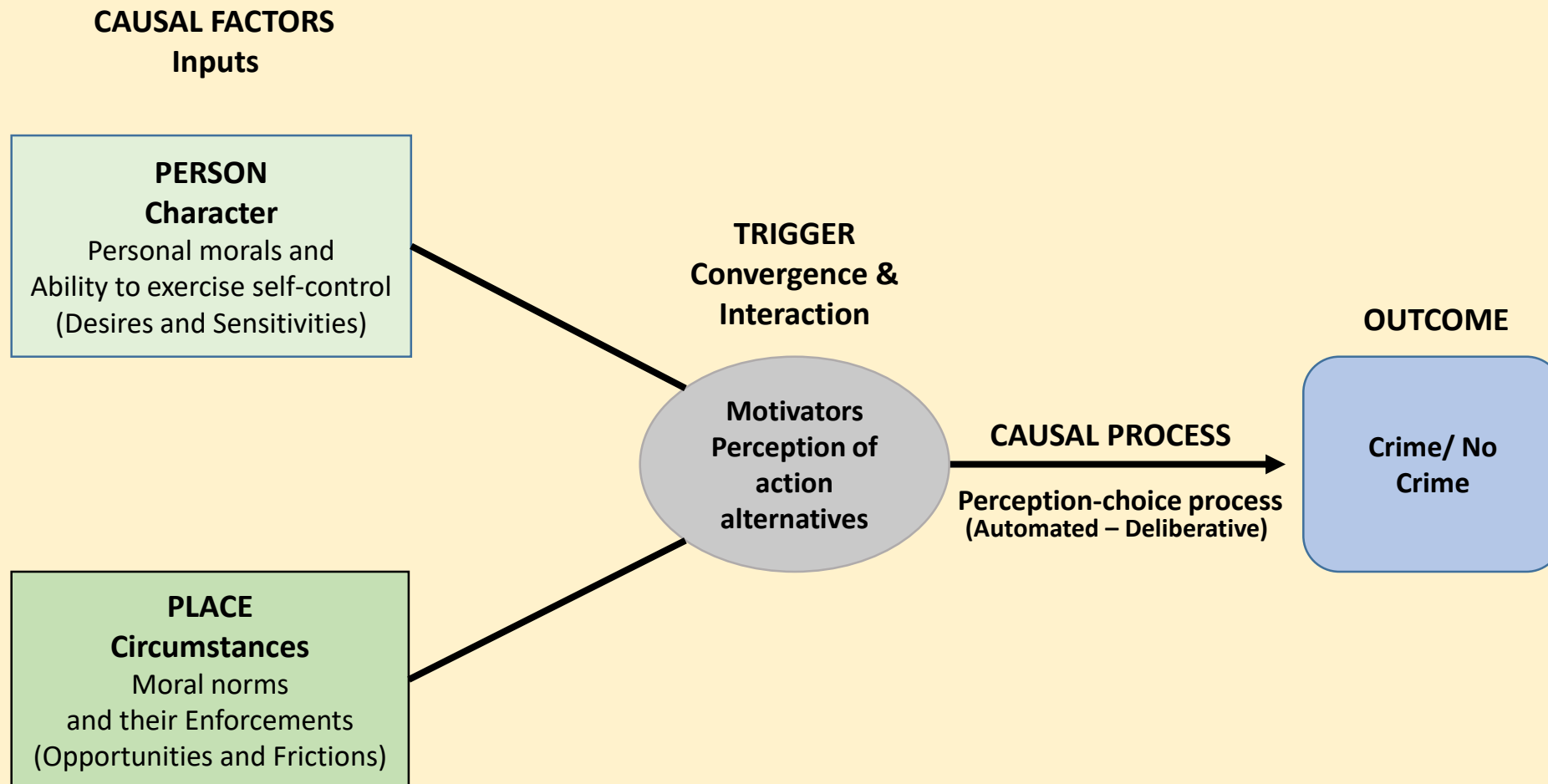
# Situational Action Theory

## The Core Argument Summarised

*Acts of crime (rule-breaking) happen because*

*(i) people perceive them as a viable and acceptable action alternative given the circumstances (and there is no relevant and strong enough deterrent) or*

*(ii) fail to adhere to their own morals (i.e., exercise self-control) in circumstances when they are externally pressured to act otherwise.*



**A person's particular action propensities are triggered by specific features of a setting, and a setting's particular action inducements are made relevant by a person's specific propensities.**

**Perception (the information we get from our senses) is what links a person to her or his environment. Choice (the forming of an intention to act in one way or another) is what links a person to her or his actions. The Perception-Choice Process is the situational mechanism that brings about a person's actions**

**TABLE Percent Offenders, Total Number of Crimes, Percent crimes (self-reported and police recorded) by Quintiles of Crime Propensity and Criminogenic Exposure. Ages 13-17.**

	Percent offenders		Total number of crimes		Percent of crimes		N
	Self reported	Police recorded	Self reported	Police recorded	Self reported	Police recorded	
Strongest	94.7	24.2	8619	63	61.0	57.8	132
Strong	90.5	11.0	3223	31	22.8	28.4	137
Medium	78.7	5.2	1479	10	10.5	9.2	136
Weak	58.1	2.2	641	3	4.5	2.8	136
Weakest	30.7	1.5	162	2	1.1	1.8	137
All	70.4	8.7	14124	109	100.0	100.0	678

	Percent offenders		Total number of crimes		Percent of crimes		N
	Self reported	Police recorded	Self reported	Police recorded	Self reported	Police recorded	
Highest	99.2	26.2	9784	57	70.6	54.8	130
High	89.5	10.5	2210	32	15.9	30.8	133
Medium	78.1	2.3	1086	3	7.8	2.9	128
Low	51.2	3.1	597	10	4.3	9.6	131
Lowest	31.5	1.5	188	2	1.4	1.9	130
All	69.9	8.7	13865	104	100.0	100.0	652

## Testing the convergence (interaction) hypothesis (The PEA hypothesis)

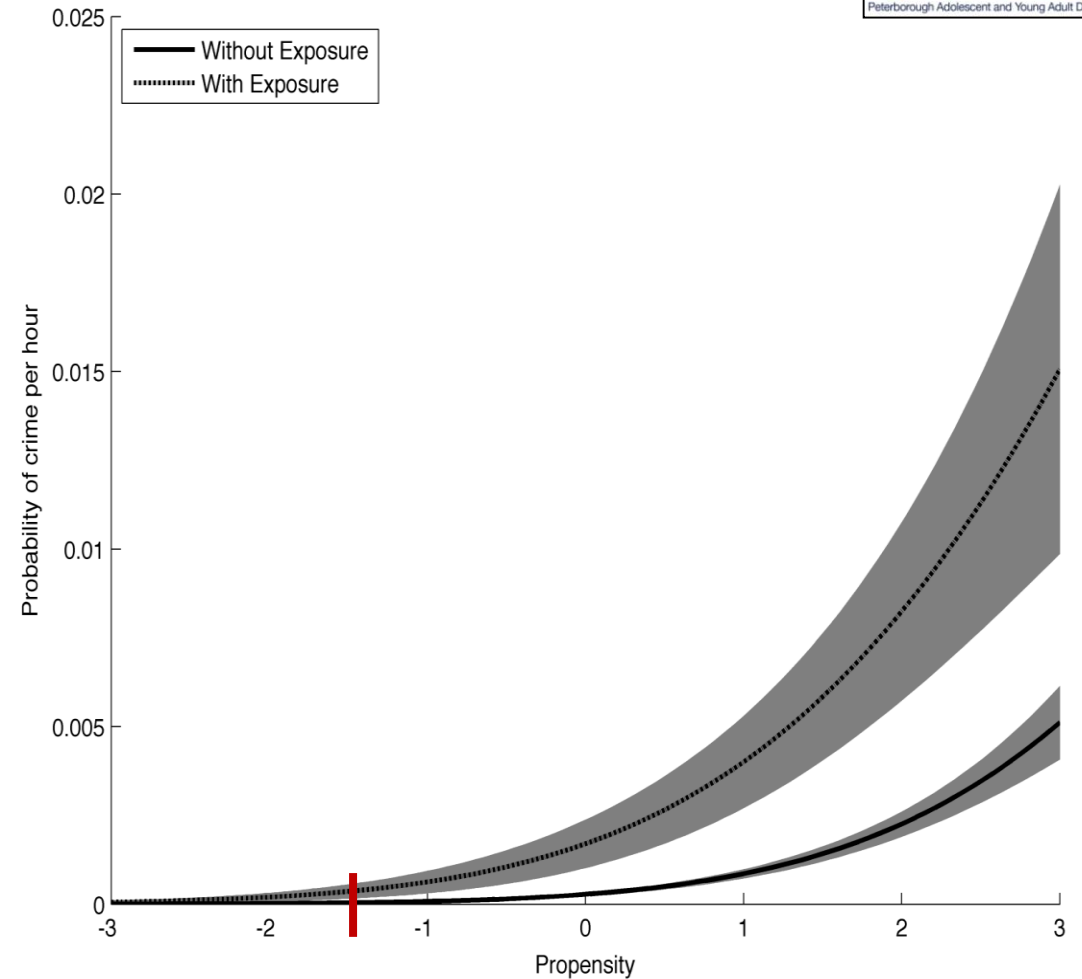
1. People with a low crime propensity are largely immune to criminogenic exposure

2a People with a higher crime propensity are vulnerable to criminogenic exposure,

2b The higher the crime propensity the stronger the influence from criminogenic exposure

**Crime propensity:** Index of scales of personal morals and ability to exercise self-control

**Criminogenic exposure:** hour in which the young person spent unsupervised engaged in unstructured activities in a residential area with poor collective efficacy or in a centrum (commercial) area



Based on more than 190000 hours (time awake) of person (propensity) and place (inducement) spatio-temporal convergences (interactions) at ages 13 to 17. Outcome = probability to commit a crime in a given hour.

