

TheCrimAcademy_60_Bersani

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SPEAKERS

Bianca Bersani, Jenn Tostlebe, Jose Sanchez

Jenn Tostlebe 00:14

Hi everyone. Welcome to the Criminology Academy Podcast where we are criminally academic. My name is Jenn Tostlebe

Jose Sanchez 00:21

And my name is Jose Sanchez.

Jenn Tostlebe 00:23

And today we have Professor Bianca Bersani on the podcast to talk with us about life course criminology, specifically the impacts of arrest on adolescents and their transition into adulthood.

Jose Sanchez 00:35

Bianca Bersani is currently an associate professor in criminology and criminal justice at the University of Maryland, and Director of the Maryland crime Research and Innovation Center. She earned her BA and MA in sociology from the University of Nebraska Lincoln, and her PhD in criminology and criminal justice from the University of Maryland. Bianca's research interests are broadly shaped by the life course perspective. Specifically, her work centers on examining patterns, or trajectories and processes related to offending across the life course with particular emphasis on how and why salient life events like marriage and arrest alter criminal offending trajectories, and influence the systems from crime. The mechanisms that help to facilitate behavior change over time, and how processes of change may be conditioned by one's social position, for example, race and ethnicity, gender, class, and immigrant generation or socio historical context. Another line of work focuses on examining and explaining the generational disparity in immigrant offending. Thank you so much for joining us, Bianca. We're very excited to have you.

Bianca Bersani 01:36

Yeah, thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Jenn Tostlebe 01:39

All right, so we're gonna start off today's discussion by having this broad conversation about life course criminology, your academic background, and how this has shaped your thinking on the life course perspective. Then we'll move into a paper authored by Bianca, "Does early adolescent arrest alter the developmental course of offending into young adulthood?" It gets at some of the foundational ideas about age and crime and taps into early life course events and how they impact criminal trajectories. And then we'll end with a more recent interest of yours in the area of emerging adult justice. So, with that being said, we'll get started. And before we really want to talk about your work specifically on life course criminology, we just wanted to take a moment and talk about something that you brought up to us in an email, which is your academic background, and how you worded it, your academic family tree and how it shapes your perspective. So, we've had a few people on the podcast to talk about life course criminology, including Rob Sampson, and John Laub, who you've studied with, and is now your colleague at Maryland. So, can you tell us a little bit about your academic background, who you studied with and how those experiences impacted your view on life course criminology?

Bianca Bersani 02:59

Yeah, sure. So, I really think that academic family trees are really fun to think about and reflect upon. And I think my own was hugely influential on my thinking about the life course and situating my conversation and research on continuity and change. So, as you did such a good job reviewing my academic trajectory really started in the sociology department at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. There, I had an opportunity to study with and learn from Dr. Connie Chapel, who happened to be a graduate student with Gottfredson and Hirschi when they had just sort of finished their general theory of crime. So, very early on in my career, I became interested in things like self control, this idea that our early life course had held implications for our later life outcomes. And I developed a pretty great appreciation for this relationship between age and crime. I then transferred to the University of Maryland, where I earned my PhD, I was fortunate, in all honesty, quite shocked to be admitted to UMD. Right from the get go, I was assigned to work with Dr. John Laub. And these were the years soon after the release of "Shared beginnings, divergent lives." As a little bit of a funny aside, I remember the very first meeting with John where we were talking about my interest and research directory and kind of what I wanted to do at Maryland. And I think I may be even proposed the idea of a theory of self control over the life course. And at the conclusion of that meeting, he jokingly spoke about looking forward to the many debates that we would have, and that he would work in like full earnest to lure me over to the dark side of life course criminology. So, while I wouldn't say that I made this sort of complete shift, I do think that if we bring these two branches of this academic family together, you'll see these kind of dual influences in my thinking about age and crime and why people change. And so, you know, I think I listened to that podcast that you had both with Rob and but also John and I've even drawn into this idea of this tension that exists between life course theory and self control theory. I think because of my academic background, I actually see a lot of consistency and complimentariness between these perspectives where others see, you know, a great deal of debate. And so to give a quick example, I do think that there is significant change over the life course, and that salient life events like marriage matter for desistance. But where my work has been situated, is trying to focus on these mechanisms behind the change. So do people change? Or do situations change, and Gottfredson would frame this as a propensity versus event question. And at least from my work with my colleague, Elaine Doherty, the evidence tends to suggest that marriage, for instance, matters because it changes our situations or opportunities to offend. But that's kind of the marrying I guess, of those two perspectives.

Jose Sanchez 05:54

Okay, as Jen mentioned earlier, and we've talked about one of the foundation ideas in life course, criminology is age and crime. And we've mentioned the age-crime curve on the podcast before but we've kind of has been like a one off or something that was tangential to our main points, but we've never quite defined it. Can you give us a brief definition of what the age crime curve is?

Bianca Bersani 06:17

Yeah. So I love this definitional piece of what you all do. You know, in a nutshell, the age-crime curve reflects this age distribution offending. So, the ages at which we begin to offend when offending peaks in the life course, as well as when offending declines. So, when we look at this, in the aggregate, the distribution tends to look like an inverted U shaped pattern, where we see a rise very early in adolescence, the peak tends to occur from mid adolescence into maybe the early 20s. And then there's a precipitous decline. And the peak is really kind of shifted maybe by a year or two in one direction or the other, depending on if we're looking at specific crime types.

