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# Student Criminality: The influence of strain, family and peers

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STUDENT CRIMINALITY: THE INFLUENCE  
OF STRAIN, FAMILY AND PEERS

Annie R. Cvetan

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General strain theory suggests that a number of conditioning factors affect who is more likely to respond to strain with crime. Research has also demonstrated that an individual's self-complexity plays a role in how an individual responds to strain. Self-complexity refers to (1) the number of identities individuals perceive as important to themselves; and (2) the varied characteristics they ascribe to these identities. This research study analyzed if college students were committing crime, whether the crimes were major or minor in nature, and if criminality was a new behavior or an imported one. This study also looked at who, if anyone, influenced college student's decisions to commit crime and if self-complexity played a role in student's decision. In addition, data were collected on what coping mechanisms students utilized, and if they were effective in reducing strain and therefore reducing criminal behavior.

STUDENT CRIMINALITY: THE INFLUENCE  
OF STRAIN, FAMILY AND PEERS

ANNIE R. CVETAN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Criminal Justice Sciences

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STUDENT CRIMINALITY: THE INFLUENCE  
OF STRAIN, FAMILY AND PEERS

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities across the nation offer, for the most part, a safe and welcoming environment for young adults to make the transition from high school into adulthood and independence (Flowers, 2009). They are melting pots for ideas, perspectives, and open minds from people of all races, cultures, backgrounds, and belief systems. However, in recent years campus crime has become more and more prevalent in our national headlines. The tragedy that took place at Virginia Tech in 2007, which left thirty-three people dead followed by the shooting by a graduate student who opened fire in a Colorado movie theater in 2012 have raised a lot of questions in regard to campus safety. Though many students are able to complete their studies with no major issues of personal safety or misconduct, few students are untouched by the problems of unlawful or risky behavior experienced by students at most schools (Flowers, 2009).

Due to the Clery Act of 1990, colleges and universities have to report Uniform Crime Reports Part I offenses (criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson) that occur on or near the campus in a yearly report available to the public (Guffey, 2013). This report is provided to prospective students both in admissions brochures as well as the university's or college's website. Prospective students and their parents are able to use this information

in their decision-making as to which school their son or daughter should attend (Guffey, 2013). As parents help their children move out and into college, their first concern is their child's safety. Data from the Clery statistics are compared with UCR data from neighboring cities and towns to estimate whether there is justification to question the accuracy of the Clery Act Data due to a history of underreporting crime on campuses. If schools are suspected of not accurately reporting campus crime, they are subject to fines and loss of government funding.

In 2000, Illinois State University's Police Department reported 302 UCR index crimes (criminal sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault/battery, burglary, theft and arson), 94 drug arrests and 14 cases of domestic violence on campus; however, these statistics do not take into account the "dark figure" of crime. The dark figure of crime is a term that is used by crime experts and sociologists to illustrate the number of committed crimes that are never reported or are never discovered, and this puts into doubt the accuracy of official crime data. Among the crimes that take place in any given place at any given period of time, some are never reported to the police, and some are reported but never recorded by the police officers.

### **Statement of the Problem**

It is undeniable that crime occurs in and around college campuses, but the question is why? Fisher, Sloan, Cullen and Lu (1998) believe that college students are at a higher rate of victimization due to life-style routine activities and increased use of recreational drugs and alcohol. However, this explanation fails to acknowledge the symptoms of why students choose to abuse alcohol and/or illegal drugs; as well as, those students who resort to criminal behavior who do not abuse alcohol and/or illegal drugs, or

those who do, but do not commit crime. This research will determine what factors influence a college student's decision to commit crime and whether it is a new behavior or a long established one. Examining what influences students to commit crime will provide a better foundation for deterring it. This study will examine who, if anyone, influenced college students' decisions to commit crime and if self-complexity played a role in student's decision. In addition, data were collected on what coping mechanisms students utilized, and if they were effective in reducing strain and therefore reducing criminal behavior.

### **Theoretical Framework**

General strain theory (GST) states that people are pressured into crime because of the strains or negative events or conditions they experience (Agnew, 2006). Numerous studies have produced support for the effect of strain on crime (Agnew, 2002; Aseltine et al., 2000; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1998; Moon et al., 2009; Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994). Strains that are seen as high in magnitude, are viewed as unjust, associated with low social control, and create some incentive for criminal coping are more likely to result in crime (Agnew, 2001). Agnew (2006) focuses on five different factors that may condition the effect of strain on crime: (1) poor coping skills and resources, (2) low levels of conventional social support, (3) low social control, (4) association with criminal others and beliefs favorable to a crime, and (5) exposure to situations where the costs of criminal coping are low and the benefits high.

Agnew (2006) lists several types of coping skills and resources which may reinforce criminal coping such as poor problem-solving and social skills, low constraint or self-control and negative emotionality, low socioeconomic status, and low self-

efficacy. With social structure theory, the strains might not necessarily come from people's frustrations with acquiring *The American Dream*, but rather a mixture in strains such as: homelessness, abuse and neglect, subcultures, deviant values, and frustrations about poverty. This means there might be more than one factor in play when a person is "influenced" to commit a crime by interacting within an imposed economic class. A person might encounter one of these factors by him or herself and not decide to succumb to peer pressure, or let his/her abuse trauma lead to a life of crime. A person might face poverty but have enough resilience through family values to choose lawful actions. The most support has been found for the conditioning effect of self-control, with those who are higher in self-control, or those lower in constraint and higher in negative emotionality, being less likely to respond to strain with crime (Agnew et al., 2002; Hay & Meldrum, 2010; Mazerolle & Maahs, 2000; Piquero & Sealock, 2000). Agnew also argues that those who lack conventional social supports will be more likely to respond to strain with crime; as well as those low in social control, those who do not believe crime is wrong, those who have few emotional bonds with conventional others, and those who are not invested in conventional activities.