# Situational Action Theory

**Why some and not others?**

**Sources of people's crime propensity  
and setting's criminogenic inducements.**

*Causes of the Causes*

*Causes (of crime events)*

**DRIVERS OF STABILITY AND CHANGE**

**INPUT**

**TRIGGER**

**MENTAL PROCESS**

**OUTCOME**

Socioecological processes  
of Social and Self-selection



Criminogenic  
inducements

Psychosocial processes  
of Moral education and  
Cognitive nurturing



Crime  
propensities

**Interaction**



Perception-choice process

**ACTION**  
Crime/  
No Crime

**A person's development, stability and change in her or his criminogenic exposure is dependent on socioecological processes of social and self-selection**

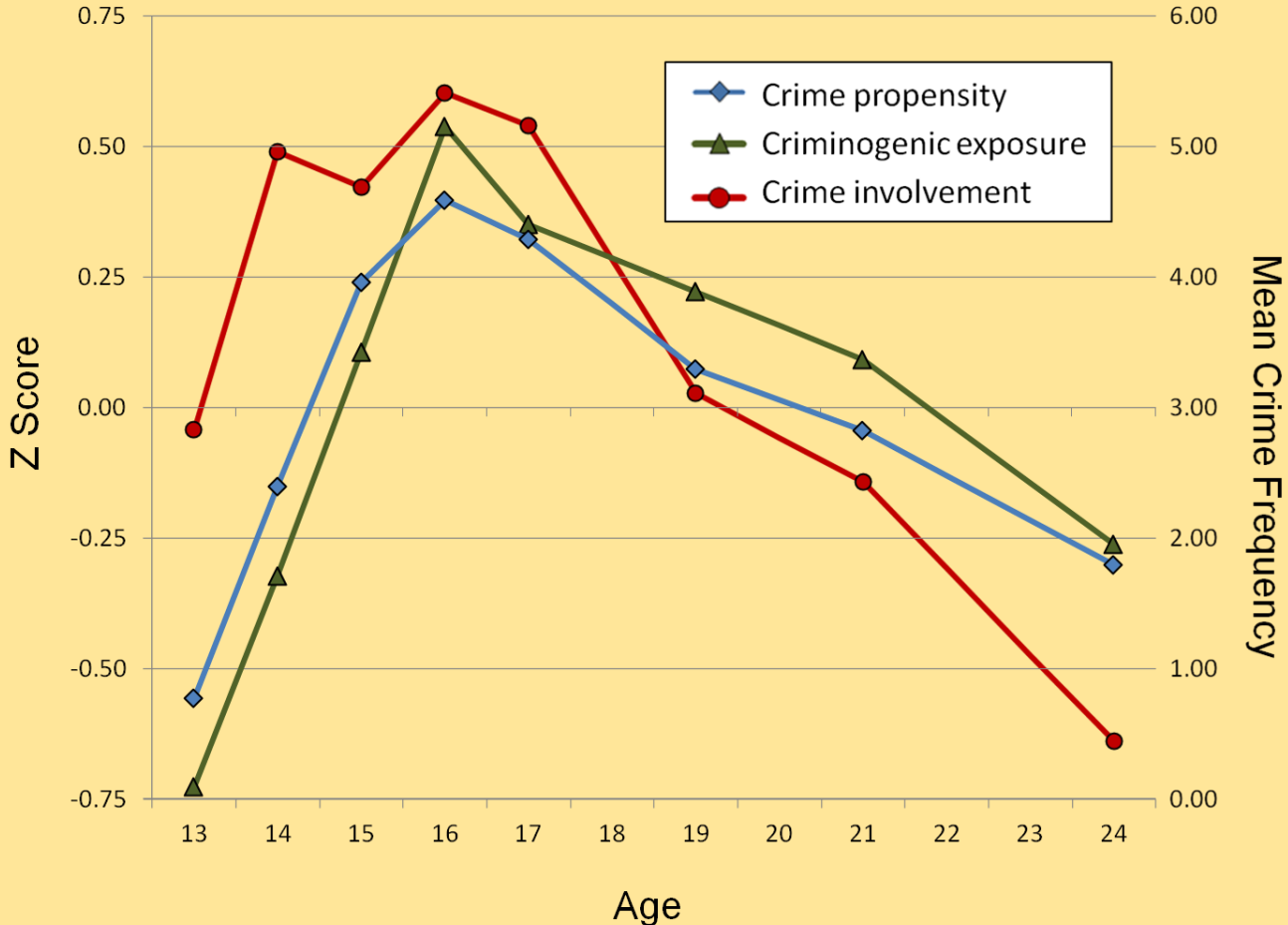
**A person's development, stability and change in her or his crime propensity is dependent on psychosocial processes of moral education and cognitive nurturing**