Jose Sanchez 07:00

And has the curve held constant over time and across location isn't something that we see consistently, no matter where we are? Is it sort of dependent on historical context, geographic location, things like that?

Bianca Bersani 07:15

Yeah, so the age distribution is actually arguably one of the first criminological facts that we have or observations. So in the early 1800's Quetelet noted this distributional quality of crime where it tended to peak then I think it was the early to mid 20s, and then rapidly declined after. And in his work, he actually centered age, right, as the key factor in halting one's propensity for crime. And so this observation of the inverted U shaped pattern of crime has found, you know, remarkably consistent across, you know, different sources of data across different time, places, locations, different people. And the consistency in which it's been observed has really led to this idea that being coined a brute fact, in criminology. And this is this sort of takes kind of center stage in the mid 80s, when Gottfredson and Hirschi publish a classic article that starts a series of articles, where they show evidence of this inverted U pattern, holding over historical time across time, crime types, geographic context, across people, distinguished by different demographic groups. And because of this, they argue that the age crime curve is invariant, and that invariance thesis spurs what is known as the great debate in criminology, where we start to think about right, like, what is this age crime curve tapping into, you know, on the one hand, you have Gottfredson and Hirschi and others who are arguing that it really does tap into a general pattern of offending that holds across individuals. And so why you might see some variation around the curve, that variation is kind of statistical noise and behavioral trajectories of offending share a similar unimodal shape over age. On the other side, though, you've got these arguments that that aggregate curve are looking in the aggregate is really masking a lot of individual differences that if we were to disaggregate that out, we would see a series of different curves. But I think, you know, I'm one of those people that loves this debate. I think a lot of my grad peers were sort of sick of the debate and back and forth and didn't see as much sort of inspiration from it. But you know, I really think that the regardless of your stance on invariance, this really was kind of, I guess, a turning point in criminology is life course, of

spending a lot more attention thinking about this full trajectory, what the pattern of offending looks like, over age, and really thinking about change, right? Continuity and change and how people matter. And so you have on the one hand, this kind of cool thinking from Moffitt that really it's the aggregate curve is two groups of people. And so the bulk of the people, these adolescent limiteds, who, because of their size, really account for those distributional features of the curve, sort of masks this other life course persisting group, right? That will be more persistent, which is great names, right? And continue defending into adulthood, versus the Sampson and Laub idea of life course and thinking about informal social controls. And you know, how those things might function as turning points, right to think about continuity and change. So, it's sort of a central piece, I think, in our life course of the discipline.

Jenn Tostlebe 10:33

Yeah, I really like these debates. And I think, really, until this episode, I mean, we have a little bit with Rob and with John, but we haven't like dived into these debates, like fully and no talking about your academic family tree. And then this last discussion you were talking about. Now, these are really like our first in depth looks at these debates. And so I guess one of our next questions for you is, you know, what can a life course? Or what can life course criminology tell us about someone that this cross sectional, or this snapshot in time type study cannot tell us?

Bianca Bersani 11:14

Yeah, and I think this is like another debate that comes out later, right? Do we need to be spending all this money on like, of course studies, and what we can get from cross sectional will tell us the same thing. You know, I think there's a little bit to that in terms of we can learn a lot from cross sectional research. But, you know, I'll speak to two benefits that I see in terms of thinking about life course, longitudinal data. So the first kind of links back to this idea that, you know, we've really gotten a chance to learn a lot about the nature of change over the life course. And so, you know, we could look at a series of cross sectional studies of individuals at different ages, and maybe look at different rates of marriage and different rates of offending and those cross sections of time. But we can't really grapple with or grapple well with this process of change, and why life events such as marriage, right, may matter. And so I think life course, and longitudinal studies provide this opportunity to look at this process of change in a way that is much harder, if not maybe impossible to get at with cross sectional designs. But I think, you know, a second thing is that we get to statistically leverage longitudinal way for important analytical models. And so I use within individual studies, a lot in those methods to, you know, look at individuals at one point in time compared to themselves earlier. So, taking the case of marriage, right, what is an individual like when married compared to themselves before they were married. And so in this way, they're functioning as their own statistical control in dealing with some of these issues that we have with things like the selection bias. And so I think we should think about, you know, whether longitudinal data is the right approach, but I also think that longitudinal data allows us to really explore questions at a in a different way.

Jenn Tostlebe 13:06

Yeah. And kind of get into more of the explanatory elements. And also then the longitudinal you know, the methodologies. Very cool. Awesome.

Bianca Bersani 13:16

Yeah, I agree. Yeah, definitely.

Jose Sanchez 13:18

So, in terms of like, life course, criminology, we often talk about, like the pathways that people follow, to desist from crime, you know, we typically call these events, turning points. So, you know, like getting married, getting employment, joining the military, things like that. But we want to flip the script a little bit, and ask, can you have a turning point that goes in the opposite direction, meaning you start offending or engaging in criminal behavior because of a turning point? And, like, do we know about the types of events that could have this type of effect on someone?

