The sociological imagination revisited: lessons from *America's Safest City*

Francis T. Cullen[1]

Abstract In *America's Safest City*, Simon Singer embraces the sociological imagination to situate juveniles' personal troubles within the context of middle-class affluence and modernity. In so doing, he departs from the standard research paradigm that seeks to explain delinquency by using secondary data sets that contain limited measures of theoretical constructs identified by reigning perspectives. Singer's decision has resulted in a rich analysis that is replete with criminological lessons about the nature of delinquency. Four such lessons are presented here, which include: (1) a lower-class bias has clouded thinking about crime; (2) the reaction to crime differs across classes; (3) parents matter in producing adolescence-limited antisocial youths; and (4) suburban delinquency may be a precursor to white-collar crime.

Most of the scholarship assessing criminological theory—including by me, I might add—is of little value [1]. There are at least three reasons why this is the case—the last of which concerns me here. First, individual studies are published but then the knowledge sits in isolated silos never to be organized. Meta-analyses are becoming more common, which gives value to the endless stream of studies that are published (see, e.g., [2–4]). Still, the empirical knowledge relevant to most theories remains to be compiled and quantitatively synthesized. As a field, we are not close to having enough information to know which perspectives to falsify and which to advance. Second, as Weisburd and Piquero show [5, 6], most theories explain little variation in offending. Although it could be that the theories lack merit, I think there is another culprit: longitudinal research. To be published in major journals, reviewers insist on time 1-time 2 designs that can unpack causal ordering. Perhaps so. But the cost of this approach is weak measurement of core theoretical variables—for example, the typical three-item scale for social bonds that some downloaded data sets contain. Cross-sectional studies

✉ Francis T. Cullen
cullenft@ucmail.uc.edu

[1] School of Criminal Justice, University of Cincinnati, PO Box 210389, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0389, USA

that measure theories more completely explain more variation (see [7]). Alas, the incentive to develop standardized theoretical measures using hard-to-publish cross-sectional data is minimal (for a notable exception, see [8]).

A third reason for the limited actualization of criminological knowledge—again, which is the concern here—is that theories lack sociological imagination. Starting most noticeably with Hirschi's [9] *Causes of Delinquency*, published in 1969, criminology embraced an empirical strategy that involved stripping theories to their core variables, measuring these variables, and then testing them against one another. This research paradigm provided many puzzles to be solved that could yield many publications (again, including for me). This approach might be called analytical rather than substantive. The goal was to test the generality of theory across context while, ironically, paying no attention to context.

Although Hirschi was writing in the 1960s, his work makes no reference to the events of this tumultuous time. I suspect that this neglect was purposeful. The power of Hirschi's social bond framework is that it is timeless—it can be used today as well as it could be used in the Sixties. But its analytical power is also its substantive weakness. The choice was made to ignore context and to abandon any claim to using the sociological imagination. The same assessment can be made of Hirschi's self-control theory authored with Michael Gottfredson. Advanced as a general theory in 1990, Gottfredson and Hirschi [10] sought to identify the core criminal propensity (or criminality) that underlies crime and analogous deviant behaviors. Brilliantly conceived and argued—parsimonious and eminently testable—their self-control perspective reigns now as the field's dominant paradigm. Again, however, the embrace of analytical generality has been made at the cost of paying little attention to what transpires in the larger society.

This assessment of Hirschi's work pertains equally to most other popular theories of crime (e.g., social learning and strain theory). When reading most works on these theories, it is impossible to know whether they were written in the 1950s or the 2010s. Again, this occurs because the goal of scholars is not to tie their theories into the changing nature of American society. Instead, it is to articulate narrow propositions that can be tested using self-report surveys of young people [11]. They make no claim to embrace, and have their formulations be informed by, the sociological imagination.

C. Wright Mills [12], of course, authored *The Sociological Imagination*. Published in 1959, this slim book remains a volume worth consulting, with its citations on Google Scholar now exceeding 12,000. The crux of Mills's argument is that personal troubles and social troubles are inextricably connected. Analyses that seek to decontextualize human conduct implicitly assume that socio-historical factors have no causal relevance. They risk treating their subjects in an atomistic fashion and conducting studies that descend into abstracted empiricism. Contemporary theorists might rebut this assessment by claiming to seek "general" causal factors that transcend time and space. Whatever merit this view might possess, it would have us believe that studying delinquency in the immigrant slums of 1930s Chicago, as did Shaw and McKay, is the same as studying delinquency in a contemporary affluent city in western New York, as did Simon Singer. "No social study," cautioned Mills ([12]:5), "that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersection within a society has completed its intellectual journey."

