Looking Backward and Forward

We began this study by discussing three critically important questions: (1) how stable are individual differences in the propensity to commit criminal acts across the life course; (2) are there two (or more) discrete groups of offenders with distinct age–crime curves concealed within the aggregate age–crime curve; and (3) does the relationship between offending at one age period and a subsequent age period endure when time-stable individual differences in criminal propensity are controlled? We noted how questions one and two could be assessed with multivariate analyses of the age–crime curves of different latent classes of offenders and that question three could be assessed through a series of multivariate analyses of the relationships between the arrest rates of individuals at adjacent ages within these different latent classes. This led to complicated but necessary statistical analyses in two substantive chapters (7 and 8). Given that the results of each substantive chapter have been previously summarized, reviewed, and discussed, this final chapter will focus on our general theoretical and substantive conclusions, possible directions for future research, and the policy implications that follow from our analyses.

Theoretical and Substantive Implications

In a nutshell, the old adages, ‘you can’t unscramble eggs’ and ‘a leopard never changes its spots,’ describe the fundamental overarching issue addressed in this study—the relevance of stability and change in criminal behavior over the life course. What have we learned here by confining our study of these issues to the serious chronic offender population? Recall that our study examined the competing predictions of three broad theoretical frameworks regarding the possibility of behavioral change over the life course.
for serious criminal offenders; all were derivative hypotheses of the same fundamental question: how stable or inflexible are individual differences in the propensity to engage in criminal/antisocial activities across the life course for these individuals? Or stated differently, is behavioral change possible in the lives of serious criminal offenders? Each perspective makes different predictions regarding the relationship between age and crime and the relationship between past and subsequent criminal activities.

Our study examined these two primary issues in Chapters 7 and 8, respectively, by addressing (1) whether the relationship between age and crime was invariant across different latent classes (i.e., stable) or whether there were variable between-class differences over time (i.e., change over time) and (2) whether or not past criminal activity was related to subsequent criminal activity after controlling for persistent individual differences. The findings presented in these two chapters provided resounding support for the notion that behavioral change is extremely relevant on both counts. With respect to the first source of change (the relationship between age and crime), between-group differences were shown to be highly variable over time; between-group differences were invariant only through early adolescence, and then during adulthood such differences were largely unstable and variable. With respect to the second question of behavioral change (the relationship between past and subsequent criminal behavior), we found that even after accounting for persistent unobserved heterogeneity in the propensity to engage in criminal activities (through both parametric and non-parametric statistical methods), a significant positive relationship between having been arrested at a earlier age and the frequency of arrest at the observed later age period persists. In other words, something about being arrested must influence—or change—these offenders’ lives, propelling them to further subsequent arrests given that we controlled for their propensity to reoffend. These substantive results broadly imply that behavioral change matters significantly in the lives of offenders, and even in the lives of the most persistent serious youthful offenders in the population (who arguably would be the most prone to stability in the spirit of Moffitt’s ‘life-course-persistent offender’ type). It is important to remember that these substantive findings were documented across three independent samples. Thus, the observed findings lend considerable credence to the notion that behavioral
change in the patterns of criminal arrest across the life course is not only possible, but is indeed also one of the ‘brute facts of criminology’ (to borrow Gottfredson and Hirschi’s statement).

In our judgement, there are three main substantive conclusions to be drawn from this study that are related to both the over-arching theme of continuity/discontinuity in criminal arrest patterns and that are important for any aetiological explanation of criminal offending patterns across the life course. First, the findings in this study inform what Sampson and Laub (1992) have referred to as the overstatement and/or misinterpretation of antisocial behaviors across the life course (see also Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber 1998). Our results clearly indicate that the continuity of arrest patterns will be much stronger when the measurement periods are closer together in time. That is, greater stability (including between-group stability) is displayed within shorter (e.g. two years) compared to longer periods of time. Indeed, the vast majority of the available data sets in criminology typically measure incidents of crime and arrest over very short periods of time. As noted by Cohen and Vila (1996: 147), ‘consistency of behavior might depend on the time scale selected for analysis.’ The empirical results of this study indicate a considerable amount of support for this contention. Continuity in arrests for crime appears to be much stronger when the measurement points are closer together in time. Discontinuity (change), on the other hand, is much more apparent in empirical studies when long-term criminal offending patterns are examined. Longer-term data, such as presented here, provide more rigorous examinations of the balance between continuity and discontinuity in criminality, the latter of which only appears to emerge in more extended data. Furthermore, the results presented herein demonstrate that some segments of the age-span display more continuity in behavioural patterns (e.g. early to mid-adolescence) than do other segments of the age-span (e.g. adulthood). Thus, while it is important for criminological theory to recognize the continuity in behavioral crime patterns over time, our data validate the importance of the possible temporal nature of this continuity.