Bianca Bersani 13:54

Yeah, I think this is a really important point, you know, we put so much time thinking about turning points in their positive potential. And there's a lot, you know, in that space, but we spent much less time thinking about the idea of a negative turning point. And there's nothing inherent in that concept of turning point that makes it positive, right? So, it could be having these an event could be altering our trajectories in different directions. So, you know, there was some early work, thinking about this in terms of negative turning points, at least in the developmental phase of adulthood, right? And so, you know, research looked at, for instance, the experience of incarceration, and so was incarceration itself a turning point? Or maybe did that experience actually alter and hinder our opportunities for some of these other positive turning points like marriage and later employment? Interestingly enough, in one of my first articles that I have, I looked at this idea of a negative turning point and how it was linked to things in education. And so my master's thesis I first touched on this idea by looking at late grade retention. So, being held back a grade and high school and school suspension at that time, for later adolescent delinquency arrest, I found that there were, right, indications, right? I didn't have the statistical prowess to like actually look to see if it was a turning point. But there was an association between experiencing these events and increased offending at a later point. More recently, though, we've begun to like really look at these early life course experiences, right? So, thinking about not kind of negative experiences and maybe hindering distance. But thinking about how early life course experiences can have negative influences for our pathways into offending, right. And so shifting that focus at a different developmental period, Sampson and Winter, and this really cool study that looks at the effect of early lead exposure in childhood, and it's a relationship with adolescent delinquency and arrest, they do a number of different kinds of fun statistical things, and pretty convincing evidence that the relationship is actually causal. And so early lead exposure is causing more delinquency and adolescence, and they liken it or suggest that this is, in fact evidence that that is a negative turning point. And then there's pretty robust body of evidence that looks at things like legal system contact during adolescence and how that holds criminogenic consequences. So, this could be anything from minor forms of contact and thinking about, you know, stop and frisk, catch and release, up to arrest. And we find evidence that yes, these things are negative, they have criminogenic effects. And the earlier this contact occurs, right, the more detrimental it is for the life course, we also know though that like the effects of early arrest are more widespread. And so arrest has been associated with negative academic and employment outcomes, we see that it ends up weakening our social networks and decreasing our links with pro-social peers, which might push us into more connections with delinquent peers. And it, of course, has this relationship with heightening our level of surveillance, right, so could lead to continued system contact. There's a whole host of other things, though, that I think we're just

starting to get into. And so this area is just starting to be kind of poked at in the research. And so, you know, I think we could imagine things like trauma and victimization and like linking up some of the ACEs work that's out there. Widom and colleagues have a study that looks at early childhood maltreatment, and how that actually alters our criminal career trajectory in detrimental ways. I think that though, you know, if we move beyond even some of these individual experiences, and we think really more broadly, we could be looking at or should be looking at large scale social events, right, so COVID, and its impact on the life course. And, you know, while COVID had these broad reaching impacts across the population, we also know that COVID impacted us differently depending on our age. And so having three young kids, I think about this a lot, and how COVID had impacted individuals at the start of their life course trajectories, right? So, children are kind of pulled out of academic institutions. And for many, right, it completely stopped their academic trajectories, it halted access to health care, and we see this by, you know, big declines in vaccination rates. And then also, as youth are kind of transitioning back into the school environment, we've seen actually increases in adolescent aggression, particularly in middle schools, as these kids are trying to navigate what it means to be in a shared social space, again, these interpersonal relationships, and then also, you know, having that strain and stress of trying to catch up in school, right, because, again, they're behind. So, I know that that was a really long response to your question. But in a nutshell, I think that there's like so many individual kind of contextual social events that we should be thinking about, that are sort of spurring this onset or the, you know, entry into pathways of offending.

Jose Sanchez 19:15

Do we see any sort of variation in these pathways, depending on the sex and gender, race and ethnicity? Or do they tend to sort of hold constant across all these groups?

Bianca Bersani 19:25

Yeah, in my opinion, opinion, this is a really big gap and an important gap in the literature. We know that the sheer prevalence of contact with like sanctioning agents, right is disproportionately and differently felt among young black minority men, or by young minority men, not necessarily black only. Two important studies revealed as you know, quite clearly McGlenn and colleagues have a fairly recent study out that shows that black youth who experience in arrest are 11 times greater to experience this subsequent arrest and adulthood compared to their black peers who didn't experience that arrest. But they also find that that detrimental impact is not observed among white youth. Raphael And Roza. I want to say have another study that finds similar detrimental effects for Hispanic youth, right? So we are seeing these kind of differences, at least in formal system contact? Well, we don't know. And when I think we need to delve in more. And, you know, I know we'll get to it. We tried to do this a little bit in our papers thinking about how this disparity in contact translates to developmental implications, right for the life course in terms of offending trajectories, but also other later life outcomes.

Jenn Tostlebe 20:42

All right, so I think that sets us up in a pretty good place to start to move into your paper. So this was authored by our guests, Bianca and then her colleagues, Wade Jacobson and Elaine Doherty. Okay, "Does early adolescent arrest alter the developmental course of offending into young adulthood?" It was published this year in the Journal of Youth and Adolescence. And just to give a quick little summary of this paper, Bianca and her colleagues examine the impact arrests early in the life course

can have on people by answering if and how early arrests alter offending trajectories. To do this, they use the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. And after restricting the data on two parameters, age 12 to 14 at baseline, and youth who were asked about offending across all of the waves. This resulted in a total sample of 1,293 individuals. Is that a fair quick overview of your paper?