Evidence shows that those with strong attachments are less likely to commit crime after experiencing strain (Agnew, Rebellon, & Thaxton, 2000; Agnew et al., 2002; Aseltine et al., 2000; Mazerolle et al., 2000; Moon et al., 2009). Strain will also likely lead to crime among those who associate with criminal others because family and friends will model delinquent behavioral responses to strain. However, Agnew also states that these negative relationships are also sometimes the direct source of the strain. Negative relationships include relationships in which other people prevent a person from achieving

a valued goal, take away something valued that the person already has, or impose on the person something that is “noxious” and unwanted (Bernard, Vold, Snipes & Gerould, 2009).

Evidence also suggests that those with delinquent/criminal peers will be more likely to commit at least some types of crime when strained than those with fewer delinquent/criminal peers (Agnew & White, 1992; Aseltine et al., 2000; Baron, 2004; Baron & Hartnagel, 2002; Gallupe & Baron, 2009; Mazerolle & Maahs, 2000; & Mazerolle et al., 2000). Agnew’s fifth factor of GST is that criminal coping will be more likely when individuals encounter situations where the costs of crime are low and the benefits are high. Agnew (2006) posits that youth and adults are pressured into crime through strains they experience. As a result of these strains, people will experience negative emotions such as anger, frustration, or depression. If they lack the resources to cope with strain through legal means or are predisposed to engage in crime, then people will be more likely to alleviate negative emotions through crime.

Matthews (2011) extends Agnew’s research by exploring self-complexity (SC) of identity to explain why some individuals respond to strain with crime. SC refers to the number of roles or identities that are important to a person and how different these roles or identities are from one another (Matthews, 2011). Matthews found that individuals who are lower in SC, or those with few roles and high overlap in how one views these roles, are more susceptible to strain because the negative emotions associated with a failure or negative event in one area of life will spill over into these closely related roles or identities (Matthews, 2011).

## **Study Objectives**

This study sought to determine which of Agnew's (2006) five different factors conditioned the effect of strain on crime and influenced college student's decisions to commit crime, and tested Matthew's (2011) extension of Agnew's research to include self-concept. College underclassmen were surveyed about their own and their friend's and families' criminal behavior, as well as, the attributes and roles they use to define themselves and how they cope with strain to give university administration data to provide appropriate interventions and support for their student body and therefore decrease campus crime. The participants were recruited from the CJS 102 roster containing 260 students. The class is a general education class taken by students from all majors as an optional general education requirement. Students were surveyed during the Spring 2014 semester to allow students to establish routines and friendships at the post-secondary level. The students were surveyed to answer the following questions: (a) Is criminal activity an imported behavior or a new behavior for college students? (b) Are the crimes that college students are committing major or minor offenses? (c) Who, if any one, influences college students to commit crimes? (d) Is low self-concept associated with an increase in delinquent behavior? (e) What coping mechanisms are students utilizing, and are they effective in reducing strain?

## **Potential Contributions to the Field of Research**

This research is vital for understanding why campus crime occurs. In order to formulate effective interventions, it is important to clearly understand what is causing college students to engage in criminal activity. Treating only the symptoms of the problem is only a short term solution and a waste of time and money. This research will

identify the root causes and target population of needed interventions to reduce crime on campus.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2007, the entire country took notice and mourned the devastation that took place at Virginia Tech. Defined as a massacre, twenty-three year old senior at Virginia Tech, majoring in English, killed 32 people on the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University campus in Blacksburg, Virginia, before taking his own life. The event rocked the country and schools started discussing increasing security measures. Then it happened again, and again, and again. Schools across the country put safety plans into place, locked down campuses, hired security, and even proposed arming teachers in order to keep students safe. What makes college campuses unique from other school settings is that they are not covered by the Free and Appropriate Public Education act (FAPE). Not everyone has the option to go to college. The “bad” kids in high school do not usually go on to college, yet crime takes place on college campuses. College campuses have not previously been associated with crime concerns due to the process of selection, which favored the wealthy and statistically least likely to be perceived as criminal. However, as college becomes more available to everyone, the crime problems from the communities some students are from are transplanted to campus. In order to fix something or prevent it from happening again, you cannot treat just the symptoms, but identify the root of the problem.

## **General Literature Review**

Scholars, professionals, and lay people debate what causes young people to commit crime (Loeber & Farrington, 2012). Some argue there are “bad” individuals who already from childhood are out of control and many become life-course persistent delinquents (Loeber & Farrington, 2012). Others argue that juvenile delinquents are to a high degree a product of their environment: the worse their environment, the worse their behavior over time (Loeber & Farrington, 2012). However, many juvenile delinquents stop offending in late adolescence and early adulthood. This decrease is accompanied by a decrease in their impulsive behavior and an increase in their self-control (Loeber & Farrington, 2012). With respect to age-based prevalence estimates, most studies indicate that prevalence peaks in the teenage years (around ages 15-19) and then declines in the early 20s (Blumenstein et al., 1986; Piquero et al., 2003). However, new data suggest that going to college extends the adolescent period, potentially presenting individuals with a greater abundance of criminal opportunities and lower levels of informal social control – both of which increase the likelihood of criminal perpetration (e.g. Cohen & Felson, 1979; Hirschi, 1969; Osgood, Wilson, O’Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996). In this section, I review the literature that contributes to the question of what factors influence the college student’s decision to commit crime these include family, aging-out, and criminal opportunities.

### **Family Criminality**

The Positive school is associated with determinism: the idea that criminal behavior is determined, or caused, by something, either internal and/or external. It is the identification of that “thing,” or set of things, that raises the question of causation to the

forefront in the analysis of crime and delinquency (Shoemaker, 2000). There are numerous theories that attempt to isolate the variables that cause criminality. Regardless of the theory, most criminologists agree that family is a key component. Whether criminality is passed through one's DNA, caused by the neighborhood in which they reside, produced by bad parenting, or pushed upon them as a way of life, juveniles are directly influenced by the people and things to which they are exposed, which is first and foremost their socialization through friends and family.