Second, the findings observed herein indicate a significant amount of heterogeneity in the longitudinal arrest patterns of serious youthful offenders, suggesting a preference for panel designs over cross-sectional research when studying criminal behavior. Examination of both the observed average total arrest charges
and the observed and predicted arrest trajectories of each latent class identified in our study indicated a significant amount of heterogeneity even in this select extreme segment of the offender population. Thus, our results bolster the contention of Sampson and Laub (1992, 1993; Laub and Sampson 2001) that far more heterogeneity in longitudinal criminal arrest and offending patterns exists than previously thought. It is important to specifically highlight that the type of heterogeneity of which we speak here is heterogeneity in the patterns of criminal offending over extended periods of the life course. As clearly shown in the graphical depiction of the arrest trajectories discussed in Chapter 7, there are periods of time when the distinctions between the arrest trajectories of the various latent classes were blurred or even non-existent. Over more extended periods of time, however, the crime trajectories of different latent classes were vastly distinct.

Third (and related to the second point noted above), large variations in criminal arrest patterns appear during adulthood that cannot be simply argued as the long-term consequences of childhood propensities (Sampson and Laub 1992). As recently noted by LeBlanc and Loeber (1998: 131), ‘against the backdrop of [relative] continuity, studies also show large within-individual changes in offending, a point understated in the invariance hypothesis suggested by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1987a).’ The findings presented in Chapter 7 indicate varying rates of developmental change in the arrest trajectories of the identified latent classes. For the most part, the latent classes appear to have discontinued their antisocial activities at very different paces and ages (see also Cernkovich and Giordano 2001). That is, among the different identified latent classes, the ‘desistence process’ did not begin at the same age, nor did it take place at the same relative pace. The results obtained in this study thus seem to add further empirical support to bolster the contention of Sampson and Laub that ‘intra-individual change is widespread even among a large group of individuals labeled as serious, persistent youthful offenders. These chronic offenders possess all of the risk characteristics that many researchers believe to be enduring and stable traits across the life course’ (Laub and Sampson 2001: 58).

In sum, the main theoretical and substantive implications of this study suggest that the processes of both continuity and change (discontinuity) are important in any aetiological explanation of
criminal offending patterns across the entire life course (see also Paternoster et al. 1997). Ignoring either of these processes, or viewing them as polar opposites on a continuum will lead to inadequate explanations of criminal behavior (see also Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995). Given the critical nature of both processes of continuity and change, we now move to discussing how future research must use this knowledge to next unpack the precise causal nexus behind each of these processes over the life course. Unfortunately, it is at this point in our study where the limits of our data preclude their usefulness for examining such issues.

Suggestions for Future Research

Our data clearly direct the field of criminology away from the static theoretical perspectives that claim the existence of a population of offenders who will always persistently offend regardless of their age or life circumstances. Instead, research should be directed towards understanding the kinds of change in offenders’ lives that contribute to either their persistence or discontinuation of criminal offending (see Laub and Sampson 2003; Sampson and Laub 2003).