Bianca Bersani 21:44

That is great, I need you to do all of my elevator pitches.

Jenn Tostlebe 21:49

Jose typed that up. So, our first question for you about this paper is just what was the motivation? What kind of gap were you looking to fill with this paper?

Bianca Bersani 22:02

Yeah, so this is an instance of an idea that's been brewing for a number of years, I'm a little bit embarrassed to say how many years so I just won't. So, it took me a little bit, I was trying to think about, like, where are the embers of this idea for this research, and I think it was kind of like a combination of things over time. And so quite a few years ago, I remember compiling evidence of all of these research studies and other things coming out that were showing this, like, various age indicators of risky behavior curve, right? So, look at my list here. So, I don't get the names wrong. Toch and Adams show evidence of an age prison rule violation curve, Brehm colleagues show an age genocide, Kerr, Lawson and colleagues reported each terrorism curve. But even beyond risky behavior, there's evidence of an age genius and productivity curve, and an age biological and different psychological curve. And so this kind of structure, right, of thinking about patterns with age and how they're very similar, when you kind of pull them all together, rekindled, I think, my interest in thinking about some of this early work on age and crime, right. And so you see this in kind of the delving in here. And what becomes actually, I think, a central point of conversation and the Annual Review of Criminology piece that I wrote with Elaine Doherty. It's that desistance in the 21st century chatter. And so in that we bring attention to this idea that, you know, criminology is really talked around this notion of natural desistance. And this is actually a concept that other disciplines pay a little bit more attention to, such as psychology and epidemiology of thinking about natural trajectories and natural recovery and things that are just occurring outside of the need of any sort of formal intervention, right? It's just sort of natural kind of processes that happen as we develop. So, when our chapter, we make an argument that sort of linking back to our early discussion about Gottfredson and Hirschi and their strong stance on invariance age-crime curve, it really resulted in a lot of people trying to or spending a lot of time trying to prove or disprove that thesis, right? And so research, you know, through and actually continues to go a variety of social and psychological factors at that age-crime curve trying to explain it away. And we see a really great article by Sweeten colleagues where they throw 40, social covariates at best, right, and, and some of those, right, are important, they're associated with offending, but at the end of the day, they have the statement that age continues to have a statistically and substantively significant direct effect on behavior. So, there's something about age that is just kind of hanging in there. And so we don't disagree with that line of work. I think, you know, this led to some important findings. But, you know, I don't want to say, I won't speak for Elaine, but I think that it had a bit of an unfortunate consequence for the field and that it resulted in us ignoring maybe the focus on aging as it relates to behavior and the possibility of a natural process of offending. And, you know, I think that this is important, because to the

extent to which age and the age-crime curve is natural, and begs the question about why actors might actually impede that natural process, right? So, yes, we're going to have this rise in risky behavior in adolescents. But we're also going expected to decline, right, as it relates to this paper specifically, the question then became, you know, does criminal justice contact early in the life course, potentially disrupt the natural trajectory, and maybe even, you know, impede desistance from crime.

Jose Sanchez 25:46

So, one of the things and you start to mention that adolescents, teenagers, they tend to engage in risky behavior, it kind of just comes with the territory of being a teenager, and some of that can include engaging in crime. And you mentioned in your paper, that these are often considered normal facets of development. Can you tell us more as to why they're seen as normal, especially when you think that some of these, engaging in some of these activities can have negative consequences?

Bianca Bersani 26:19

Yeah, sure. So, we've long noticed, right, or known that delinquency is ubiquitous, right? So, when you look at different prevalence studies of the general population, or kind of suavs, of a birth cohort, it's like upwards of 95% or more of individuals self report and engaging in delinquent and criminal behavior. And that the notion is like that other four, or 5%, is either lying, or they're the abnormal individuals in the distribution. And, you know, this makes a lot of sense when we think about adolescence, right, and we reflect back, I think, it's always useful to reflect back on our own time periods and what we were like during those ages. And so from a cognitive perspective, know that during this period of our life, our brains are really rapidly developing. We know that that occurs early in infancy, but actually evidence more recently comes out shows that there's another wave of really rapid development that occurs during this time period. So, adolescents tend to have a heightened risk for our heightened responsiveness for rewards, right, so they're constantly looking to kind of seek out that sort of behavior and that this peaks at like 15 to 19 years of age, at the same time, our ability to control our impulses, or self regulate isn't quite yet developed. And so I talked with my students about it, it's like a car, where the accelerator is really on full tilt, right, and it's going very fast, but our braking mechanism just has not developed yet. And so eventually, these things become balanced, right, as we enter into our 20s, the development of our braking system matches or ramps up. Well, we spend a number of years right with the accelerator on full tilt. I think from a sociological perspective, though, as well, we know that this period of the life course is rife with a whole lot of different changes that are taking place. And so the salience of our family tends to take a little bit more of a backseat and peers become much more of a priority, we have a lot more independence. So, we have often access to transportation or at least more freedom with what we do with our time and combine these things lend way to just more opportunities, right, to engage in risky delinquent behavior, that's some times criminal, however, as equally ubiquitous is that like offending is, we also is like this process of desistance from crime and leave, a lessening or declining our offending without any need a formal intervention, right? So, if 95% of the population is intending to being involved in delinquent behavior, very few of those individuals are caught up in the system, most desist out and kind of go on to lead sort of regular productive lives that I think taps into this idea that there's a lot of natural desistance. That's happening, right, just generally in the population. And so I think that the pervasiveness, right, of these two things, this ubiquity of delinquency and the ubiquity of desistance, lend way to this notion that there's something natural and expected about this flow of involvement in crime. But I think Jose, as you mentioned, right, this isn't always the case, right?