According to Mills ([12]:4), the sociological imagination thus involves the purposeful intent to "grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world." This "imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals" (5). "To recognize this task and its promise," he observed, "is the mark of the classic social analyst" (6). It is for this very reason that Simon Singer has proven to be a classic social analyst. He identifies troubled individuals and recounts their stories, some with unhappy endings. But their biographies are not reduced to a set of variables. Rather they are situated within a particular social context, "suburbia," and within a particular historical era, "modernity in America." The subtitle to Singer's [13] book is telling: *Delinquency and Modernity in Suburbia*.

The book's main title, *America's Safest City*, similarly reveals Singer's embrace of the sociological imagination, though perhaps in a different way. Recall that in *Suicide* [14], Durkheim sought to demonstrate the power of sociology by showing how this perspective could illuminate a behavior—suicide—that seemed to be the most personal of all choices. There is a certain irony in this approach, falling within what John Hagan [15] once called the sociology of the interesting. In a comparable way, Singer seeks to teach us about the nature of crime by focusing, ironically, on the *safest* city in America. By using this vantage point, he allows us to see the world differently and to pursue new lines of inquiry.

Beyond the power of his scholarly approach—a style that is used too infrequently (for an exception, see [16, 17])—the book's richness provides an opportunity to draw diverse lessons about the criminological enterprise. The sign of a special volume is that a variety of scholars can read its pages and be moved to think in fresh ways about different things. Accordingly, the short list of four lessons to be shared here are likely idiosyncratic and not exhaustive. They represent what I was inspired to consider as I had the privilege of bringing my academic biography to the imaginative account Singer offers about delinquency in the safe city of Amherst, New York.

Lesson 1: A lower-class bias has clouded thinking about crime

Singer's account suggests that the way in which scholars have focused on social class has clouded thinking about crime. Starting with the Chicago School, criminologists have assumed that serious delinquency is concentrated in disorganized inner-city neighborhoods that confine the truly disadvantaged [18, 19]. In particular, Shaw and McKay conceptualized the city as a series of concentric zones in which criminal activity flourished in the "zone in transition" where most impoverished immigrant families resided. Notably, Shaw and McKay referred to these as "delinquency areas," a term that implied that crime in these neighborhoods was widespread. From reading their work, one might assume that the average inner-city youngster was "Stanley," whose delinquent life story was classically relayed in Shaw's *The Jack-Roller* [20].

In fact, most youths living in the "delinquency areas" of Chicago were not so involved in crime as to become adjudicated delinquents—as Shaw and McKay's [18] own data reveal. Thus, in one analysis, Shaw and McKay examined the number of male youths taken to the juvenile court over a 7-year period. The highest rate per 100 youths, essentially a percentage, was only 18.9. Computing commitments to juvenile

institutions for the same 7-year series, the rate per 100 for youths in the zone in transition was under 4.0. The point here is that even in the most delinquent areas, the modal response seemed to have been no contact with the criminal justice system when youths were 10 to 16 years of age in 1920s and 1930s Chicago. Good kids, in short, far outnumbered bad kids.

This conclusion is mirrored in the contemporary findings reported in *The Criminology of Place*, an important book authored by Weisburd, Groff, and Yang [21]. Their data showed that within inner-city areas in Seattle, WA, the entire community was not criminogenic. Rather, crime was highly concentrated by place, which in this study was measured by street blocks. They found that some streets are dangerous, but most are not. Rather, these latter streets are either crime free or crime light. There seem to be many good streets in bad areas.

The point in all this is that criminologists, as a well-meaning group, may have inadvertently contributed to an "over-criminalized conception of the inner-city"—a point that I first made relatively recently [22]. We may have socially constructed a professional stereotype of inner-city areas as permeated by social disorganization and crime—places where crime is *pervasive and intractable* due to its root causes. This just does not seem to be the case (see also [23]).