A long history of research demonstrates the direct correlation between family and aggressive behavior. One of the first major studies on family criminality was conducted by Richard Dugdale in 1877, studying the history of the Juke family, which spurred the entire eugenics movement because the results illustrated that criminal and deviant behavior are passed from one generation to the next. For example, in the Jukes study, Dugdale (1877) traced a clan of 700 criminals, prostitutes, and paupers descended from "Margaret, the Mother of Criminals." The Jukes family represented a degenerate hereditary stock stemming from an early progenitor, Max Jukes. Those who married into the Jukes lineage were corrupted in their subsequent descendants. Interestingly, Dugdale claimed that what was inherited was a bad environment, not a bad physiology. His solutions were simple: decent housing and education. Environmental optimism pervaded his study of the Jukes. He believed crime and pauperism could easily be controlled through intense social reform: "Energetic, judicious, and thorough training of children of our criminal population would, in fifteen years, show itself by the great decrease in the number of commitments" (p.57). Needless to say, his recommendations were not acted upon.

Ferguson published a study in 1952 examining how familial crime predicts delinquency in boys. He was able to demonstrate that the percentage of boys who were convicted increased dramatically with the number of other convicted family members, from 9 percent (no other family member convicted) to 15 percent (one), 30 percent (two) and 44 percent (three or more other family members convicted) (Farrington, 2001). The probability of conviction was especially high among boys who had convicted fathers (24%), convicted older brothers (33%) or convicted younger brothers (38%). One line of thinking behind this trend is that boys generally emulate their fathers and/or older brothers in hopes to one day be just like them and gain their approval, even if they are not directly involved in their lives.

In the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (1975), offending was strongly concentrated in a small group of families (5%) who produced about half of the criminal convictions in the 400 families followed (West & Farrington, 1977). The study found that boys who already had delinquent siblings by age 8 years were more likely to break the law at ages 10 to 16 and were more likely to go on to have chronic criminal careers in adulthood through age 32 (Farrington & Lambert, 1996).

In a more recent study (Farrington, 2001), parents of 1395 Pittsburgh boys aged 8, 11 or 14 reported arrests by all relatives. The distribution of arrests for all relatives in the 1395 families were as follows: 9.7 percent of the participants, 10 percent of brothers, 2.7 percent of sisters, 33 percent of fathers, 6.6 percent of mothers, 12.8 percent of uncles, 3.4 percent of aunts, 5.1 percent of grandfathers and 1.6 percent of grandmothers. In total, 44.4 percent of families included at least one arrested person, and 8 percent of all relatives were arrested (Farrington, 2001). This study is unique that to overcome the

“paper” barrier in the United States, researchers obtained information about family criminality from family members. The study of family criminality in the United States is lacking due to difficulty in obtaining criminal records because so many different agencies are involved and because of Americans’ mobility, which makes it difficult to track participants. The Pittsburgh findings show that the most important relative in predicting a boy’s delinquency was the father; arrests of the father predicted the boy’s delinquency independently of all other relatives (Farrington, 2001). The study clearly illustrates that criminal relatives have a negative effect on children in the family and is a strong predictor of juvenile delinquency.

### **Genetics**

How important heredity is compared to the environment is debatable. There are several explanations (which are not mutually exclusive) for why offending tends to be concentrated in certain families and transmitted from one generation to the next (Farrington, 2001). First, there may be intergenerational continuities in exposure to multiple risk factors: such as, entrapped in poverty, disrupted families, single and teenage parenting, and living in the most deprived neighborhoods (Farrington, 2001). One of the main conclusions of the Cambridge Study is that a constellation of family background features (including poverty, large family size, parental disharmony, poor child-rearing, and parental criminality) lead to a constellation of antisocial features when children grow up, of which criminality is one element (West & Farrington, 1977). According to this explanation, the intergenerational transmission of offending is part of a larger cycle of deprivation and antisocial behavior (Farrington, 2001). A second explanation focuses on assortative mating. Farrington (2001) found that female offenders tended to cohabit

with or get married to male offenders. This happens for one of two reasons. The first is that convicted people tend to choose each other as mates because of physical and social proximity; they meet each other in the same schools, neighborhoods, clubs, bars, etc. (Rowe & Farrington, 1997). The second reason is that people choose partners who are similar to themselves. In the Dunedin longitudinal study in New Zealand, Krueger et al. (1998) found that sexual partners tended to be similar in their self-reported antisocial behavior. Children with two criminal parents are likely to be disproportionately antisocial (West & Farrington, 1977). Another explanation focuses on direct and mutual influences of family members on each other. In the Cambridge Study, co-offending by brothers was surprisingly common; about 20 percent of boys who had brothers close to them in age were convicted for a crime committed with their brother (Reiss & Farrington, 1991). A fourth explanation suggests that the effect of a criminal parent on a child's offending is mediated by environmental mechanisms. Farrington (2001) suggested that arrested fathers tended to have delinquent boys because they tended to impregnate young women, live in bad neighborhoods, and use child-rearing methods that did not develop a strong conscience in their children. In the Cambridge Study, it was suggested that poor parental supervision was one link in the causal chain between criminal fathers and delinquent sons (West & Farrington, 1977).