As discussed in Chapter 2, our study is not able to test the specific causal structures of a particular theory or set of theories, but rather our goal was to evaluate the empirical validity of the longitudinal implications of three leading criminological theoretical perspectives. Overall, our data failed to empirically validate several of the implications of Moffitt’s ‘dual taxonomy’ theory. We have in our study, three independently selected samples of what Moffitt would label ‘life-course-persistent offenders’, those whom would be predicted to continue their offending throughout their lifetimes. Instead, we found that these samples of serious offenders could be empirically classified into six groups, each with a different arrest rate trajectory across time. However, the arrest rates in each of these six latent classes proved not to be as ‘persistent’ as predicted by Moffitt; the arrest rate of each latent class declined with age, albeit at different rates. Further, age was a highly significant predictor of offending behavior in all of the latent classes. However, our examination of the predicted and observed arrest trajectories provided overwhelming support for the presence of an ‘adolescent-limited’ offender group in this population (which is an interesting result given the nature of our samples), but our examination of the
state dependence processes in Chapter 8 did not reveal evidence indicating that state dependence is more important for this group. This is contrary to the theoretical arguments of Moffitt concerning this group. We conclude, therefore, that the analyses of our data overall have failed to validate the empirical expectations of Moffitt’s dual taxonomy perspective.

Our analyses also failed to support the age-invariance hypothesis promulgated by Gottfredson and Hirschi. That is, we found little support for the confirmation of this hypothesis after adolescence. Therefore, longitudinal research may be much more valuable in the study of the relationship between age and crime than these researchers acknowledge. What should not be lost on the readers of our study, however, is the confirmation found here for several contentions of Gottfredson and Hirschi’s ‘general theory of crime’. For example, we did find support for one of their ‘brute facts’ of criminology that—even among the most persistent offender groups in the population—offense rates do eventually decline with age. By the mid-to-late twenties, the vast majority of the latent classes identified in our samples had begun to demonstrate a declining arrest trajectory, and some have even largely ceased their offending (as measured by arrests). The strong relationship between age and crime demands a theoretical explanation and further empirical examination addressing the aetiological explanation of this ‘brute fact.’ We also found support for several other contentions of Gottfredson and Hirschi such as the high mortality rate of high-rate offenders and the generality of offending in criminal patterns (i.e. offenders engage in a wide variety of offenses). While we cannot support their age-invariance hypothesis, we believe it would be a serious mistake to dismiss the theory altogether. This particular hypothesis is only one part of what is a much more expansive and complex theory.

In the end, the examination of the issues addressed in this study have led us to the tentative conclusion that, overall, the evidence obtained here is perhaps most consistent with the predictions implied from Sampson and Laub’s (1993), age-graded social control theory. The findings in our study have shown (1) that behavioral change is evident among serious chronic offenders, (2) that the heterogeneity in criminal propensity among the chronic offender population is often underreported, and (3) that there is considerable post-adolescent heterogeneity in the arrest rates of offenders that
cannot be explained purely as a consequence of earlier individual differences.

We cannot however speak to Sampson and Laub’s proposed labeling effect as the best explanation for this pattern of crime continuity observed in our data. They believe that youths who are seriously delinquent accumulate social disadvantage as they age, making it increasingly more difficult for them to exit from a life of crime. This loss of ‘social capital’ is generated most directly by sanctions such as arrest, conviction, and incarceration by watchful social control agents who scrutinize their every move. Being officially labeled and stigmatized as a serious delinquent serves to further reduce future educational and employment opportunities. Chronic offenders thus become trapped in a vicious cycle in which crime leads to failure in conventional activities that in turn exacerbates further delinquency. As they grow older, however, most of these young men will gain access to other sources of achievement and social satisfaction—a job, a girlfriend and/or wife, and in many cases, children. When chronic offenders become attached to such barriers to crime and delinquency, they become less dependent on delinquent peer-groups for support and reinforcement.

Admittedly the data limitations do not permit us to assess if or to what degree such constraints on criminal behaviour impact the members of our samples over time. Nor do these data allow us to speculate as to whether continuity in arrest rates observed during adolescence and early adulthood among our samples were the result of labeling, exposure to definitions favorable to crime, lack of legitimate opportunity, sub-cultural reinforcement of criminal conduct, weak social bonds, or the absence of fear at the prospect of being caught and punished for criminal activity. Such data limitations raise the issue of possible avenues for future research that could better inform the specific causal structures of change in criminal behavior.

The data sets employed in our study, and the findings observed herein, cannot be used to answer the four critical questions raised by Nagin and Paternoster (2000) that they believe are of crucial importance for understanding the population heterogeneity-state dependence debate: (1) what are the specific causal mechanisms underlying the individual differences in the propensity to commit criminal acts; (2) what are the specific positive and negative salient life events that lead individuals both into and out of the criminal
lifestyle; (3) what are the specific causal processes underlying the desistance process; and (4) what processes determine both the availability of pro-social opportunities and whether an individual will take advantage of these opportunities?