The flip side of this stereotype, however, is the implicit assumption that suburban areas are crime free. For our purposes, it is important to note that Shaw and McKay [18] portrayed the two outer zones in their model—the "residential zone" and the "commuter's zone"—as organized and as non-delinquent. Inadvertently, they may have caused us to have a "safe" stereotype of these zones—that is to have an *under-criminalized* conception of suburban areas.

It is here that Singer's study takes on importance. His careful analysis reveals that youngsters in suburban cities do not necessarily live easy and idyllic lives. Modernity exposes these youths to an array of challenges. As Singer notes ([13]:267), "misfortunes, depression, illnesses, and a range of other troubles can happen to anyone at any time." Put in criminological terms, he emphasizes that suburban youths face the challenge of establishing "relational attachment" to adults and others and face an array of problems that would fall neatly into the three categories of strain identified by Agnew's [24] general strain theory.

None of this is to suggest that kids in slums do not experience daunting disadvantages or that kids in suburbia do not live a privileged existence. Nonetheless, *America's Safest City* disrupts the facile assumption that lower-class neighborhoods are ridden with crime that is beyond amelioration and that affluent neighborhoods are free of crime and devoid of life stresses. Indeed, the effects of modernity are likely apparent to any academic who has recently had the pleasure of parenting an adolescent son or daughter.

Lesson 2: The reaction for crime differs across classes

Singer's analysis thus raises the possibility that many criminogenic risk factors may occur across social classes—being more a function of modernity, parenting, and maturation. But his book also vividly illuminates that something else is strongly class based: *societal reaction* to delinquency. This point is important—and often forgotten in

most theories and empirical analyses. Thus, delinquency is a product not only of what causes the propensity to offend but also of how we react to it—a key insight made by labeling theorists and by scholars evaluating correctional treatment programs [25–27].

Class matters in two ways. First, Singer shows how assiduously adults in suburban cities try to avoid using the justice system to respond to delinquency. They are sufficiently wise to know that contact with the justice system is itself a risk factor to be avoided. Indeed, much evidence now suggests this to be the case. For example, Anthony Petrosino and colleagues' [28] meta-analysis of 29 randomized controlled trials found that juvenile justice processing is "crime enhancing." Suburban adults seem to know this fact and, except in the most extreme cases, react to delinquent youths accordingly.

In a way, Singer makes an observation that stands social bond theory on its head. What matters is not the youths' bonds to adults but adults' bonds to them—their attachment and commitment to kids in trouble. Underlying it all is, to use Shadd Maruna's [29] term, a collective "redemption script." These youths are seen as redeemable, as having a future. A commitment to them is seen as merited because we do not wish to "waste" their lives. The goal is to effect the inclusion or restoration of these "troubled" youths, not their exclusion and stigmatization. By contrast, they are not portrayed as super-predators—as constituting the "other," the unredeemable who must be locked away (cf. [30, 31]). Instead, the goal is, as Edwin Schur [32] recommended long ago—"radical non-intervention." This is why diversion programs abound in suburbia.

Second, beyond minimizing formal social control, it is clear that suburban communities have the capacity to deliver social support to delinquent youths (see, more generally, [33]). This might be seen as another aspect to Sampson's [34] view of collective efficacy—that is, the capacity of a community to solve problems in line with its values. A city is safe in large part because its members have the social, personal, and economic capital to support troubled kids. By contrast, many inner-city areas lack the capacity to deliver formal and informal support to their at-risk youths [35]. In two different studies, Magda Stouthamer-Loeber and colleagues [36, 37] showed that a large majority of at-risk youngsters in the Pittsburgh Youth Survey received little or no intervention prior to entering the juvenile justice system. As they commented, "Thus, the disruptive problem careers of many of the delinquent boys were left unchecked" ([37]:248).

Lesson 3: Parents matter in producing adolescence-limited antisocial youths

Singer can perhaps be seen as presenting a broader look at what Terrie Moffitt [38] calls adolescence-limited antisocial behavior. This is not the place to discuss the difference between a developmental approach versus a sociological life-course approach to explaining why delinquency is most often adolescence-limited (compare [38] with [39]). I suspect that both have value. But let me just say this much.