# Situational Action Theory

Age and Crime

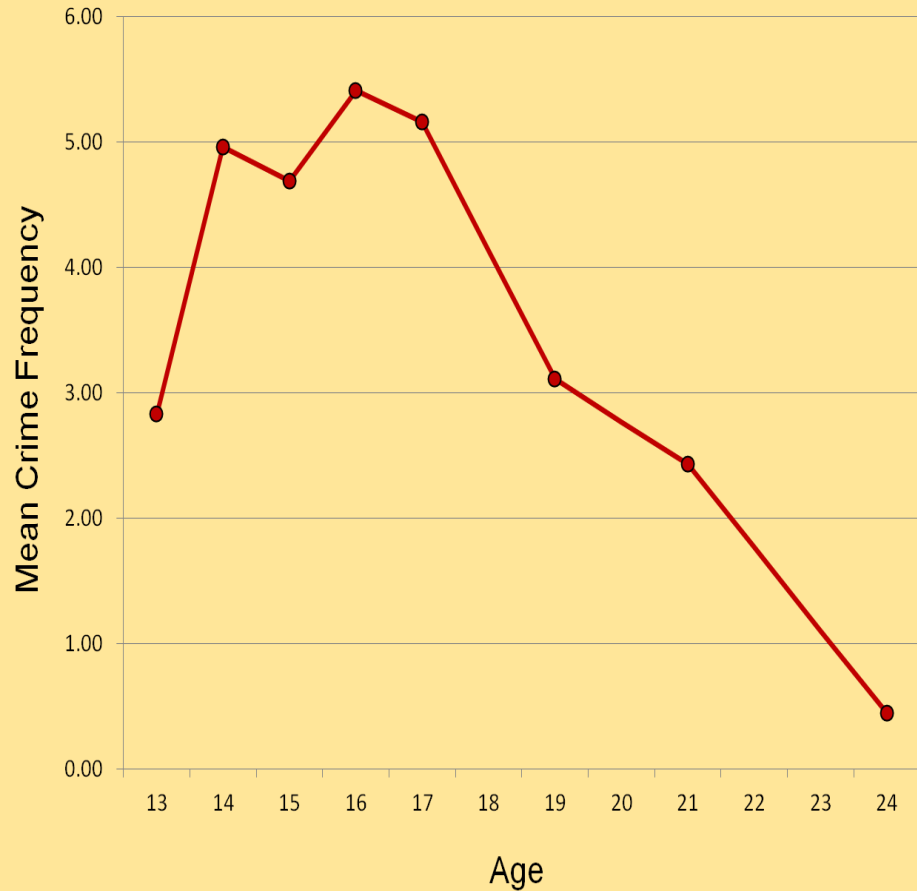


# Crime, Crime Propensity and Criminogenic Exposure by age

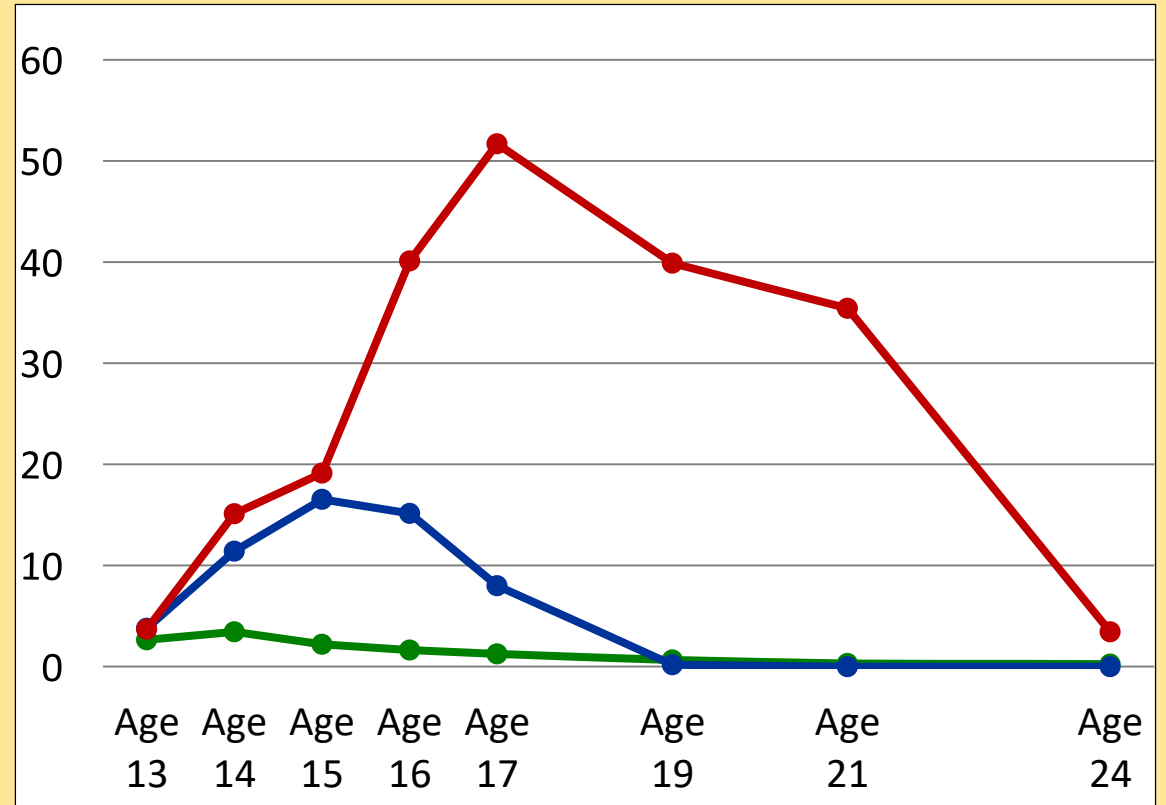


**The cohort's changes in crime involvement mirrors its changes in levels of crime propensity and criminogenic exposure**

### Total Cohort



### Different pathways (crime trajectories)



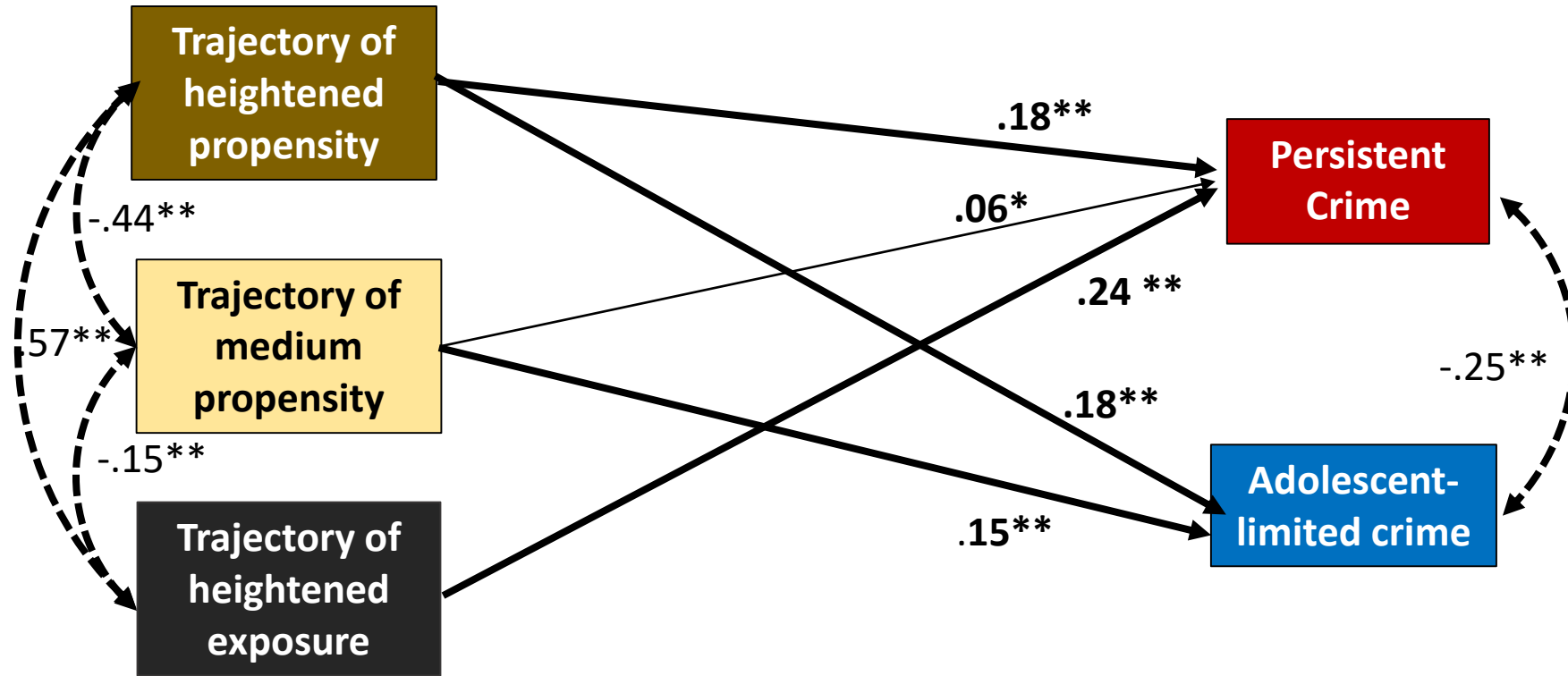
**Young people vary in their  
Pathways in crime**

**Persistent:** 6.3% (n= 45)  
**Adolescent-limited:** 9.6% (n= 68)  
**Infrequent :** 84.1% (n=597)

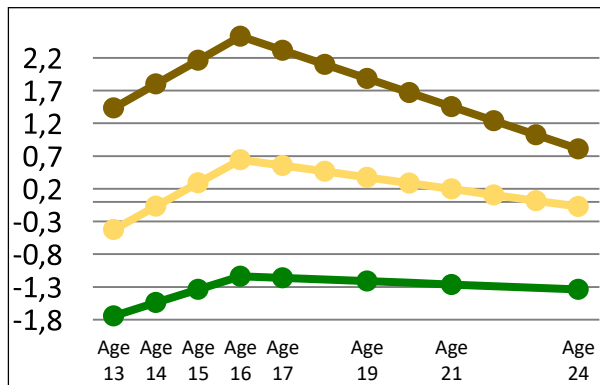
# Situational Action Theory

Pathways in crime is an outcome  
of stability and change in people's  
crime propensity and  
criminogenic exposure

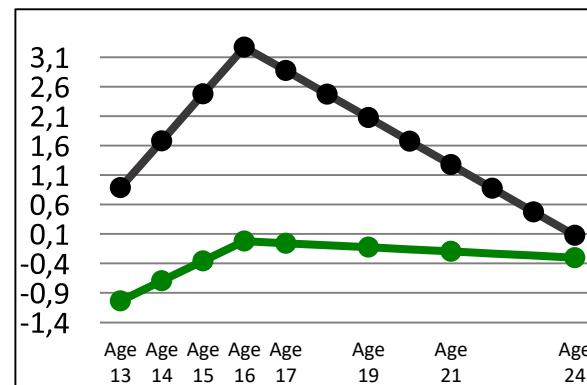
# Adolescent and young adult development