Such questions, along with the empirical results of our study, suggest a critical need for the discipline of criminology to engage in further research to determine both the theoretical and empirical aetiological mechanisms driving the change (see also Bushway et al. 2001; Laub and Sampson 2001). Particularly critical is determining why offenders who have shown a pronounced proclivity (albeit a varying one) to engage in criminal activities for a significant segment of their lifespan would begin to decrease their offending in adulthood? As is evident here in the lives of even the most serious offenders in the population, positive behavioural change does occur, and it occurs earlier for some individuals/groups than for others. Given the record numbers of Americans under some form of custody in the criminal justice system, identifying the theoretical and public policy implications requires further research on the causes and nature of pro-social behavioral change among the serious offender population.

Finally, even though it is clear that many of the serious chronic offenders within our samples appear to follow a path of ‘desistence’, we have no idea exactly what kind of lives they actually lead in their thirties, forties, and thereafter. Information of this sort is sadly lacking and little is known on this topic (Laub and Sampson 2001). Do the majority of these individuals lead highly marginalized lives full of alcohol and drug abuse problems, unemployment, and marital discord as Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) have suggested? Unfortunately, questions such as this cannot be answered with the data sets we have utilized.

Laub and Sampson (2003), however, have recently updated the longitudinal records for many of the surviving members from the Glueck’s original sample of seriously delinquent youths through the age of 70. Their study suggests that many of these individuals led troubled lives even though crime rates eventually declined by the middle adult years for all groups of offenders identified in their study. In fact, the results of our study dovetail nicely with some of the results of the recent work of Laub and Sampson (2003; Sampson and Laub 2003) in several ways, including: the presence of a significant amount of heterogeneity in the long-term offending
patterns of serious young offenders; that measured covariates do not effectively distinguish offenders in different latent classes; that the age-invariance assumption is violated over the long-term, especially in adulthood, and that adult offending patterns are not simply the long-term outcomes of differences present early in life; and finally that even though our data naturally lends itself to finding the life-course-persistent offender, the notion of differential ‘life-course desisters’ seems more descriptively accurate.

Having discussed the theoretical and empirical implications of our research and some possible directions for future research, we conclude this study with a discussion of how the role of change in offenders’ lives can inform the public policy debates struggling with this same relationship between age and crime.

Public Policy Implications

The nature of the age–crime relationship has profound implications regarding the practical utility of contemporary criminal justice policies. Over the past three decades in the United States, the public’s outrage about serious crime and the government’s response to their outrage have resulted in an increase in both the probability of offenders being sentenced to prison after conviction and in the length of time served while in custody (Blumstein and Beck 1999; Donziger 1996; Irwin and Austin 1997). This increased punitive ness against convicted criminals is the direct result of the get ‘tough on crime’ attitude that has swept this country since the late 1960s (Caplow and Simon 1999).

The interaction effect between the increased probability of imprisonment and the increased length of time served for felony convictions has led to a phenomenal increase in the number of offenders imprisoned over the last thirty years (Blumstein and Beck 1999; Caplow and Simon 1999). In 2000 there were nearly 2 million adults in prison in the United States (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2001). Between 1970 and 2000, for example, the adult (prison) incarceration rate in the United States nearly quintupled, increasing from 96 per 100,000 adult residents in 1970 to 478 per 100,000 in 2000 (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2000). Indeed by mid-year 2000, one out of every 142 Americans was incarcerated in either prison or jail, compared to one out of every 218 in 1990 and one out of every 320 in 1985 (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1995, 2001).
Conservative policy makers in particular, have long maintained that putting more people in prison for longer periods of time would have both deterrent and incapacitation effects that would substantially reduce crime. Such beliefs were certainly apparent among California policy makers during the period covered in our study when the state’s imprisonment rate quadrupled. Much of the political leadership in California for what would turn out to be the largest prison expansion program in the country would be provided by Governor George Deukmejian, who would build ten new prisons during his administration (1982–90). Deukmejian and his successor Governor Pete Wilson would both earn well-deserved reputations as leaders for sentence reform policies aimed at both adult and juvenile offenders that incarcerated more people for far longer periods of time than any of the other political administrations in the state’s history. In Chapter 4, for example, we described how a CYA ward’s average length of stay increased significantly over this time period. The post-release recidivism rates of wards paroled under this policy change, however, appear to have been unaffected by the increase in the length of institutionalization over time. Our analysis indicated that the recidivism rates of each of the three cohorts (subjected to increasingly severe treatment, respectively) were virtually identical. Twelve months after release on parole, roughly 50 per cent of each of the three cohorts had been rearrested, while after three years, about 75 per cent of each cohort was apprehended for the commission of a new offence. Thus, while such policies may have successfully served the ambitions of politicians and bureaucrats and satiated public outrage, they did not appear to contribute much to public safety once these wards were released on parole.