A large body of research exists that has tested genetic influences on crime, and the results of these studies have revealed that crime and other antisocial behaviors are heritable with approximately 50% of the variance being explained by genetic factors (Moffit, 2005). Four meta-analyses and several literature reviews are available that summarize the extant research estimating the heritability of antisocial behaviors

(Ferguson, 2010; Fishbein, 1990; Harris, 1995, 1998; Mason & Frick, 1994; Miles & Carey, 1997; Moffitt, 2005; Raine, 1993; Rhee and Waldman, 2002; Rowe, 1990, 2002; Turkheimer & Waldron, 2000). Mason and Frick (1994) conducted one of the first meta-analyses and reported an average heritability estimate of .48 for antisocial behavior (Barnes, Beaver & Boutwell, 2011). Other meta-analyses have also emerged that provide similar estimates (Ferguson, 2010; Miles & Carey, 1997; Rhee & Walsman, 2002). Moffit (2003) explored the genetic and environmental influences on aggressive and nonaggressive antisocial behavior in over 1,000 twin pairs aged 8-9 years and again at 13-14 years. The continuity in aggressive antisocial behavior symptoms from childhood to adolescence was largely mediated by genetic influences; whereas, continuity in nonaggressive antisocial behavior was mediated both by the shared environment and genetic influences (Moffit, 2003). These data are in agreement with the hypothesis that aggressive antisocial behavior is a stable heritable trait as compared to nonaggressive behavior, which is more strongly influenced by the environment and shows less genetic stability over time (Moffit, 2003). Seen in this way, the concentration of crime among biological relatives (including the transmission across generational lines) is the result of the genetic material that is shared among biological relatives (and that is transmitted from parent to offspring)(Beaver, 2013). Having a criminal biological parent or sibling, then, may be a proxy indicator for the latent genetic risk that is evident within the family (Beaver, 2013).

Family is the prime determinant of delinquency. It is in the home that children's values, personality, and self-concept begin to develop (Musick, 1995). Antisocial individuals tend to have children with partners who also have antisocial features

(Farrington, Barnes, & Lambert, 1996). Antisocial parents show increased levels of family conflict, poor supervision, family breakdown, and hostility directed toward children (Loeber & Farrington, 2001). In homes where both parents exhibit antisocial characteristics, children receive very little, if any, positive reinforcement for appropriate behaviors. It is more likely that the only attention a child receives will be for negative acting out and therefore reinforcing inappropriate behavior. As the child gets older, the satisfaction or reward they gain from delinquent behavior will outweigh any consequences they may receive. Having an antisocial sibling also increases the likelihood of antisocial behavior in other siblings. In the Cambridge study, boys who already had delinquent siblings by age 8 were more likely to break the law at ages 10 to 16 and were more likely to go on to have chronic criminal careers in adulthood through age 32 (Farrington & Lambert, 1996). Patterson (1984, 1986) supports the position that young children learn aggressive and coercive behavior through interactions with already aggressive siblings and through exposure to similarly poor parenting practices (Loeber & Farrington, 2001).

### **Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theorists believe that criminal behavior is learned from others as a result of deviant behavior being differentially reinforced and defined as desirable, but they also acknowledge that an individual's genetics, hormones, central nervous system, and physical characteristics influence an individual's potential for aggression. The issue is that rewards are more powerful in shaping behavior than consequences. The same learning process in a context of social structure, interaction, and situation produces both conforming and deviant behaviors (Akers & Sellers, 2004). The difference lies in the

direction of the balance of influences on the behavior (Akers & Sellers, 2004). The people or groups with whom an individual is in social contact, either directly or indirectly, influences an individual's behavior. Whether individuals will refrain from or commit a crime at any given time (and whether they will continue or desist from doing it in the future) depends on the past, present, and anticipated future rewards and punishments for their actions (Akers & Sellers, 2004). The most important reinforcements tend to be social (resulting from interactions with peer groups and family members) (Akers & Sellers, 2004). Witnessing the actions of others, in particular the people that are close to us, can affect our participation in both conforming and non-conforming behaviors (Donnerstein & Linz, 1995). This takes place primarily through the basic principles of differential association: criminal behavior is learned; criminal behavior is learned in interaction with other persons in a process of communication; the principal part of the learning of criminal behavior occurs within intimate personal groups; when criminal behavior is learned, the learning includes techniques of committing the crime and the specific direction of motives, rationalizations, and attitudes conducive to a crime; the specific direction of motives and drives are learned from definitions of the legal codes as favorable and unfavorable; a person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of the law; differential associations may vary in frequency, duration, priority and intensity for each individual; the process of learning criminal behavior by association with criminal and anti-criminal patterns involves all the mechanisms that are involved in any other learning; and while criminal behavior is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values since non-criminal behavior

is an expression of the same needs and values (Shoemaker, 2000). Clinigempeel and Henggeler (2003), tracked 80 young people, between the ages of 12 and 17, over a five-year period to study the influences of aggressive juvenile offenders transitioning into adulthood and found that the quality of the relationships the young people had with others was significantly related to their desistence or persistence in criminal conduct.

McCord (1977) conducted a similar study which suggested that boys with criminal fathers are somewhat more likely to be found guilty of a crime than boys with fathers who avoid conviction. Boys who were most likely to become criminal had criminal fathers who rejected them and passive or rejecting parents who employed inconsistent patterns of discipline (Musick, 1995). Children from criminal families tend to build up anti-authority attitudes and the belief that offending is justifiable (Farrington, 1986). Using the same sample, Farrington, Barnes and Lambert (1996) subsequently maintained that if children had a convicted parent by the time they were 10, then that was the “best predictor” of them becoming criminal and anti-social themselves (Farrington, 1986).

### **Aging-Out Phenomenon**

Regardless of their upbringing or age of onset, all young people mature and form some semblance of internal control which is demonstrated through more mature judgment; better decision-making in offending opportunities; better executive functioning, reasoning, abstract thinking, and planning; less influence exerted by immediate undesirable consequences than longer-term possible desirable consequences; better impulse control, less likely to take risks and commit crimes for excitement and more likely to make rational prosocial choices; better emotion regulation and self-

regulation; less susceptibility to peer influence; and avoidance of self-harm (Loeber & Farrington, 2012). It is well established that antisocial and criminal activity increases during adolescence, peaks around age 17, and declines as individuals enter adulthood (Sweeten, Piquero & Steinberg, 2013). Evidence for this “age-crime curve” has been found across samples that vary in their ethnicity, national origin, and historical era (Farrington, 1986; Farrington et al. 2013; Moffitt, 1993; Piquero et al. 2003,2007). Masten et al. (2004) characterized the transition period as a window of opportunity for individuals to alter their life course and to have second-chance opportunities and turning points in their lives.