This this kind of lack of formal intervention throughout this course, doesn't always happen. And some youth are going to get caught up in the criminal legal system. And that can really alter the trajectory and have really kind of negative consequences over the life course, both kind of immediately and long term outcomes.

Jose Sanchez 29:35

Yeah, definitely. They do like, I mean, I so appreciate it when you mentioned that we like try to put ourselves back into those times because I do that every time I read a live course paper and reading something about life course I always do. I just think back to my teenage years. I don't know why I always remember this time when some of my friends that will give you 50 cents if you eat this pepper and I did it. And I didn't even really care about the 50 cents that just wanted them to see that I was down for it right?

Jenn Tostlebe 30:06

Like I'm pure influence.

Jose Sanchez 30:08

Yeah.

Bianca Bersani 30:11

Those rewards, right?

Jose Sanchez 30:14

Yeah, like and it wasn't even like the monetary reward, right? It was like the peer, like the reward from my peers that I wanted. But now, like, over 15 years later, if someone suggest to me to do something that might even cause me a little bit of discomfort. I'm like, No, I'm not about that life anymore.

Bianca Bersani 30:33

Well, and I think this links to something we'll get, hopefully at the end of that emerging adult justice thing of thinking about us as emerging adults and putting ourselves back in that space. I do think it helps us when we try to think about development and the risks and the decisions that youth are making. You know, I definitely was a very different person, I'd say 20 than I am today.

Jenn Tostlebe 30:54

Yeah, yeah, that's definitely because I was the TA for criminological theory course, last semester. And I definitely I brought that up when we were talking about life course, like, even though, you know, most of them were 20, 21. I was like, even just think back five years ago, and just they were like, yeah, I was way different, you know, and I was like, that's gonna continue to change. But yeah, interesting way to think about these ideas. Alright, so the overarching question, then of your paper is like, what impact and arrest very early in life could have on future criminal behavior? And so we're wondering, what is it about arrest that could make it different from other sanctions? Like you mentioned, you've done some work on suspension or expulsion from school, or things like being detained by a mall cop or punishment from parents? What makes the rest unique?

Bianca Bersani 31:48

Yeah, so arrest really, you know, I think all these other sanctions have the potential right to have negative impacts. And it really depends kind of who finds out about those things. And so when arrest, we tend to think, you know, this links back to labeling theory, right? And arrest this kind of formal recognition and sanction that has this greater power, we think, to risk public labeling and stigma that comes from it. But also, you know, arrest does have implications for how we are then viewed and surveilled and watched. And so an arrest is going to lend weight at greater surveillance, which is likely to have an impact on subsequent arrest, right, in contact with the system in a much different way than, you know, getting in trouble by a mall cop. We might see this actually, and I think this is an important question of whether contact with say an SRO in a school starts kind of similar processes down the road. So, a lot needs to be flushed out with that, but the impact of having some sort of formal recognition, and it's heightened level of labeling and not really set apart those sorts of actions.

Jenn Tostlebe 32:58

So, then related to this idea, do you think arrest has an effect like a general effect on adolescence? Or would things like the subsequent proceedings, you know, going to court being released to your parents have more of an effect?

Bianca Bersani 33:14

Yeah, I think that this is an interesting empirical question, right? So I think that arrest is important, but maybe it doesn't have anything to do with the arrest. And the question is what happens after that arrest. So, if they are detained there and sort of formally kind of deepen their involvement with the justice system after that might be the thing that is really having this negative impact versus being arrested and kind of sent home to your parents? Now? I don't know. I think my parents would have been be pretty charged. So, perhaps it is the arrest and any sort of thing that happens after is important, but I think there's research to say that the kind of further or deeper engagement with the system has more sort of salience right and a greater effect on us.

Jose Sanchez 34:01

Yeah, I definitely feel that I feel like if I, my parents, were going to get a call, hey, come pick up your kid. we arrest them, but can you just put me in jail? For a little while? Yeah.

Bianca Bersani 34:17

Yeah. For some parents are that ultimate sanctioning agent, right, like, just don't tell my parents I'll do anything.

Jose Sanchez 34:25

So we mentioned in the summary that you used the ages of 12 to 14 as one of the inclusion criteria for your study. And so we were curious as to why 12 to 14 and instead of going through 17 or even 18.