As a result of the concern over high recidivism rates among serious offenders, several states, most notably California, have enacted tough new statutes like the one commonly known as ‘Three Strikes and You’re Out,’ introduced in 1994 during Governor Wilson’s administration. These statutes are proactive crime control policies mandating the incarceration of individuals who repeatedly commit most of the serious crimes in society—the chronic, or career, offenders (the same population that our study examines). The primary goal of such programs is to selectively identify those offenders deemed to present the greatest risk to society and to remove these individuals away from the general public by incarcerating them for longer periods of time.
In California, the basic content of the ‘Three Strikes’ law requires that defendants with two prior ‘violent’ or ‘serious’ felonies (i.e. those who have already accumulated two strikes), are to be sentenced to a mandatory term of 25 years to life in prison after conviction of any third felony, even if it is non-violent. Furthermore, this law mandates that any second-strike felony offense receive double the prison time it would receive were it a first offense.

Sustained petitions against juveniles, however, do not count as ‘strikes’ under California’s ‘Three Strikes’ law until the juvenile reaches the age of 16. Once a juvenile reaches age 16, however, sustained petitions for the commission of ‘violent’ or ‘serious’ offenses (felonies) are then counted as ‘strikes’ against them. This fact has the potential effect of increasing the age at which chronic, youthful offenders are typically sentenced for their ‘third-strike’ offense. Thus, it is conceivable that many youthful, chronic offenders will not accumulate their ‘third strike’ until after they reach the age of about 25, because they may be required to serve considerable time periods for their first and/or second offenses after conviction.

Our finding that each of the six latent classes of serious chronic offenders tended to ‘age out’ of serious crime suggests the potential for heavy financial and social implications associated with incarcerating such individuals for extended periods of time under a ‘Three Strikes’ policy. For example, using national statistics on the costs of constructing and maintaining prisons, Irwin and Austin (1997) calculated the cost per additional prisoner (including both supervision costs and the amortized prison construction costs) in 1997 to be $39,000 per year. In total, the 30-year cost of adding space for just one additional prisoner was estimated to be over $1 million dollars (Irwin and Austin 1997: 139).

Beyond financial cost, consider the relationship between age and crime uncovered here and its implications for the use of prisons, especially ‘draconian crime control policies’ such as ‘Three Strikes.’ If the offending rate of a ‘high risk’ individual is not constant over his or her criminal career, but actually declines with age (as we find in our study), then sentencing such ‘high-rate’ serious offenders to very long prison terms, perhaps just at a point when their offending rates are sharply declining does not seem to be a socially efficient or cost-effective crime control policy (see also Haapanen 1990; Ezell and Cohen 1997). Despite the contentions of certain criminologists, we found no evidence of a group of ‘life-course-persistent’ serious
offenders where age does not predict their behaviour. The notion that such groups exist is well represented in the criminological literature and is very seductive when considering crime control policies (Laub and Sampson 2003; Sampson and Laub 2003). As described earlier in this chapter, however, much of Gottfredson and Hirschi’s initial critique and reaction towards the criminal career approach of Blumstein and his colleagues was specifically directed at selective incapacitation policies, and how these polices completely disregard the relationship between age and crime (see Gottfredson and Hirschi 1986, 1990; Hirschi and Gottfredson 1986, 1988). Our study both validates and extends this argument by detailing the declining criminal offending patterns across three samples and within each of the latent classes within those samples.