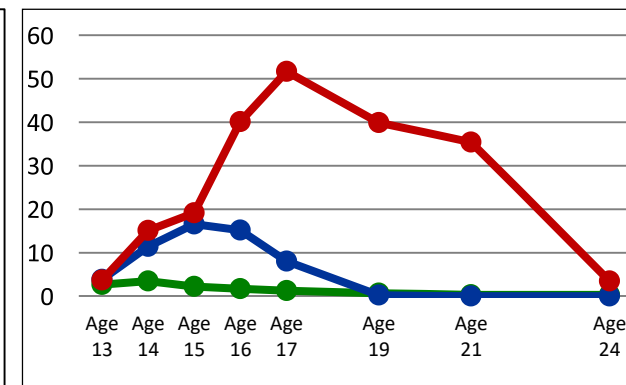
Propensity trajectories



Exposure trajectories



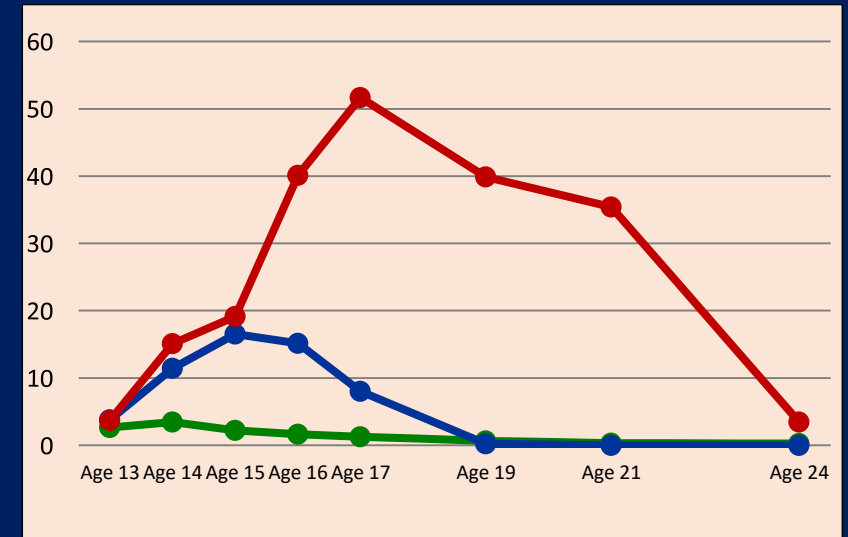
Crime trajectories



## Summary

### Propensity and its key elements

A high crime propensity influences whether or not a young person will follow a pathway in crime (an Adolescent-limited or Persistent pathway compared to a pathway with few or no crimes)



Weak law-relevant morality is a key factor influencing if a young person will follow a pathway in crime (compared to a pathway with few or no crimes).

Having a poor self-control differentiate those following a Persistent from those following an Adolescent-limited pathway in crime.

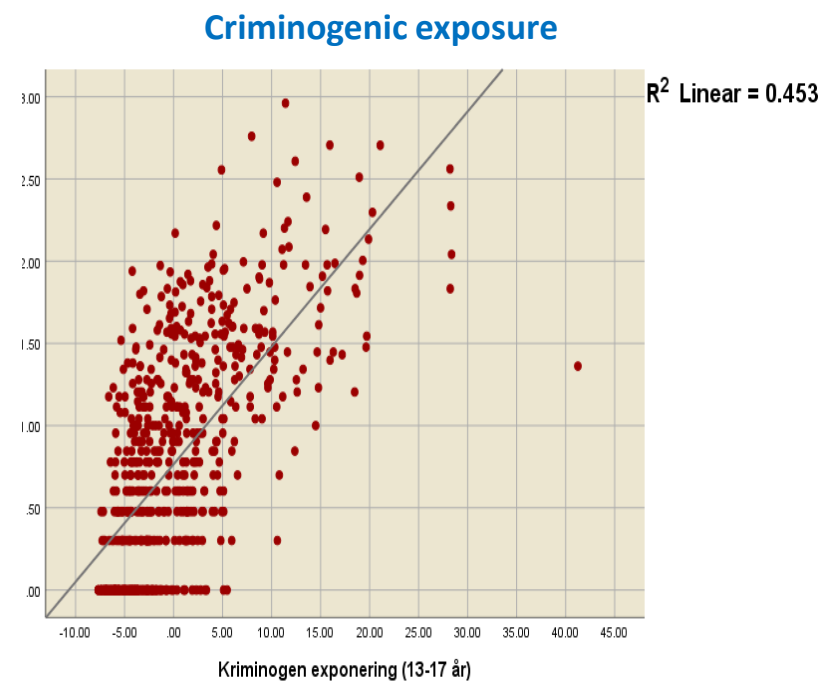
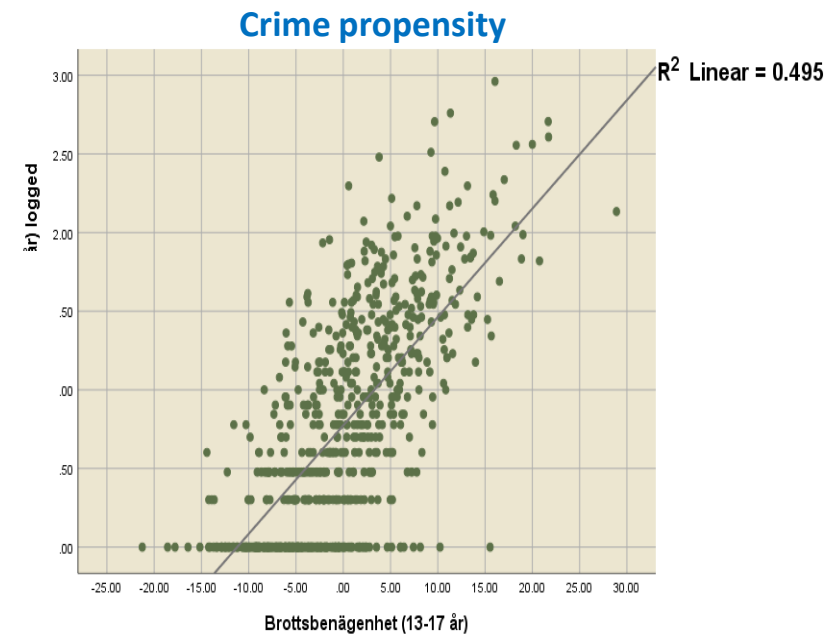
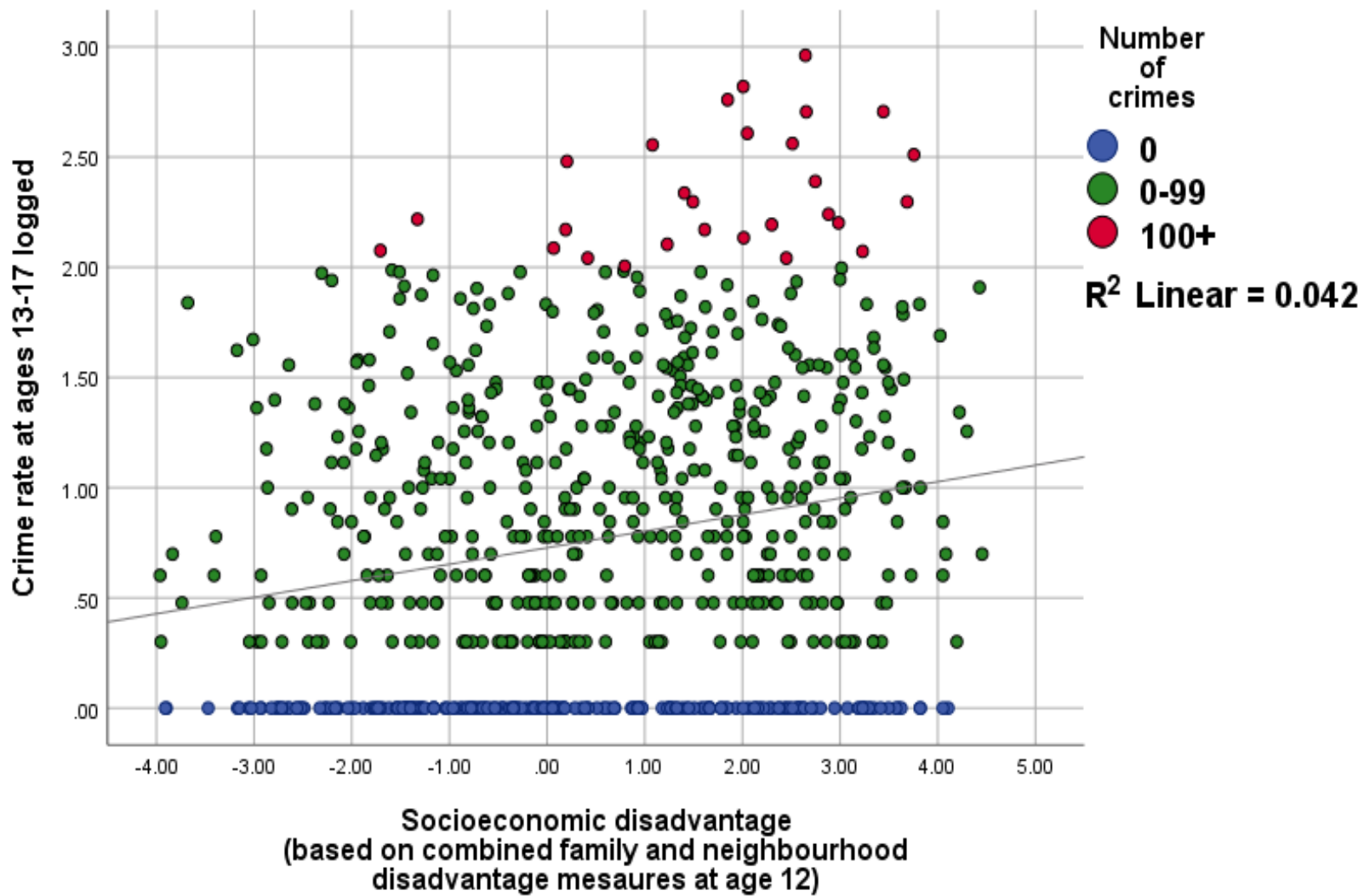
### Exposure and its key elements

A high criminogenic exposure differentiate those who follow an Adolescent-limited or Persistent pathway in crime

Those who follow a Persistent pathway have particularly high levels of crime prone peers/friends.