Bianca Bersani 34:41

Yeah, so this comes up of a couple of things. You know, we really were trying to isolate the early system contact before we might expect kind of water, typical contact to occur. When you look at the just general developmental literature they tend to use 14 as distinguishing early adolescence from mid

adolescence. So, there's a couple of things that you know, really centered that age of 14 for us. But we also like it because it separates it from when the bulk of offending really is expected to occur. So, those peak years where we can capture some of this difference between individuals with early contact, and those without as well as kind of thinking about pathways, [inaudible] crime. So, you know, 14 was a good marker. We also know there's a 2019 OJJDP report that comes out and says that of adolescent arrests, something like 34-35% of those arrests are actually happening youth 14 years of age or younger. So, there's something happening among this group that's really important to be thinking about. And so I think from that side of it, it's an interesting marker. But we haven't looked at and it would be good to look at right, is it 14, maybe it's 13. Maybe it's 15. On the other side, right, or 16. It's kind of thinking about where that tipping point is, I think, is really important. Another thing I guess, that I've mentioned is, we know from lifecourse crim, that the earlier contact occurs, the longer individuals are involved in crime, right. So, it impacts our thinking about duration of involvement and crime, as well as the severity of their involvement in crime. So there is something about distinguishing this group from the rest. And if we can kind of hold off on their contact, there's evidence to suggest that the later a person comes into contact with kind of less impact it has on their life.

Jenn Tostlebe 36:28

Right. So, getting into your results, then you had these four research questions in your study. And so we'd like to walk through these in order and discuss your findings. So, your first question was whether early arrest altered the prevalence, frequency and variety of offending later in life? So what did you find in your study regarding these questions?

Bianca Bersani 36:54

Yeah, so I'll give a quick kind of overview of our setup. And I have to give full kudos and shout out to my co-author Wade Jacobson, who really pulled this together. So, we use this kind of propensity matching and growth curve model, which, when you I thought it was gonna be like, oh, that's gonna be an easy project for you is wildly complicated. But anyway, we do kind of, we start off by looking at youth who are 14 years of age or younger, and statistically matched these youth on, I think it's the, you know, over 40 covariates that's happened to individual, family, victimization experiences, early risky behavior, right? We're trying to identify statistically similar youth from the get go, where the thing that distinguishes them is that experience of early arrest. And so we take those two groups then, and we look at these trajectories of offending from 50 years of age into kind of mid to late 20s. And we're looking to see, right, like, does their prevalence vary? Does their frequency of involvement vary? Does their variety of different types of crime vary, which is often used as an indicator of severity, right? So, more variety is more indicative of more serious offender. And so when we look at these things, and we compare these two groups, we find evidence that early arrest is associated with a 56% higher odds of subsequent offending. So, it's a prevalence indicator, a 96% increase in the expected frequency of offending and a 30% increase in the expected number of offenses. So, early arrest does appear to have negative impacts when we think about, you know, offending trajectories.

Jose Sanchez 38:34

Yeah, those seem pretty high. So, your second question was about whether arrest would alter the rate of change in offending over time. What did you find here?

Bianca Bersani 38:46

Yeah, so our first question set up this question of like, is there a gap between these two groups over these time periods? Right? The second question, then asked, does the actual curvature or the shape of the age-crime curves vary across these two groups? So, we might expect, right, given prior research that the early arrest group might be experienced, persistent offending into adulthood? And so we look at that picture. And, you know, our findings actually don't find evidence that early arrest is altering the age crime curve. And so I think the way to think about this, that situates these two is, if you think about a rainbow, I mean, our early arrest individuals are the kind of red, orange, yellow, shading of that rainbow. And so they're starting earlier, and they're ending later. And they're higher, right? They're sort of there's a lot of red that gets colored into that rainbow. However, our non-earlier rest group is the kind of green, blue, and purple. And so certainly, they're involved in offending there stomping a little bit earlier. And so there are differences in the magnitude, right the gap of those curves, but the shape of the overall curve, the is pretty similar. Hopefully that's a way to try to tap the differences in terms of where those two questions are.

Jenn Tostlebe 40:06

All right, so your third question then was about the effect of early arrest on this developmental course of offending and whether it remained after accounting for the accumulation of subsequent arrests or more arrests over the life course. So what did you find for this question?

Bianca Bersani 40:26

Yeah, this kind of links back up to an earlier conversation that we just had. So maybe it's not really early arrest. And it's just kind of this series of accumulating arrests that occur that results in this difference. And so we took into account right, every year, we have a measure of whether they were arrested. And so after we take into account, you know, the accumulation of arrest and subsequent system contact, we do find that the impact of earlier arrest is reduced. But it remains a significant factor when we look at prevalence, frequency and severity of offenses. But when we do take that, you know, subsequent arrest into account, it actually allows us to look at or approximate what could be this natural offending trajectory. So, these are the trajectories of individuals who never report any contact with the legal system, at least in terms of self reported arrest. And what we see, right, is that, you know, clearly they're involved in delinquent behavior, right. And in some cases, it's, you know, significant, it's not hovering around zero, but that they do sort of truly desist and, you know, remove themselves from offending. So, these aren't crime abstainers that we're comparing this other group to, they're engaging in risky behavior, it's just not coming to the contact of police. And so it's interesting to see those gaps between those groups start to parse out.