### **Age-Crime Curve**

According to the age-crime curve, their criminal activity will have peaked in late adolescence and will decrease subsequently into adulthood (Farrington, 1986; Tremblay & Nagin, 2005; Laub & Sampson, 2003). The Philadelphia Birth Cohort Study indicated that about one-third of Philadelphia males born in 1945 had experienced a police contact by age 18 (Wolfgang et al., 1972): a finding which has generally been replicated across most longitudinal studies examining official record (Piquero, Hawkins & Kazemian, 2012). With respect to age-based prevalence estimates, most studies tend to indicate that prevalence peaks in the teenage years (around 15-19) and then declines in the early 20s (Blumenshine et al., 1986; Piqueoro et al., 2003). These figures tend to peak earlier in self-reports and later when using official measures (including police contacts, arrests, and then convictions) (Moffitt et al., 2001). Empirical evidence on ever-prevalence of offending suggests that while most individuals self-report involvement in some form of delinquent or criminal behavior by early adulthood, official records from police contacts,

arrests, and convictions show a much smaller estimate (~20-40% depending on data source, follow-up period, etc.) largely because most offenders are not caught (Piquero, Hawkins & Kazemian, 2012).

Piquero et al. (2007) examined the prevalence of offending using the conviction records originally captured in the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (Piquero, Hawkins & Kazemian, 2012). Their analyses showed that (1) the early to middle teenage years saw a steady increase in annual prevalence from 2 percent to just over 10 percent at the peak age of 17 (10.7%, only to be followed by a small degree of stability amid a general decline through age 40; (2) the cumulative-prevalence of convictions through age 40 evinced a rapid rise until about age 18, at which point it became asymptotic up to age 40 (39.9% of the sample had at least one conviction); (3) there were very few differences in offending prevalence across offense types, as involvement across most offense types decreased over time (a pattern that was observed both for the number of persons convicted and the sum total number of convictions); and (4) offending prevalence assessed using self-report surveys among the Cambridge Study participants approached 100 percent by age 40 (Farrington et al., 2001). Kazemian and Farrington (2006) investigated these quantities in the Cambridge Study, based on official records of convictions, and found that the average residual length of a criminal career and the average residual number of offenses decreased steadily with age (Loeber, Farrington, Howell & Hoeve, 2012).

Less well known is the fact that, although an early age of onset, compared to a later age of onset, is associated with a longer criminal career, the highest concentration of desistance takes place during adolescence and early adulthood *irrespective* of age of

onset (Loeber & Farrington, 2012). In fact, the prevalence in the down-slope of the age-crime curve is very substantial; going down from about 50 percent to about 10 percent of all persons (e.g., Loeber et al., 2008). However, the transition to adulthood has become increasingly prolonged with more youth staying in education longer, marrying later, and having their first child later than in the past (Arnett, 2000). Sweeping demographic shifts have taken place over the past half century that have made the late teens and early twenties not simply a brief period of transition into adult roles but a distinct period of the life course, characterized by change and exploration of possible life directions (Arnett, 2000). As recently as 1970, the median age of marriage in the United States was about 21 for women and 23 for men; by 1996, it had risen to 25 for women and 27 for men (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997). Age of first childbirth followed a similar pattern. Also, since midcentury the proportion of young Americans obtaining higher education after high school has risen steeply from 14% in 1940 to over 60% by the mid-1990s (Arnett & Taber, 1994; Bianchi & Spain, 1996). Similar changes have taken place in other industrialized countries (Chisholm & Hurrelmann, 1995; Noble, Cover, & Yanagishita, 1996).

Arnett (1994) surveyed college students ( $N = 346$ ) on their conceptions of the transition to adulthood and their own statuses as adults. Only 23 percent indicated that they considered themselves to have reached adulthood, while nearly two-thirds indicated that they considered themselves to be adults in some respects but not in others (Arnett, 1994). In the views of many young Americans, becoming an adult means complying with social norms by refraining from behavior such as drunk driving, shoplifting, and experimentation with illegal drugs (Arnett, 1994). This is also heavily correlated with the

importance of learning to stand alone and no longer dependent on family or others (Arnett, 1998).

### **College Students and Criminal Opportunities**

The transition from high school to college has become an increasingly common experience for many young people in the United States (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Despite the fact that highly delinquent youth are unlikely to succeed in high school, let alone attend college, criminal offending exists in and around places of higher education and is most likely perpetrated by members of the college student body (Siegel & Raymond, 1992). Based on interviews designed after the National Crime Victimization Survey, Fisher et al. (1998) surveyed 3,472 randomly selected students across 12 institutions to examine the level, and sources of students' victimization. More than one-third of the sample reported being victims during the 1993-94 academic year (Fisher, Sloan, Cullen, & Lu, 1998). While juvenile delinquency and educational attainment are negatively correlated, crime and other risk-taking behaviors are certainly not absent among college students (Fisher, Sloan, Cullen, & Lu, 1998). College student's daily routines and overall lifestyle choices potentially heighten the risk for criminal behavior (Fisher et al., 1998; Sloan, 1994; Sloan, Fisher, & Cullen, 1997). Most colleges and universities will experience their share of illegal activity, due in part to the demographic makeup of the institutions themselves (Seffrin, Cernkovich & Giordano, 2008). The bulk of the college student body is comprised of individuals who are under the age of twenty-five, unwed, and without full-time employment, all of which have been previously identified as risk factors for crime and victimization (Miethe, Stafford, & Long, 1987). College enrollment may be a temporary, yet significant shift in life circumstances that may potentially increase

unstructured socializing with peers, criminal opportunities, and the risk of criminal behavior, and substance abuse. Therefore, the daily routines and overall lifestyle choices of many college undergraduates potentially heightens the risk for criminal behavior (Fisher et al., 1997; Sloan, 1994; Sloan, Fisher, & Cullen, 1997). The relationship between crime and education is therefore paradoxical in some respects (e.g. LaFree & Drass, 1996) in that participation in an otherwise traditional institution may encourage, rather than deter, social deviance and risk-taking.