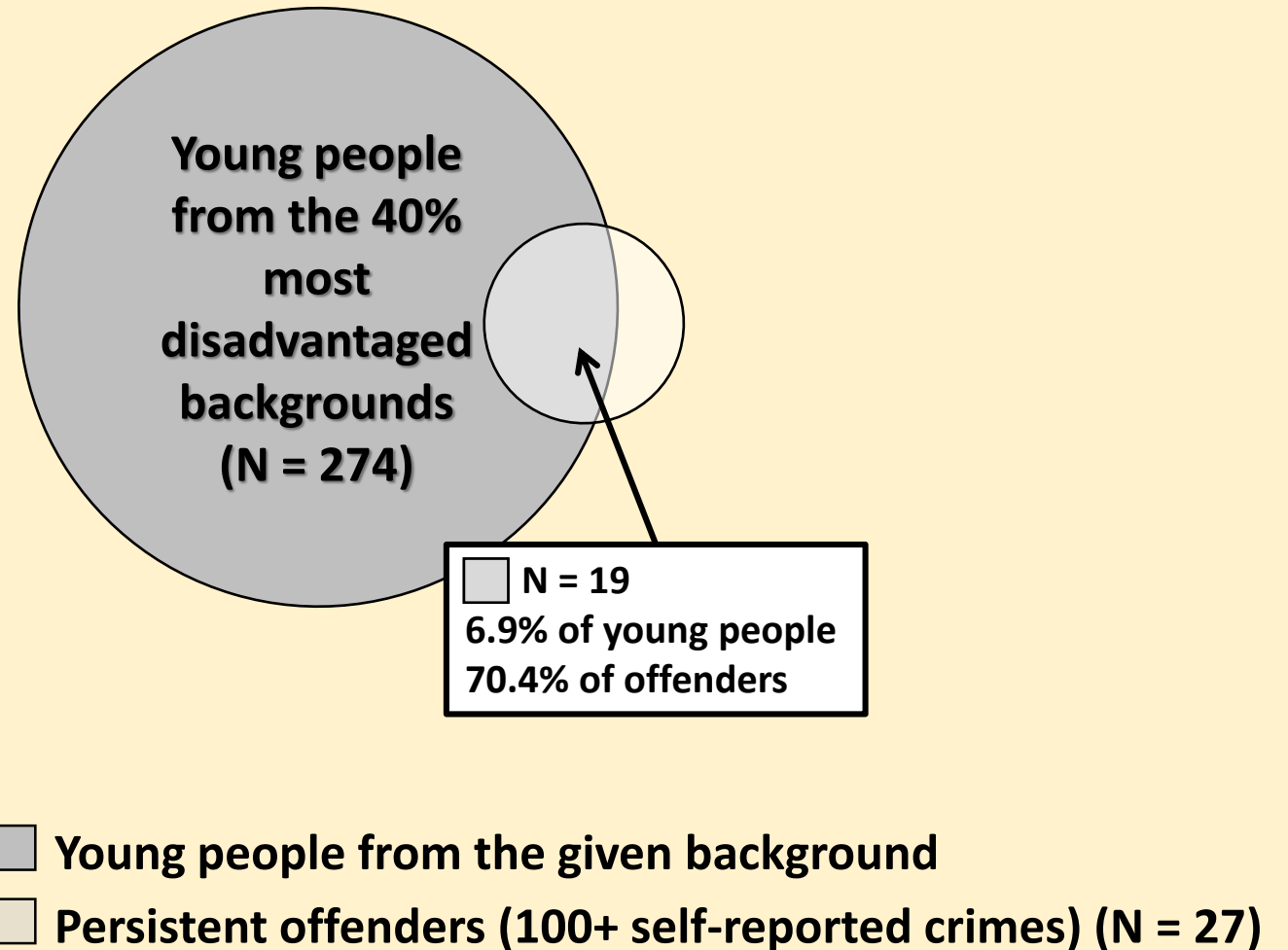
**A note on the (limited)  
role of childhood  
social disadvantage  
in crime causation**

# Family and neighbourhood social disadvantage (age 12) and frequency of crime (ages 13-17)



# Childhood family and neighbourhood combined disadvantage (age 12) and persistent offending (ages 13-17)

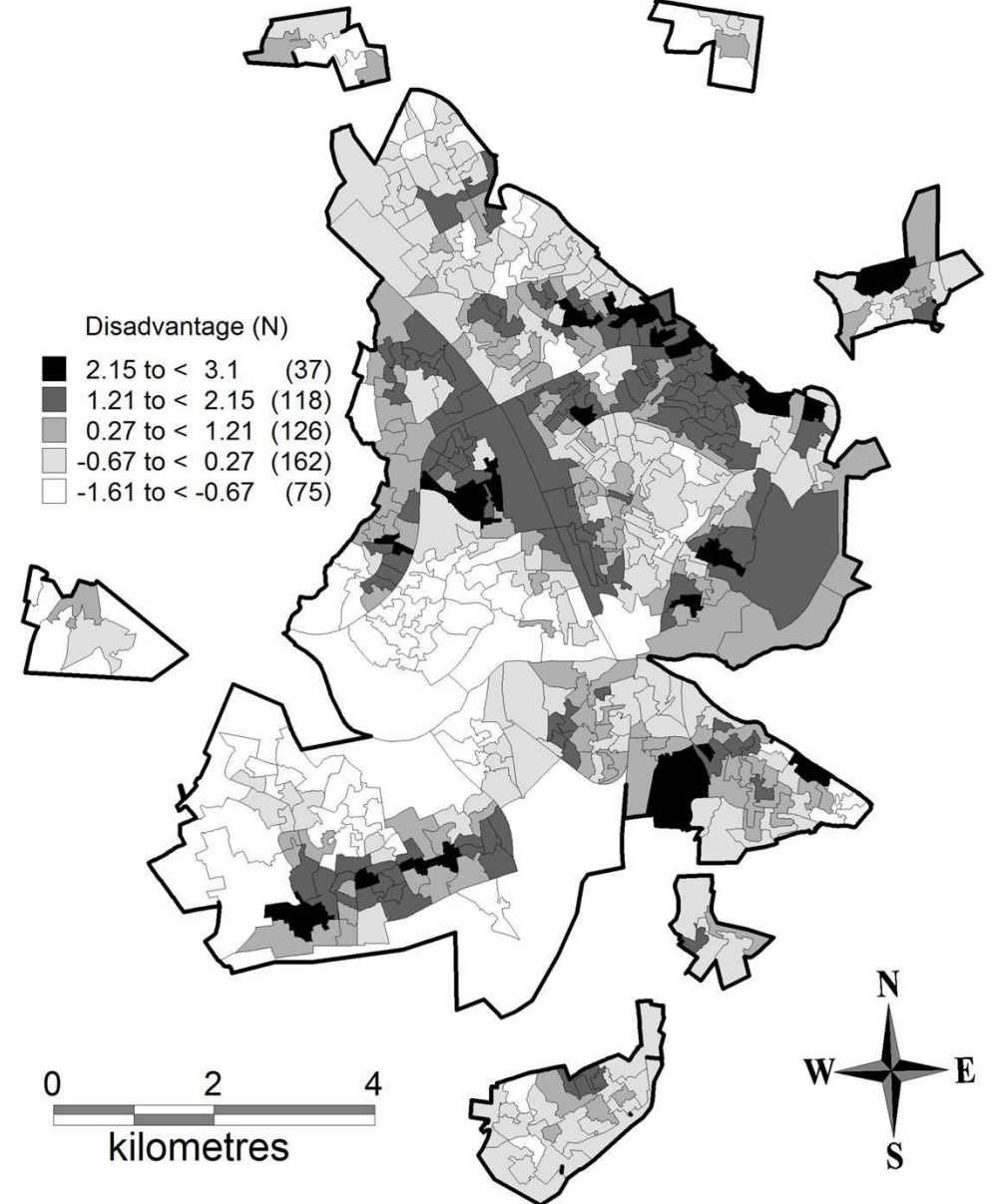
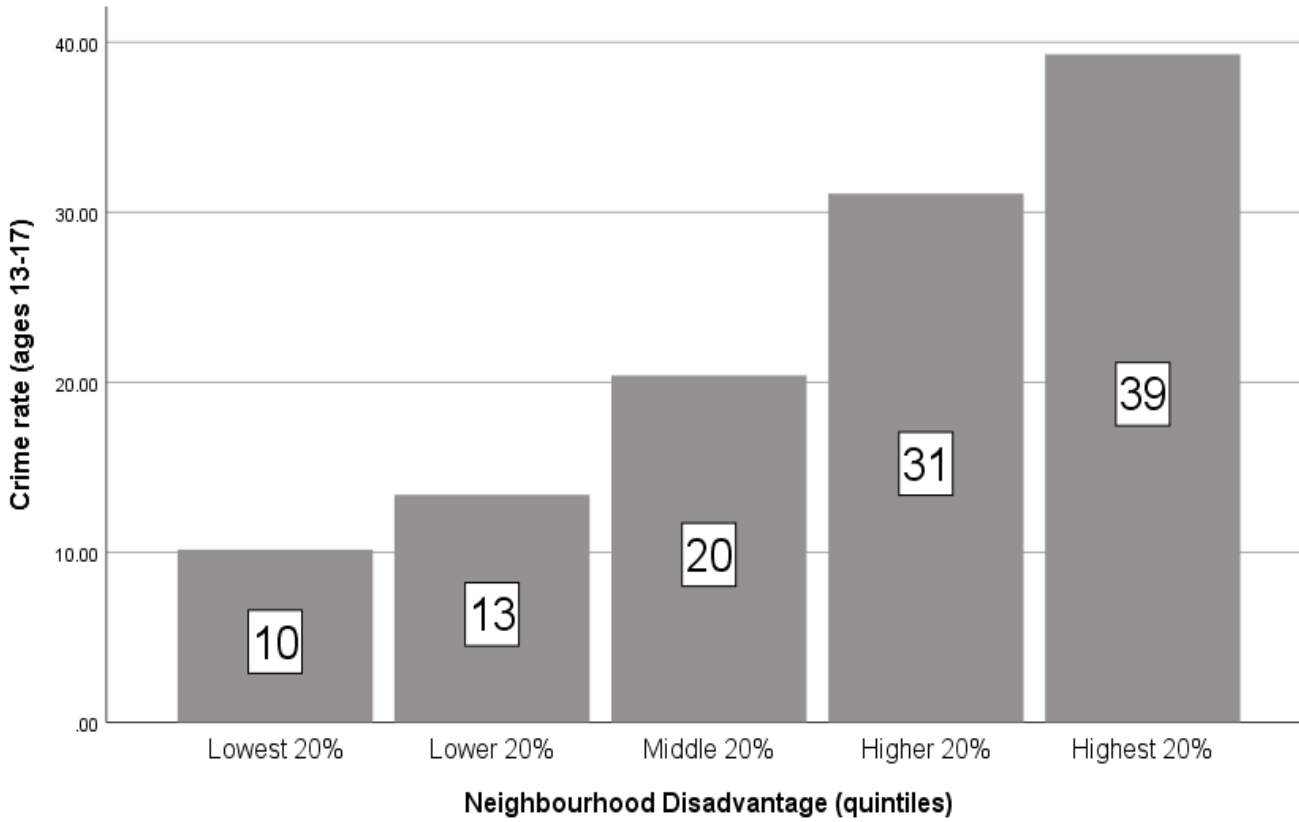
*“...although most persistent offenders come from disadvantaged backgrounds, most people from disadvantaged backgrounds don't become persistent offenders”*