Jose Sanchez 41:47

Okay, the last thing that you looked at was whether the effects of early arrest vary by race, ethnicity, and gender. And so can you tell us about your findings for this question?

Bianca Bersani 41:59

Yeah, so this relates back to that, like, there's a really big gap out there. And that's really needing to pay more attention to demographic diversity and some of these developmental implications of early arrest. And so we tried to look at this, we actually found that the impact of early arrest was similarly

detrimental across all groups. So we, we have a little bit of indication that here and there, there might be differential consequences. But with our sample size, right, starting to parse it out, particularly among women, you know, we're a little bit limited and looking at that, but it is still consequential for different racial, ethnic gender groups.

Jenn Tostlebe 42:33

All right. So thanks for running us through your results. I want to go back and just say that I loved your rainbow analogy, and I feel like I'm gonna have to incorporate that into things. But anyway, so given your findings, what are some of the implications for research policy and practice?

Bianca Bersani 42:53

Yeah, so theoretically, and practically, we tend to think about this idea of early arrest as being a signal for those who are at high risk for persistent serious offending. Yet, I think our results are speaking to something else that could be at play. And essentially, I think the findings suggest that early arrest itself, you know, is criminogenic. But, you know, I think at least it's responsible for manufacturing this potential. And so to break down that idea a little bit. In our sample, as I said, self-reported offending was very common. This supports that notion that offending is normal and perhaps part of a natural outgrowth of youthful offending, we'd have only 18% of our youth who report never being arrested or offending across any of the waves. And I think that if we were to open up actually our measure to things like substance use and abuse, the number would be even smaller. Among our statistically similarly situated adolescents who experience in early arrest, that appears to be pretty consequential, right, and it's associated with this higher offending, offending more frequently, offending more seriously. And so there's evidence to suggest that there is something of a process of cumulative disadvantage or the accumulation of later arrests, continued system contact. But at the same time, the results show pervasive desistance among all of our youth, right? So, even among those with an early arrest, we don't find evidence that there's this persistent pattern of offending into adulthood. So, I tend to think that in this way, early arrest isn't necessarily a marker of this persistent offender with unique criminal potential. Instead, the experience of early arrest is manufacturing that potential by fueling subsequent offending and contact. I think, you know, another thing to think about here is that, while the general shape of the curve for the youth appear to share similar distributional qualities, right, that magnitude is different between in those groups, and I think that this is where that idea of the practical kind of implications come into play. And so when we look at that early arrest group, their differences in offending compared to the other group held into the early 20s, right? At least. And so long past that modal age of 18, when states determine, at least legally, that when adulthood is and individuals are processed in the adult criminal system, where there the consequences are greater, right and more lasting, would that be branded with this mark of a criminal record. So, in this way, the consequences of early arrest are likely lasting and probably diffuse to other life course domains, like educational opportunities, employment opportunities, work, family, well being. And so, you know, I tend to think that, when you take all of these things together, the body of research that this is fitting into, really suggest this need to think seriously about these developmental implications of early life course system contact, I think we see some states that are moving towards raising the lower age of contact. And so for example, in Massachusetts, now, you can't be involved in the system until you're 12 years of age. And so you're diverted to all these non-legal system alternatives. Currently, many states actually have no lower age. And so you know, you could be 6 and kind of brought into system contact. And while that might sound

extreme, we do know that there's cases right of children being processed in the system and places. And, you know, while I think that these are important steps, kind of the raising the lower age of system contact, or step in this direction, I think our research is suggesting that 12 is probably not enough. And we need to think about, you know, are there non-system alternatives to this? And so I wouldn't say that that notion of radical non intervention, I think there's probably something happening in these spaces that other resources and services could be the better alternative than processing through the legal system.

Jenn Tostlebe 46:58

Just thinking about that idea. I mean, I know we're not talking about this specifically, but the like age of being tried in the adult system. I think my home state of Iowa has the lowest age, which is 10. And that's just insane to me to think that a 10 year old could be going through the adult system. So yeah, I think it is important that we think about these lower age, you know, limits and requirements, just given what we know. And you know, as your research is showing too.

Bianca Bersani 47:29

Yeah, and I think we need to think about right, those consequences of this, it's the whole intent is crime control. Is this really getting us where we want to be? And that there is just a lot of evidence to suggest that we need to be rethinking these practices.

Jose Sanchez 47:45

Yeah. Okay, so we'd like to spend the last bit of time that we have discussing this emerging area of interest that you have, and so discuss briefly and the conclusion of your paper and this emerging adult justice. And so can you tell us what you mean by emerging adult justice?

