

A Review on Steffensmeier and his associates' challenging findings on age and its relation to crime in Taiwan

Letter to editor

A recent published paper by Steffensmeier and his associates have advanced our understanding of one of criminology's crucial debates between the life course thesis and Hirschi et al.,¹ thesis of the invariant relationship between age and crime in all social and cultural conditions. In other words, their thesis implies that age has a direct effect on crime, presumably the outcomes of biological maturation and aging determinants. This paper offers first-hand empirical evidence arguing the age-crime relationship could be conditioned by cultural and social contexts. Steffensmeier and his associates (2017) argue that the relationship between age and crime observed in Taiwan's collectivist culture is hypothesized to be more divergent than homogeneity in their age-crime schedules comparing with their counterpart under the U.S. individualist gestalt. Their findings support robust divergence in Taiwan's age-crime patterns compared with U.S. patterns and the reverted J-shaped norm projected by Hirschi et al.,¹ Steffensmeier et al.,² findings were also responsive to their literature review that helps construct comprehensive interpretations of the findings. The findings provide a considerable challenge to Hirschi et al.,¹ thesis. Furthermore, this study also stipulates an advanced theoretical challenge to the infamous invariance thesis for a significant theoretical revision. Studies and scholars in the field should find much merit from this research.

According to the study, peak crime ages in Taiwan are typically in the late twenties or older, with the age curves being either bimodal or lacking a clear-cut peak and more than 50 percent of arrestees being in their mid-thirties. The variance deviations are consistently much lower for Taiwan than for the invariance standard found in the U.S. data, aggregate and individual data. That is, Taiwan offenders are more widely distributed over all ages while U.S. counterparts are more aggregated in late teens. The bimodal crime-distribution or the less age related variance in crime commitment in Taiwan data had not been documented for comparisons while both societies have many modern cultural convergences. While the authors provide several explanations for their significant findings, they encourage more explanatory research to assist the further understanding of the research findings. Steffensmeier et al.,² suggest (partly informed by related literature) that some protective factors associated with teenagers in Taiwan society are embedded in their collective social norms in all types of social institutions. These protective factors may include greater attachment to education and parents, fewer stresses other than academic performance, broader protective social monitoring of daily activities, less formal policing, and more informal handling of juvenile offenders. However, the findings cannot explain the late crime peak in the twenties or thirties in Taiwanese data due to these factors.

Life course theories by³⁻⁵ argue that less social control contributes to greater involvement of juvenile delinquency (i.e. dropping out of school) while later adult social control (marriage or work) could bring the youth back to normative social institutions so as to quit their prior

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wayward behaviors. The initial look of the life course approach may help explain the Taiwan data findings but it may not be able to explain the lower commitment in crime between post-college ages and the early thirties, which may lack of school constraint, nor the establishing work or marital responsibility. Steffensmeier et al.,² are aware of the possible explanations of developmental-psychological approaches that attribute the age effect to preprogrammed neurobiological changes over the adolescent-adulthood transition.⁶ However, they may need to look further to examine the need of autonomy among teenagers between U.S. and Taiwanese youths as another factor contributing to the research findings. The most effective parenting practice to prevent wayward behavior is authoritative parenting that includes both a high level of parental involvement of child behavior and performance (parental warmth and affection) and a firm adherence to schedule and discipline (parental monitoring). Nevertheless, besides its capability of preventing child deviance, parental monitoring may yield additional adverse outcomes (deviance/delinquency) due to its threat on youth's needs of autonomy.^{7,8} In Asian societies, collective culture usually deemphasizes the need of autonomy so that youth may not sense the need until the early adulthood or even their thirties, which is parallel to the abovementioned protective social norms in Taiwanese society. The examination of this factor may help provide further explanations to current findings.

In addition, senior high schools are tremendously different between these two countries. U.S. high schools have students from local communities and thus delinquent/crime commitment is related to neighborhood characteristics and informal social control exercised in their community. However, Taiwanese high schools select students (through regional school entry exams) according to their academic performances (although the government has been trying to bring down the impact of academic performance by reducing its role in the school entry policies). Therefore, delinquent students are more likely to be concentrated in certain low ranking schools and will be more likely to be closely supervised by school authorities or directed to some alternative activities rather than classroom learning, while good high

schools are mostly immune from influences of delinquent students. It will be interesting to understand how the differences between the high school institutions in these two societies can help explain current findings.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

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