College enrollment may also influence the life-course of crime by allowing for a lifestyle that essentially extends the adolescent period (Moffitt, 1997). Institutions of higher education help students to realize their aspirations, but participation in them may equally portend a set of routines and behaviors that temporarily delay entry into adult roles and responsibilities, such as marriage, family formation, and full-time participation in the labor force (Thorton, Axinn, & Teachmen, 1995). Instead of participating in these adult roles, college students may continue high levels of involvement in unstructured socializing, with same and opposite sex peers, and in contexts that are often insensitive to minor forms of social deviance or legal infraction (i.e. public intoxication, indecent exposure, and general unruliness) (Seffrin, Cernkovich & Giordano, 2008). A recent longitudinal study of adolescent youth indicates that the frequent pursuit of multiple dating interests and unstructured socializing patterns combine to elevate the risk of criminal offending into the early adult years (Seffrin, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2008). Other studies show that spending time with friends in a casual setting, ‘hanging-out,’ is related to higher levels of delinquency and other forms of risk taking (Haynie & Osgood, 2005; Osgood & Anderson, 2004; Osgood et al., 1996). For example, Osgood

and Anderson (2004) surveyed 4,358 juveniles to analyze the effects of time spent in unstructured socializing with peers. Their findings strongly support the contention that more unstructured time with peers is associated with an increase in the rate of delinquency. These findings have important implications because such interactions frequently become a regular part of the college student's repertoire – possibly much more so than peers who have entered the labor force, married, or do not attend college (Seffrin, Cernkovich, & Giordano, 2008).

### **Campus Crime Statistics**

There is no denying that crime occurs on college campuses. The U.S. Department of Education (2009) reported that four-year institutions in the United States in 2007 collectively reported 44 murders, 2,491 forcible rapes, 1,386 robberies, 2,130 aggravated assaults, 25,978 burglaries, and 3,410 motor vehicle thefts. These statistics do not include minor offenses like underage drinking, public intoxication and general unruliness. In 2006, about 17.6 million (46.1 %) underage persons used alcohol in the past year, 10.8 million (28.3 %) used in the past month, 7.2 million (19.0 %) engaged in binge alcohol use, and 2.4 million (6.2 %) engaged in heavy alcohol use (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2008). Despite the fact that alcohol possession and consumption are illegal for most undergraduates, several studies have shown that heavy drinking and binge drinking are common among college students (Engs & Hanson, 1994; Rivinus & Larimer, 1993; Siegel & Raymond, 1992; Wechsler et al., 1994). Siegel and Raymond (1992) reported that close to 80 percent of victimizations committed against students were by fellow students. In 1990, Congress passed the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act (20 USC 1092), which requires colleges and universities that

participate in federal financial aid programs to publish statistics for specific on-campus FBI Index offenses, liquor and drug violations, and weapon possession (Fisher, Sloan, Cullen, & Lu, 1998). Although the vast majority of campus crimes are neither deadly nor violent (Bromley, 1992; Fisher, et. al., 1998; Sloan, 1994), campus crime is still important to study, especially as college enrollments have continued to rise due to the ever growing need of a college degree (Barton, Jensen & Kaufman, 2010). As opposed to generations of the past, high school graduates today are unable to obtain a number of high-paying jobs that were once available. The U.S. has been transformed from a manufacturing-based economy to an economy based on knowledge, and the importance of a college education today can be compared to that of a high school education forty years ago.

### **Summary**

Crime is being committed on college campuses. It is important to find the root cause. Are the students who are committing crimes importing the behavior from adolescence, or is it a new behavior? Who or what most influences college students to commit crime, or are college students partaking in criminal activity as a coping mechanism in order to deal with the strain of transitioning to independence and the pressure of academic success?

CHAPTER III  
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

**Social Structure Theories**

Social structure theories assert that the disadvantaged economic class position is a primary cause of crime. The theories state that neighborhoods which are “lower class” create forces of strain, frustration, and disorganization that create crime. The social structure genre provides the purest sociological explanation of crime and delinquency (Brown, Esbensen & Geis, 2004). It links the key troubles of individuals to the social structural origins of these difficulties (Mills, 1956). Theories that are most appropriately characterized as social structural depict crime as a product of characteristics of society (Brown, Esbensen & Geis, 2004). Structural features that contribute to poverty, unemployment, poor education, and racism are viewed as indirect or root causes of high crime rates among members of socially deprived groups. With social structure theory, the strains might not necessarily come from people’s frustrations with acquiring *The American Dream*, but rather a mixture in strains: homelessness, abuse and neglect, subcultures, deviant values, and frustrations about poverty. Meaning, there might be more than one factor in play when a person is “influenced” to commit a crime by interacting within an imposed economic class. A person might encounter one of these factors by themselves and not decide to succumb to peer pressure, or let his/her abuse

trauma lead them to a life of crime. A person might face poverty but have enough resilience through family values to make a choice of lawful actions.

Although social strain has been the dominant American sociological theory of crime during the twentieth century, it came under increasing attack during the 1970s (e.g. Hirschi, 1969; Kornhauser, 1978; Bernard, 1984). According to Robert Agnew (1992), the decline in the popularity of social strain theory can be attributed to four major criticisms: the focus on lower-class delinquency; the neglect of goals other than middle-class status and financial gain; the failure to consider barriers to achievement other than social class; and the inability to account for why only some people who experience strain turn to criminal activity (Brown, Esbensen & Geis, 2004). Therefore, Agnew proposed a general strain theory which focuses on the individual, and how negative relationships play a role in strain and the effects of strain. A fairly large number of studies have found support for Agnew's basic argument that negative relationships and stressful life events are associated with increases in a variety of delinquent behaviors (Bernard, Vold, Snipes & Gerould, 2009). General strain theory also addresses the criticisms of social structure theory and broadens the perceived sources of strain (Brown, Esbensen & Geis, 2004). Agnew's research has provided a framework for analyzing the many influences that impact a person's decision to commit crime.