(Wikström & Treiber, 2016)

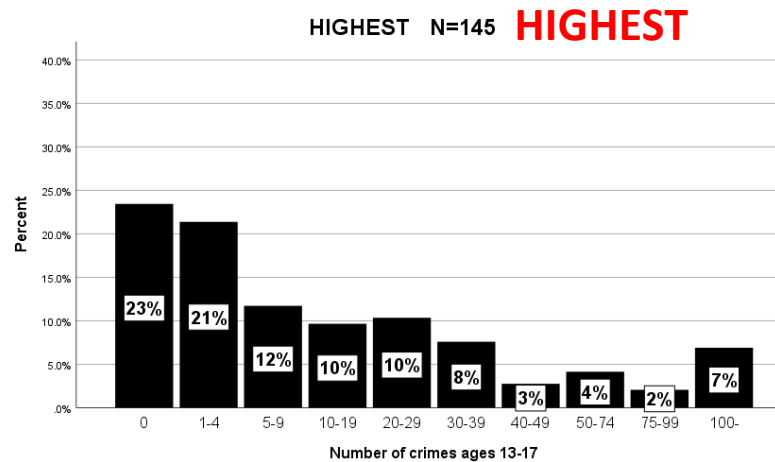
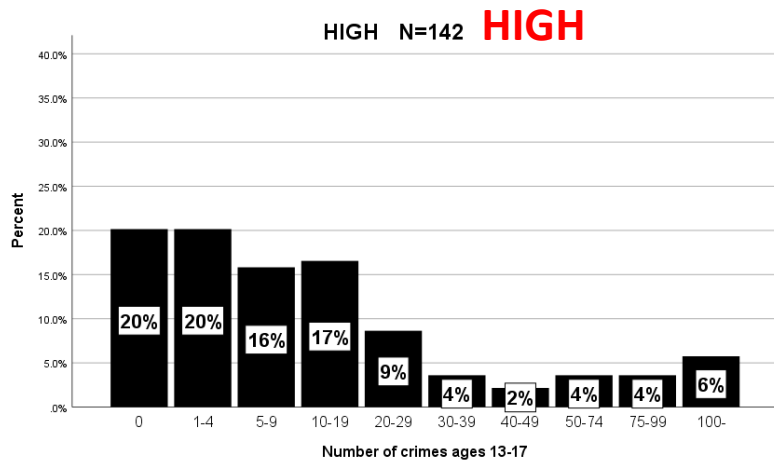
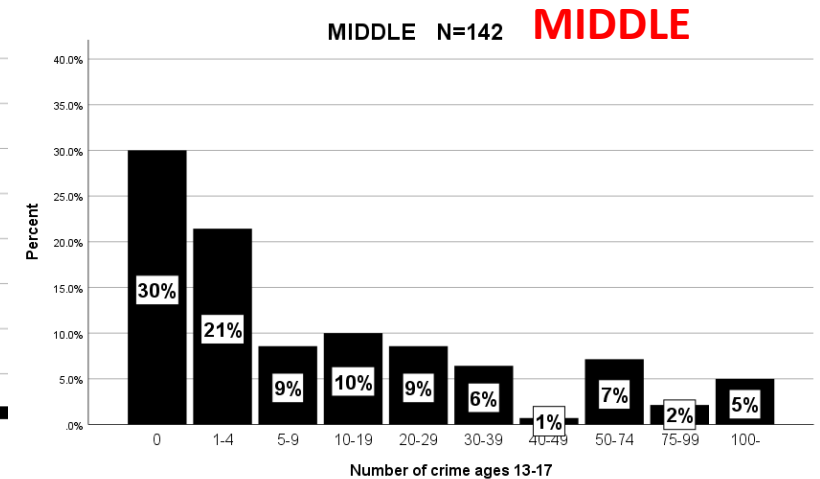
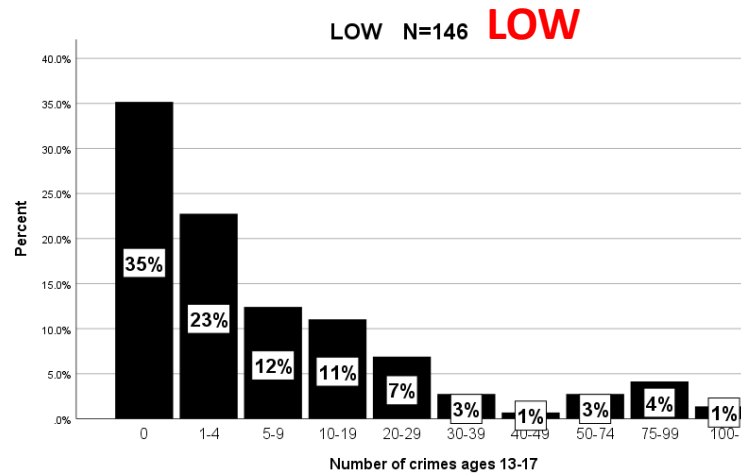
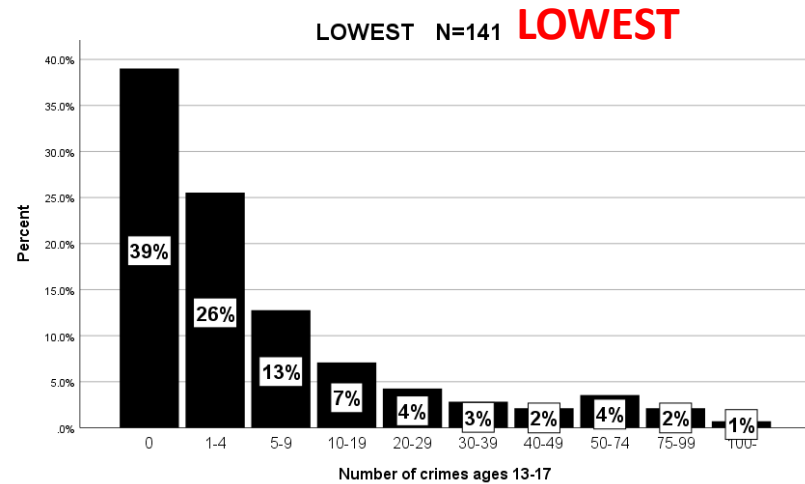