The crime prevention prospects of selective incapacitation policies appear ‘murky’ when we consider the different implications of the processes of state dependence and population heterogeneity theories with respect to the practical utility of effectively and efficiently preventing crime. According to the population heterogeneity perspective, criminal propensity once formed is not malleable. Thus, from the perspective of Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), any intervention with a lasting impact on the criminal propensity of an individual must involve the efficacy of early child-rearing practices prior to the approximate age of 8 (see Hirschi 1995). As Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990: 272) pointedly state: ‘Apart from the limited benefits that can be achieved by making specific criminal acts more difficult [e.g. target hardening], policies directed toward enhancement of the ability of familial institutions to socialize children are the only realistic long-term state policies with potential for substantial crime reduction.’

Imprisonment according to some researchers, for example, will have neither an enduring beneficial (deterrent) nor negative (criminogenic) effect on the individual after release because it has nothing to do with the source of criminal propensity, and thus cannot alter it (Nagin and Farrington 1992b). Furthermore, as Gottfredson and Hirschi note, any potential beneficial impacts of criminal justice programs are more likely to be a function of selection bias effects with respect to who is placed in what programmes. In other words, high-rate (low self-control) offenders get placed in certain (restrictive, secure) programs, while low-rate offenders get placed in other programs, and the differential
success rates claimed by supporters of these various programs will be entirely dependent on such selection bias effects.

From the perspective of Sampson and Laub, however, programs that serve to strengthen an individual’s bond to society, rather than weakening it, have the possibility to bring about considerable positive change in the criminal propensity of offenders. Given that the state dependence perspective views criminal propensity as malleable across the life course, this perspective asserts that it is possible for criminal justice policies to ultimately change the probability of future criminal behavior through assisting the development of positive life events (see Laub et al. 1995). Unfortunately, however, policies regarding positive life events in adulthood are arguably extremely difficult or impractical to implement in practice.

Nonetheless, critics often note that the current ‘get tough on crime’ policies often simply serve to further isolate the individual and cut off possible future (positive) opportunities for change. Recall, for example, Sampson and Laub’s, argument that imprisonment has criminogenic effects because of its deleterious impact on the prospects of stable employment during adulthood, especially since many of the ‘escape routes’ for convicted felons have been increasingly shut-off as available paths to evade the criminal lifestyle. ‘Although there is considerable state-by-state variation, licensing boards bar ex-offenders from virtually hundreds of other occupations [besides being a barber], including apprentice electrician, billiards operator, and plumber’ (Sampson and Laub 1997: 148; see also Laub et al. 1995). Making prisons even more hostile environments through the removal of educational opportunities, job training, and visitation hours also does not appear to be good policy from a state dependence theoretical perspective. Reintegrating the offender into society and establishing bonds with conventional persons rather than further isolating them is seen as the key to bringing about change in the lives of these individuals according to many adherents with a state dependence perspective (see also Braithwaite 1989). As Laub et al. (1995: 103) assert, ‘it is critical that individuals have the opportunity to reconnect to institutions such as family, school, and work after a period of incarceration.’

Given the above discussion, what are the policy implications for the state of California that may be said to flow directly from our
study? First, given the extremely high parole failure rates reported in Chapter 6, the pessimist who reads this study will conclude that the benefits of institutional placement in the CYA appear to be very discouraging, at least in the short-term. Upon reflection, however, perhaps we never should have expected low or even moderate recidivism rates among our three samples of serious chronic offenders. Assume for the moment that the CYA is stocked with dedicated employees, who by and large work very hard to rehabilitate and support wards under their supervision, and that the available programmes provide a variety of educational, treatment, training, and supervisory services and opportunities for wards. Why shouldn’t we expect low failure rates? To begin, we would do well to remember that these wards represent the worst 5 per cent of the youthful offender population in the state. The case history records of these serious chronic offenders are considerably worse than any we have previously seen. For this and other groups of active offenders, we find no consistent evidence to support the commonly held expectation that policy changes which increase the severity of punishment and the average length of sentence will significantly deter the likelihood of subsequent criminal behavior. The ‘get tough on crime’ movement began largely in the mid-1970s as a justification for establishing an increase in the severity of sentencing decisions because of the failure of the rehabilitation programmes (in vogue during the 1960s) that were supposed to reduce recidivism rates. The changes in policy and parole decisions in the 1980s and early 1990s that have had the effect of increasing the average length of institutional stay of CYA wards do not appear to have improved the subsequent post-release behavior of parolees as is well documented in Chapter 6. The simplest explanation for this finding is that the menu of education, treatment, training, and supervisory services in place (assuming wards could get in these programs) could not overcome or appreciably reduce the existing powerful social forces influencing offenders to continue their criminal offending behavior.