### **General Strain Theory**

General strain theory states that people are pressured into crime because of the strains or negative events or conditions they experience (Agnew, 2006). Numerous studies have produced support for the effect of strain on crime (Agnew, 2002; Aseltine et al., 2000; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1998; Moon et al., 2009; Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994).

Strains that are seen as high in magnitude, are viewed as unjust, associated with low social control, and create some incentive for criminal coping are more likely to result in crime (Agnew, 2001). Agnew (1992, 2006) asserted that strain produces negative emotions such as anger, disappointment, frustration, depression, fear, or hopelessness. In her tests of general strain theory, Broidy (2006) found that anger increased the likelihood of delinquency, but other negative emotions, such as crankiness, depression, and insecurity, actually decreased the likelihood of delinquency. Similarly, Piquero and Sealock found that anger mediates strain and crime but found no mediating effect of depression. The social psychological consequences of experiencing strain include a variety of negative emotions that may be alleviated through crime, although not the norm, depending on characteristics of the individual and the environment. For instance, he indicates that the following types of strains should increase the likelihood of criminal activity: parental rejection; the failure to achieve core goals that are not the result of conventional socialization and that are easily achieved through crime (e.g., thrill, excitement, money); child abuse; homelessness; criminal victimization; child abuse or neglect; and abusive peer relations (Brown, Esbensen & Geis, 2004). On the other hand, the following types of strain should not increase the likelihood of crime: unpopularity or isolation from peers; excessive demands of conventional jobs that are well rewarded; failure to achieve goals that result from conventional socialization and that are difficult to achieve through illegitimate channels (e.g., educational or occupational success); burdens associated with the care of conventional others to whom one is strongly attached, like children and sick/disabled spouses (Brown, Esbensen & Geis, 2004). Agnew (2006) focused on five different factors that may condition the effect of strain on crime: (1) poor

coping skills and resources, (2) low levels of conventional social support, (3) low social control, (4) association with criminal others and beliefs favorable to a crime, and (5) exposure to situations where the costs of criminal coping are low and the benefits high.

Agnew (2006) listed several types of coping skills and resources which may reinforce criminal coping such as poor problem-solving and social skills, low constraint or self-control and negative emotionality, low socioeconomic status, and low self-efficacy. The most support has been found for the conditioning effect of self-control with those who are higher in self-control, or those lower in constraint and higher in negative emotionality, being less likely to respond to strain with crime (Agnew et al., 2002; Hay & Meldrum, 2010; Mazerolle & Maahs, 2000; Piquero & Sealock, 2000). Agnew also argues that those who lack conventional social supports will be more likely to respond to strain with crime; as well as those low in social control, those who do not believe crime is wrong, those who have few emotional bonds with conventional others, and those who are not invested in conventional activities. Evidence shows that those with strong attachments are less likely to commit crime after experiencing strain (Agnew, Rebellon, & Thaxton, 2000; Agnew et al., 2002; Aseltine et al., 2000; Mazerolle et al., 2000; Moon et al., 2009). Strain will also likely lead to crime among those who associate with criminal others because family and friends will model delinquent behavioral responses to strain. However, Agnew also stated that these negative relationships are also sometimes the direct source of the strain. Negative relationships include relationships in which other people prevent a person from achieving a valued goal, take away something valued that the person already has, or impose on the person something that is “noxious” and unwanted (Bernard, Vold, Snipes & Gerould, 2009). Evidence supports that those with

delinquent/criminal peers will be more likely to commit at least some types of crime when strained than those with fewer delinquent/criminal peers (Agnew & White, 1992; Aseltine et al., 2000; Baron, 2004; Baron & Hartnagel, 2002; Gallupe & Baron, 2009; Mazerolle & Maahs, 2000; & Mazerolle et al., 2000). Agnew's fifth factor of GST is that criminal coping will be more likely when individuals encounter situations where the costs of crime are low and the benefits are high. Agnew (2006) posited that youth and adults are pressured into crime through strains they experience. As a result of these strains, people will experience negative emotions such as anger, frustration, or depression. If they lack the resources to cope with strain through legal means or are predisposed to engage in crime, then people will be more likely to alleviate negative emotions through crime.

Delinquency and drug use are both widely used ways of coping with and managing the strain of these negative emotions through illegal means (Bernard, Vold, Snipes & Gerould, 2009). Agnew and White (1992) found through empirical testing, that measures of general strain theory did a moderately good job of explaining delinquency and drug use. Measures of family, school, and neighborhood strain were significant predictors of delinquency, while the traditional measures of failure to achieve valued goals were not (Brown, Esbensen & Geis, 2004). Delinquency may be a way adolescents have of achieving their valued goals, of retrieving what is being taken away from them, or of removing themselves from negative relationships. Drug use may be a means of managing negative emotions by directly addressing the negative relationships themselves (Bernard, Vold, Snipes & Gerould, 2009). However, deviance is but one possible consequence of strain. Agnew identifies a number of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral adaptations that will minimize negative outcomes and thus reduce the

probability of criminal behavior resulting from strain (Brown, Esbensen & Geis, 2004). Agnew explained that people can invoke one of three cognitive coping strategies to reduce the relevance of strain and therefore be less likely to resort to antisocial behavior: minimizing the importance of the goals; minimizing the negative outcomes; or accepting responsibility (Brown, Esbensen & Geis, 2004).