Because most theories are offender-centric, one of the missing components in delinquency theory is the importance of adults in the lives of youths. Here, I want to move beyond the issue of how much parenting styles matters (e.g., authoritative vs. harsh and erratic). I also want to move beyond repeating Hirschi's [9] views on

attachment—now more than four decades old—or repeating his views with Gottfredson [10] on parental use of direct control to inculcate self-control—now more than 25 years old. Rather, I am referring to the importance of Singer's observations about *relational support*. A key issue is just how much parents and other adults care about kids and then use their human agency and capital to help these youths cope effectively with the pervasive "personal difficulties, discontent, and some sort of trouble" they experience ([13]:248). As noted, should more serious delinquency occur, parents take steps to ensure that it does not escalate.

So, the point is that much delinquency may be adolescence-limited not only because youthful indiscretions are developmentally normative but also because parents make it so. They play a *protective role* in knifing off life-course pathways that could result in cumulative disadvantage. They are skilled at finding ways to ensure that troubled kids are not permanently damaged by their challenges but can survive them to move into a conventional adult role. The concept of relational support thus is pregnant with rich theoretical possibilities.

Lessons 4: Suburban delinquency may be a precursor to white-collar crime

Singer's work has significant implications for the study of white-collar crime. Sutherland's [40] intellectual project was to explain how seemingly respectable members of the upper echelons of society could end up going to work and breaking the law. His answer was that the workplace itself—whether corporations or the political arena— was socially disorganized in the sense that society was not organized to combat the occupational values that justified, if not encouraged, shady practices and corruption. Employment thus afforded many previously conventional citizens an intense form of differential association in which criminal definitions were systematically transmitted. More contemporary scholars might provide the same explanation but use terms such as organizational culture and ethical climates to describe the criminogenic processes identified by Sutherland.

Singer's analysis, however, illuminates a far different source of white-collar crime. In essence, he alerts us to the fact that many middle-class youngsters commit a range of delinquent acts. Similar to Chambliss's [41] classic description of the "Saints" in his ethnography of affluent delinquents, Singer's subjects avoid detection and, thanks to their parents and other adults, avoid prosecution and entry into the justice system. But many are quite deviant and leave adolescence with ethical beliefs that are hardly conformist. Their criminality in the workplace thus may be less organizationally produced and more a matter of importation. In another essay—entitled "Adolescent Precursors to White-Collar Crime," Singer ([42]:233) makes this precise point:

> The life-course literature has long recognized that the precursors for adult criminality reside in adolescence. Yet theories of delinquency tend to focus on the crimes of those who are disadvantaged. The main precursor to being an adult is adolescence. It is surprising that more of the characteristics of middle-class and upper-class adolescence are not taken into account in explanations of adult white-collar criminals.

In this piece, Singer draws our attention to white-collar delinquencies, such as cheating and the illegal copying of copyrighted materials.

More generally, Singer shows that kids in suburban cities—those who will populate white-collar occupational positions—do not enter these settings with no experience with crime and with spotless ethical records. Again, scholars tend to view white-collar crime not as part of a persistent life-course propensity but as freshly created from exposure to criminal corporate and political cultures. We would enrich our understanding of white-collar offending, however, if we understood that delinquent experiences matter not only for those who later will offend on the streets but also those who will later offend in corporate suites.

Conclusion

America's Safest City is an exemplar for what the best of criminology can achieve. To be sure, its brilliance can be traced to the special talents of its author, Simon Singer, and thus its level of substantive excellence might lie beyond the reach of the rest of us. Nonetheless, it offers a model on how to do criminology that departs significantly from the standard research paradigm of using secondary data sets with limited measures to repeatedly test narrow aspects of reigning theories. Instead, Singer began his project with a real city populated by real people. He chose to compile their stories and to measure features of their lives. But most importantly, he placed their biographies, including their personal troubles, within the unique socio-historical context in which they were inextricable embedded. In so doing, he taught us that C. Wright Mills was prescient in identifying the sociological imagination as an indispensible conduit for more fully understanding the challenges individuals face and the ways in which they are resolved. Delinquency, as Singer has now illuminated, is shaped intimately by modernity. This insight should inform subsequent inquiries into the lives of youths—located across the class structure—who seek to negotiate life in contemporary America.

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