# Neighbourhood Disadvantage and crime rates



# WHY SOME AND NOT OTHERS?

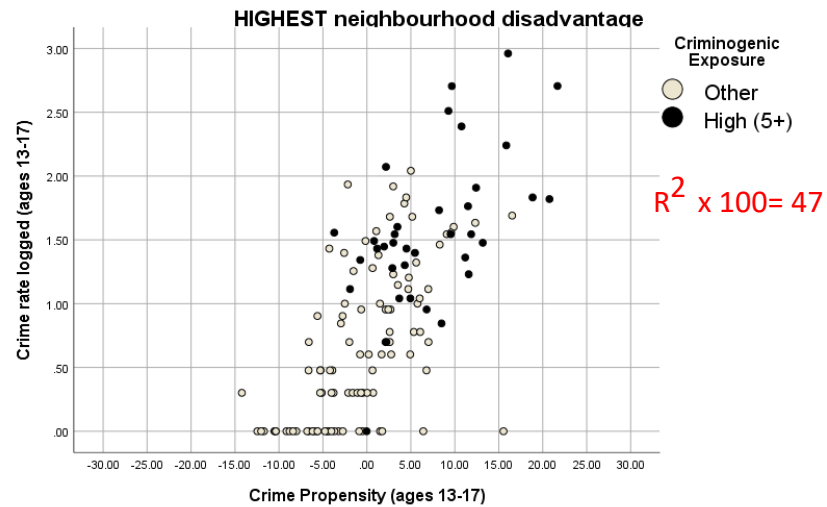
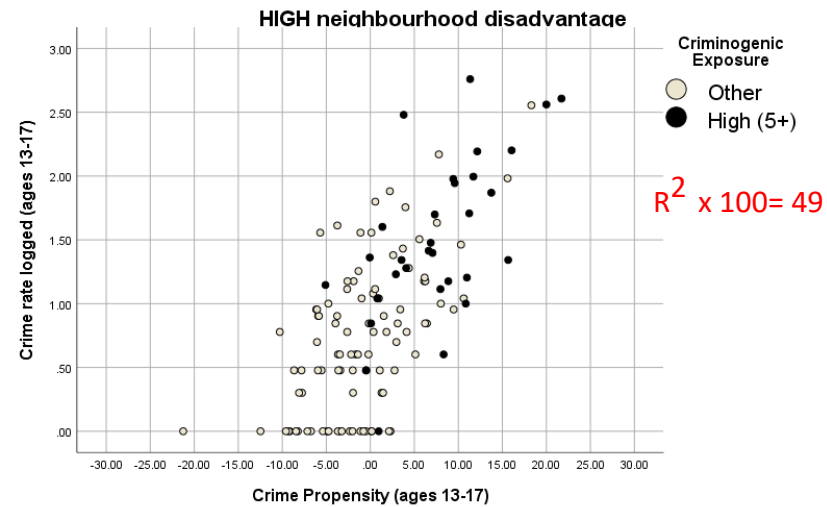
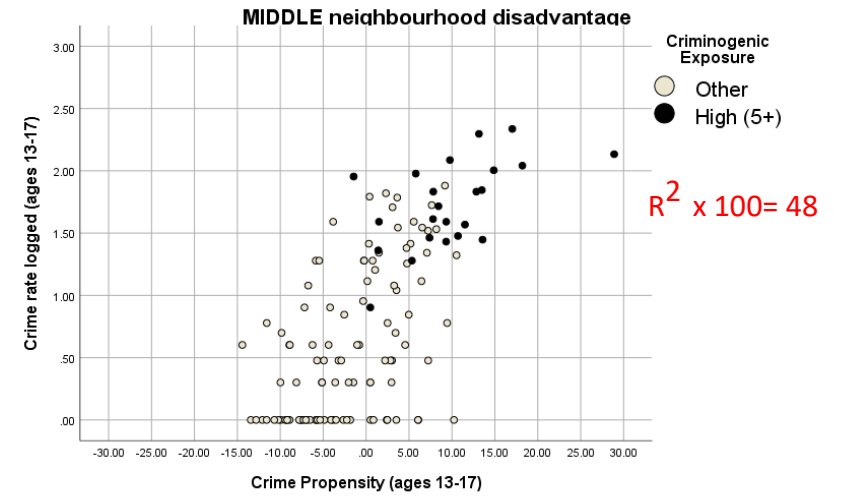
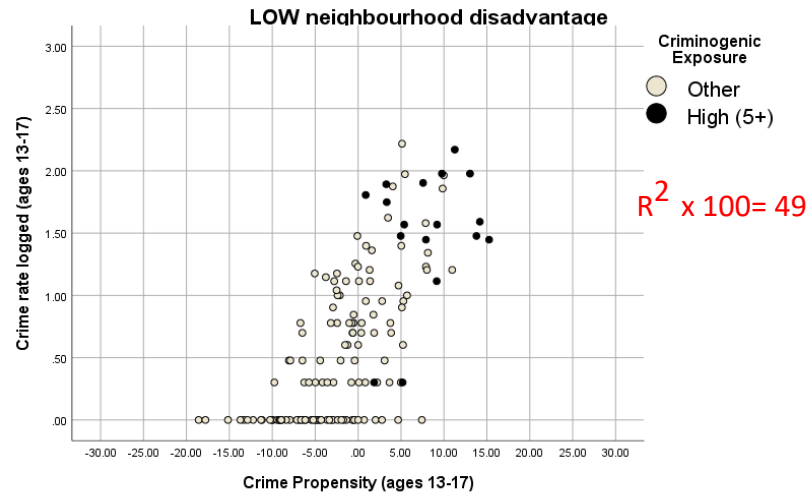
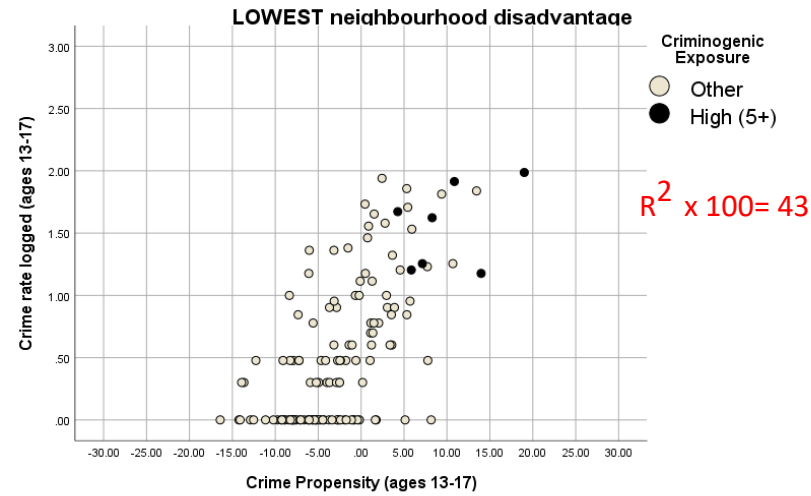
## Crime distribution (total crime ages 13-17) by childhood (age 12) neighbourhood disadvantage quintiles



In each disadvantage group there are young people who commit no crime and young people who commit a lot of crime.

Non-offenders are somewhat more common in the least disadvantaged groups and high frequency offenders are somewhat more common in the most disadvantaged groups.