The optimist who reads our study, however, will be intrigued by the long-term relationship observed here between age and crime. While we have found little evidence to support Gottfredson and Hirschi’s notion that the relationship between age and crime is invariant, we also found no support for the idea that the frequency of serious criminal behavior does not decline with age among
active offenders. Instead we have observed support for a ‘brute fact’ of criminology that the arrest trajectories for every latent class derived from our active offender samples eventually declined with age. While we have no direct evidence to support Sampson and Laub’s explanation for this phenomenon, the timing of the desistance patterns among our samples is consistent with the possibility that the processes of developing and strengthening social bonds could be at work here. Recall that Gottfredson and Hirschi, on the other hand, speculate an alternative hypothesis for this observed behavioral pattern of desistence—maturational reform. They argue (1990) that desistence is nothing more than behavioral change that comes with maturation; desistence cannot be explained through traditional conceptual schemes employed by criminologists. It is only when you apply their substantive distinction between ‘crime’ and ‘criminality’ to the basic facts about crime that you are able to understand and explain the relationship between age and crime (for more on their explanation of desistence over time, see Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 136–41).¹ Our data do not allow for an informed opinion of which of the above explanations is most appropriate to account for the pattern of desistance observed over time in our study, but clearly this issue is in need of considerable attention in the field of criminology.

The serious criminal offences that are of the greatest concern to society (e.g. Index crimes) were found here to have been most frequently committed by members of our samples when they were relatively young (e.g. ages 14–22). That is, the data presented in this study showed a marked relationship between age and crime even for the serious criminal offenses that are the intended targets of selective incapacitation policies such as ‘Three Strikes.’ In fact, over time, the individuals who recidivated in these samples became increasingly more likely to have been arrested for a drug-related offense as they aged than for any other type of offence. For example, the members of the 1981–2 sample accrued 166 robbery charges in 1983. In 1999 they accrued only 18 arrest charges for robbery offences. For drug-related offences, on the other hand, they accrued

¹ If it is maturational change, then an obvious question that needs to be addressed concerns why certain groups of offenders experience rapid periods of maturational reform (e.g. the adolescent-limited offender) while others experience slow maturational processes. Given the results of our study, if it is ‘maturational change,’ it appears that maturational change processes vary considerably in the population.
396 charges in 1983 and still accrued 299 charges for such offenses in 1999. Because of their long histories of past involvement in serious crime, however, these individuals become prime candidates for selective incapacitation as ‘third strike’ offenders at the approximate point in the age–crime curve where most no longer appear to pose a grave danger to public safety. The trends in our data suggest that the decline in crime with age is going to continue in the coming years, which (extrapolating to the general population of criminal offenders) indicates that there are going to be a fair number of offenders in prison who appear to pose relatively little danger to society. If many of these individuals no longer represent a serious danger to society because they have ‘aged out’ of, or are in the final stages of aging out of serious felony crimes, then there are potentially enormous social and economic costs to be accrued for treating them outside the community at later ages.

As in life, ‘there are no free lunches’ when it comes to building and maintaining a massive prison industrial complex. In order to finance the massive increases in state prison populations, legislatures have certainly been forced to divert money from discretionary line items in state budgets—education, welfare, medical care, mental health services, and child care. The fear among critics of ‘get tough’ crime policies is that money is being diverted away from the very institutions that have traditionally played a crucial role in either preventing some individuals from engaging in serious crime in the first place, or in helping individuals to desist from the criminal lifestyle. Ironically, the worry here is that higher incarceration rates may serve to set in motion a spiraling effect that in the long term could push crime rates to rise rather than decline. If true, this unintended consequence of harsh crime policy would confirm Dante’s well-cited admonition that ‘the road to hell is paved with good intentions.’