Bianca Bersani 48:03

Yeah, sure. So emerging adult justice, it's kind of this really exciting, somewhat new space that we're getting into. It brings together or focuses on development that's occurring from, I would say, roughly 18 years of age until about 26 years of age. And it's really thinking about actually this idea that we were just talking about of taking development seriously, and thinking about what that could mean for justice system responses. And so in an interesting way, it harkens back to the motivations for the development of the juvenile justice system. So, you know, more than 100 years ago, we start thinking about and giving recognition that there's this developmental period of adolescence, right before that it didn't exist, it was childhood to adulthood. Well, we recognize that there was something very distinct and unique that occurred in between. And the system sort of responded to that and developed a juvenile system that was supposed to be more responsive and rehabilitative and orientation rather than the punitive model that we think about with the adult correctional system. And I think that the same thing is starting to happen with this period of emerging adulthood, right? So emerging adulthood is coined by a psychologist Jeffrey Arnett. And he's arguing that it is a new developmental phase. That was an outgrowth of social events happening in the 60s and 70s. Right. So thinking about what this might mean in terms of our whether you're coming at it from the cognitive perspective, I tend to think socially and, and all the different things that are happening at that time, might our justice system need to be responsive to this occurrence? And so we see some inklings of this occurring across the country where you now see young adult courts. You see young adult correctional facilities the oldest one in the US is

in Connecticut and their true unit, which is man all over it. I think we had a 60 minutes or something episode, if anybody's interested. But you also see the movement in the raise the age event that we just talked about, at the lower age, you're seeing the raise the age movement happening, actually the upper ages as well. And so states have been for about the last decade, raising that lower age of adult system contact to about 18 years. So, you can still have those juvenile transfer laws or whatever. But that age of criminal responsibility now, the modal age is 18 across states. Many states right now we're actually thinking about and submitting legislation and bills to raise it beyond 18 years of age. And actually, one state Vermont just a couple of years ago was the first in recent history to have the age raised above 18. So, youth up to their 19th birthday, right now, we're actually all sort of processed in the juvenile system. And supposedly next summer that is going to raise up to the 20th birthday. And that response was really couched in this idea of how can we best facilitate, you know, this period, in of individuals who are involved in criminal behavior? How can we best sort of get them on a track to be successful in their later life course. And maybe it needs some of these social services that are more developmentally attuned to that period of the life course.

Jenn Tostlebe 51:11

So, thinking about this, we're assuming you started to do some work in this area. And so can you give us some insight, spoiler free, of course, as to some of your work in this area? And what kinds of questions are you trying to answer?

Bianca Bersani 51:26

Yeah, so I happen to be lucky enough to be a part of this emerging adult justice learning community for a few years. And so really, that was kind of motivation for getting kind of deeply involved in this space, I'll give you kind of a shout out to two projects that I have going on. So I know Vermont really well, because I have an active project in the field there, where we're trying to actually speak with youth, right, who were raised the age impacted. So, 18 year olds who were processed in that juvenile system, compared to their developmentally similar 19 year olds who were processed in the adult system simply because of a difference in their age, right, the contact, because we want to know, like, what are you sort of reflecting and experiencing in these systems, I think we assume that the juvenile system is more rehabilitative, I think we need to see what that means in terms of what youth are getting access to, and how that might be different from youth in the adult system. So, that's kind of where that space is right now. They're also working on a project with Charles Loeffler, who's a faculty at UPenn, who has really been in the raise the age space for quite some time. And we're looking at and trying to dig into whether the raise the age that happened in Massachusetts, so this is not above 18, but sort of going from 16 and moving that age upwards. If that raise the age process, had our policy had any sort of impact on educational trajectories, right? And so are those youth more likely to have stayed in school or graduated from school or at least graduated by a certain point in young adulthood? And so those are the spaces where we're trying to move? I think that this motivation towards raise the age is like catching on like wildfire across the country. But unfortunately, we have very little empirical evidence on what is happening in these spaces. And so it's, you know, we worry sometimes with these policies that catch on like wildfire without the balance of rigorous research with itself. Hopefully, that's a space that will continue to grow.

Jenn Tostlebe 53:20

Yeah, sounds really interesting. And hopefully it does. I hope your research is able to help inform these policies. Yeah.

Bianca Bersani 53:27

That's the goal. Right? Hope Yeah.

Jose Sanchez 53:30

Yeah, definitely. Okay. Well, those are all the questions that we have for you today. Thank you so much for joining us. It was great talking with you. Is there anything you'd like to plug and play we should be on the lookout for?

Bianca Bersani 53:42

No, I mean, emerging adult, generally, everybody rethink about age and crime. But no, that's it. And thanks for having me. This has actually been really fun.

Jose Sanchez 53:51

Okay, um, where can people find you? You mentioned that you're on the Twitterverse? Is email good way to reach you?

Bianca Bersani 53:59

Yeah, email is probably better. I'm on Twitter, but it's more than, like, boost other people. I wouldn't say engage and interact a lot. But I really like it as a space. You're on the job market. I tried to boost every single job opening that I see out there. But if you do message me or contact me, I will try to interact there. But email is great.

Jose Sanchez 54:17

Awesome. And we will provide your contact information in the episode description.

Bianca Bersani 54:22

That'd be awesome.

Jose Sanchez 54:23

I hit Well, thank you again. I really appreciate it.

Bianca Bersani 54:26

Thank you so much. And Jose, I hope that's not a call from daycare. buzzing like, Oh, no. Yeah. Yeah. Good luck with that. Thank you. Awesome. Thanks so much. Y'all. Have a great day. Thank you.

Jenn Tostlebe 54:42

You too. Thanks. Bye. Hey, thanks for listening.

Jose Sanchez 54:46

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Jenn Tostlebe 54:57

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Jose Sanchez 55:01

or email us at thecrimacademy@gmail.com.

Jenn Tostlebe 55:12

See you next time!