# Scattergrams Crime propensity and Crime rates (logged) ages 13-17 by childhood (age 12) neighbourhood disadvantage quintiles (high levels of criminogenic exposure indicated by markers)

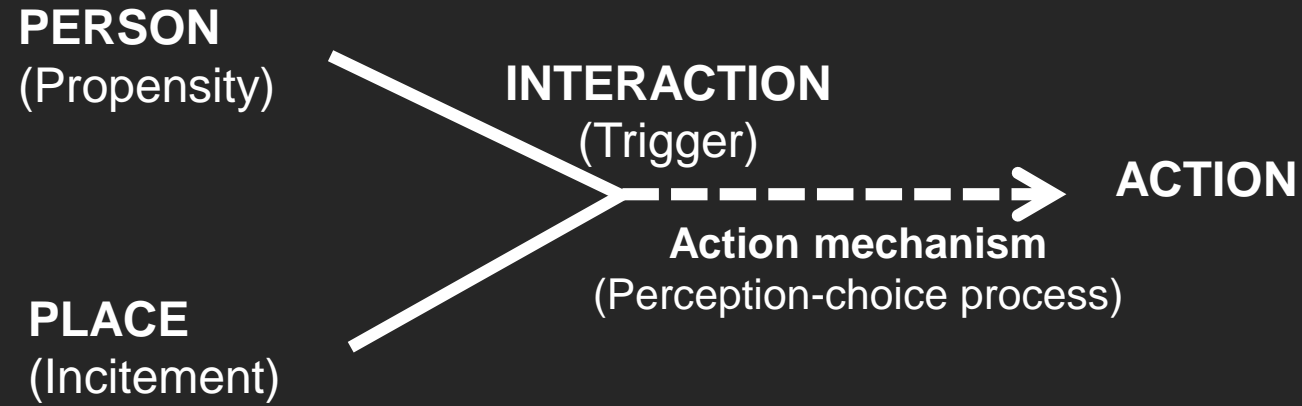


**Percent variance in crime rates accounted for by crime propensity and criminogenic exposure**

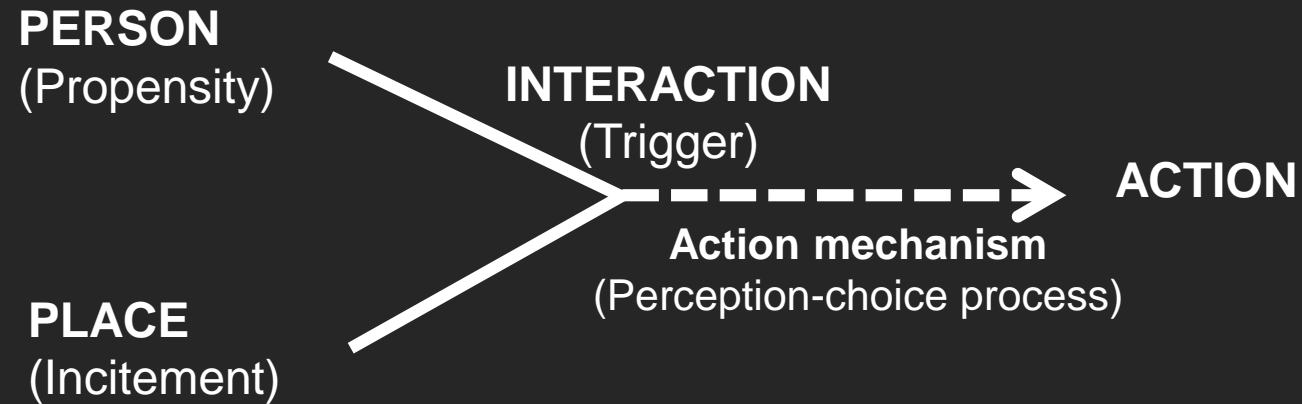
Disadvantage	Percent variance
Lowest	49
Low	59
Middle	56
High	54
Highest	54

# Situational Action Theory

Implications for  
policy and prevention



**Alter the input and  
the behaviour will change**



To change people's criminal behaviour we can

**change people (reduce *crime propensities*)**

(influence their law-relevant personal morals and ability to exercise self-control through influencing processes of moral education and cognitive nurturing)

**change environments (reduce *external criminogenic incitements*)**

(influence opportunities and frictions and their moral contexts – the law-relevant moral norms and their enforcement)

**change people's exposure to environments (reduce *criminogenic interactions*)**

(influence processes of social and self-selection)

## *Causes of the Causes*

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## *Causes (of crime events)*

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### DRIVERS OF STABILITY AND CHANGE

### INPUT

### TRIGGER

### MENTAL PROCESS

### OUTCOME

Socioecological processes  
of Social and Self-selection



Criminogenic  
inducements

Psychosocial processes  
of Moral education and  
Cognitive nurturing



Crime  
propensities

Interaction



Perception-choice process

ACTION  
Crime/  
No Crime

### PSYCHOSOCIAL PROCESSES

#### Moral Education

(continous learning and evaluation process by which people come to adopt, modify and change value-based and emotionally grounded rules of conduct)

- \* **Instruction**
- **Observation**
- **Personal Experimentation**

#### Cognitive Nurturing

The experientel process (limited by a person's neuroogical constitution and base line capacities) that influence people's neurocognitive capacities and positively influence their expression.

- \* **problem-solving**
- \* **patience and restraint**
- \* **concentration**

*Causes of the Causes*

*Causes (of crime events)*

**DRIVERS OF STABILITY AND CHANGE**

**INPUT**

**TRIGGER**

**MENTAL PROCESS**

**OUTCOME**

**Socioecological processes of Social and Self-selection**



**Criminogenic inducements**

**Psychosocial processes of Moral education and Cognitive nurturing**



**Crime propensities**

**Interaction**



**Perception-choice process**

**ACTION  
Crime/  
No Crime**

**SOCIOECOLOGICAL PROCESSES**

**Social Selection**

The cultural (rule-based) and structural (resource-distribution-based) conditions in a jurisdiction (e.g., a nation or a city) that enable (encourage or compel) or restrict (discourage or bar) particular kinds of people from taking part in particular kinds of time- and place-based activities

As manifested in, e.g., average gender, age and social class differences in setting exposures.

**Self-selection**

The person's preference and agency-based choices of taking part in particular kinds of settings within the constraints of the forces of social selection.



# Situational Action theory

**Explaining  
radicalization  
and terrorism.  
Some pointers**

## **Key Problems in research into radicalization:**

- 1. Which individuals are most vulnerable to the features of settings that promote radicalisation (the problem of vulnerability).**
- 2. How people, through social and self-selection, come to be exposed to these radicalising settings (the problem of exposure).**
- 3. How radicalising settings emerge (the problem of emergence).**

Bouhana & Wikström (2011)

1. To acquire a propensity for terrorism, people have to become exposed to terrorism-supportive moral contexts (exposure).
2. For them to be exposed, settings with terrorism-supportive moral contexts have to be present in their environment (emergence), and they have to come into regular contact with these settings (vulnerability to selection).
3. For radicalisation to result from exposure, individuals have to be sensitive to the influence of the terrorism-supportive features of the settings they come into regular contact with (vulnerability to moral change).

## *Reducing Moral and cognitive vulnerability*

*Cognitive vulnerability* (poor ability to self-control) manifests as an inability to cope with external pressure (e.g., peer pressure).

*Moral vulnerability* is described as a weak commitment to conventional moral rules and values (**weak moral rule-guidance**), or as the undermining of a prior commitment to moral rules and values.

**There is a strong suggestion across problem areas that** commitment to a conventional moral framework renders people less susceptible, if not immune, to the influence of radicalising settings. **Conversely,** a weak commitment to a conventional moral framework renders them vulnerable **to that influence.**

## *Influencing social and self-selection.*

The selection of settings based on preference and other personal factors (self-selection) occurs within the limits set by social selection.

People are more likely to find themselves in certain kinds of places according to the (social, cultural, economic, residential) categories to which they belong. If one of these kinds of places happens to contain a radicalising setting, then the people more likely to find themselves in these places will also be more likely to be exposed to radicalising influence.

Who is at risk of exposure (and who will be radicalised) is determined by the location of radicalising settings. Processes of social selection can explain why radicalised individuals have diverse socio-demographic or socio-economic characteristics: their background will be, in part, determined by the characteristics of the radicalising settings found in the environment.

## *Emergence is key, but poorly understood*

**Radicalising settings are characterised by:**

- **socialising practices, notably moral teachings, which support terrorist violence;**
- **a lack of effective monitoring of the behaviours that go on in the setting; and**
- **opportunities for attachments to radicalising agents, be they peers, recruiters, or moral authority figures.**

**These radicalising features are found in places ranging from 'neutral' settings (for example, sports clubs) to so-called radicalisation magnets (for example, religious study groups). Neutral settings can expose individuals to radicalising influences in an incidental way: what attracts people to the setting in the first place are not its radicalising features, but some other aspect or activity.**

Bouhana & Wikström (2011)

**Very little is known about why radicalising settings emerge in certain places at certain times, but the following factors are likely to influence that process:**

- ***Systemic factors.*** The literature points to the contribution of community-level factors, such as low levels of collective efficacy, in creating an environment favourable to the emergence of radicalising settings. Other factors include residential segregation and intergenerational gaps, which contribute to the creation of spaces isolated from mainstream society (spaces where radicalising practices may not be challenged).
- ***Media.*** Media are a vector that facilitate the introduction of new moral values and ideas into local contexts.
- ***Radicalising narratives.*** These narratives are characterised as transcendental, simplistic, categorical and action-orientated, all characteristics that would appeal to a young audience. This has implications for the crafting of counter-radicalising narratives

**Effective prevention of radicalization is the one that successfully**

- 1. Reduce people's vulnerability to radicalising messages through moral education and cognitive nurturing**
- 2. Reduce peoples exposure to radicalising settings through affecting processes of social and self-selection**
- 3. Reduce the emergence of radicalising settings**



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## Theory

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