In addition to specifying characteristics of strain that enhance the likelihood of criminal behavior, Agnew, with his colleagues, pointed to characteristics of the strained individuals that increase this probability (Bernard, Vold, Snipes & Gerould, 2009). Individuals with two “master traits” – being overall negative emotionally and being low in constraint – are particularly prone to behaving illegitimately when exposed to strains, whereas individuals without these traits are more likely to employ conventional coping strategies (Bernard, Vold, Snipes & Gerould, 2009). Their preliminary empirical research provided support for the role of these personality traits in amplifying the effect of strain on criminal behavior.

### **Self-Complexity**

Matthews (2011) added to Agnew’s five factors by exploring self-complexity (SC) of identity to explain why some individuals respond to strain with crime. SC refers to the number of roles or identities that are important to a person and how different these roles or identities are from one another (Matthews, 2011). Higher levels of SC, as defined by more distinct roles, have been shown to reduce the impact of stress on a wide range of outcomes including depression, self-esteem, and physical health (Cohen, Pines, & Smith, 1997; Dixon & Baumeister, 1991; Linville, 1987; Ryan, LaGuardia, & Rawsthorne, 2005; Smith & Cohen, 1993; Steinberg Pineles, Gardner, & Mineka, 2003).

Higher levels of SC reduce the impact of stress because individuals who view themselves differently among a variety of roles or identities experience fewer negative emotions when something negative occurs in one area of life (Matthews, 2011). However, individuals who are lower in SC, or those with few roles and high overlap in how one views these roles, are more susceptible to strain because the negative emotions associated with a failure or negative event in one area of life will spill over into these closely related roles or identities (Matthews, 2011). When negative events affect more aspects of the self, then these stressful events should be more likely to lead to negative outcomes in response to this stress including depression, physical illness, and maladaptive health-related behaviors such as drug and alcohol use (Linville, 1987). As Linville (1985) stated, when faced with stressful situations, it is advantageous not to place all of one's eggs in the same cognitive basket.

Research shows that SC buffers the effect of negative life events on outcomes such as illness, perceived stress, self-evaluations, and quality of written work (Cohen et al., 1997; Dixon & Baumeister, 1991; Linville, 1987; Ryan et al., 2005; Smith & Cohen, 1993; Steinberg et al., 2003). In general, after stressful events, those who are higher in SC have fewer illnesses, perceive less stress, have higher self-esteem, and write better quality essays than those who are lower in SC because negative emotions are less likely to spill over into other self-aspects (Matthews, 2011). These negative life events correspond to the types of strain that Agnew (2006) argued affect criminal behavior such as school failure and relationship problems. Therefore, SC lessens the emotional effect of stressful events, and in doing so moderates the relationship between strain and crime (Matthews, 2011).

Matthew's (2011) used a sample of college students because they represent an ideal initial test of the relationship between strain, SC, and crime because this sample experiences a fair amount of strain (Hamilton & Fagot, 1988), engages in a variety of crimes and deviant acts (according to campus crime reports from college sampled), and prior studies show that college students vary substantially on SC. In addition, Agnew (2006) argued that negative secondary school experiences such as being treated poorly by teachers or receiving low grades could lead to delinquency. Matthews (2011) used this scenario and applies it to her study of college students by presenting situations where respondents may interpret that they are being treated poorly by professors which result in poor grades. Also, it is highly likely that academic strain is especially severe for this sample because it threatens the core values, goals, needs, and identities of these individuals (Matthews, 2011). Specifically, academics are essential to most college students wanting to get the highest grades possible; especially if they plan pursuing a degree or certificate above a bachelors or if their financial assistance is dependent upon it.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### **Research Questions**

Students are not choosing to commit crime without cause. Crime is a symptom.

The research questions posed in this study are as follows: (a) Is criminal activity an imported behavior or a new behavior for college students? (b) Are the crimes that college students are committing major or minor offenses? (c) Who, if any one, influences college students to commit crimes? (d) Is low self-concept associated with an increase in delinquent behavior? (e) What coping mechanisms are students utilizing, and are they effective in reducing strain?

#### **Conceptualization**

Public attention to crime on campus has increased due to recent high profile events on or around college campuses; such as, Virginia Tech, Kent State, University of Texas, Northern Illinois University and Aurora, Colorado. Crime is being committed by college students on campus, but what is causing the behavior? A new study shows that neither criminal background checks nor pre-admission screening questions accurately predict students' likelihood to commit crime on college campuses (Runyan, Pierce, Shankar & Bangdiwala, 2013). Runyon (2013) found that only 3.3 percent of college seniors who engaged in misconduct actually reported precollege criminal histories during the admissions process, and just 8.5 percent of applicants with a criminal history were

charged with misconduct during college. The study surveyed 6,972 students at a large southern university. It found that students with criminal records prior to college were more likely to commit crimes once admitted, but the screening process rarely identified them (Runyan, Pierce, Shankar & Bangdiwala, 2013). Runyon's findings indicate that students who engage in criminal activity during college are more likely to have engaged in misconduct prior to college, whether they admit it on their applications or not.

However, Runyon also states that the current application process often fails to detect which students will engage in misconduct during college and that most of those who have records before college do not seem to continue the behaviors in college. Others have found that campus students did not start participating in criminal activity until graduating high school and entering the post-secondary setting due to new found independence, strain, and peer influences (Matthews, 2011).

### **General Strain Theory**

Research supports the assertion that students experience strain and that strain produces negative emotions such as anger, disappointment, frustration, depression, fear, or hopelessness (Agnew, 1992; 2006). The social psychological consequences of experiencing strain include a variety of negative emotions that may be alleviated through crime depending on characteristics of the individual and the environment. Agnew also argues that those who lack conventional social supports will be more likely to respond to strain with crime; as well as those low in social control, those who do not believe crime is wrong, those who have few emotional bonds with conventional others, and those who are not invested in conventional activities. Evidence shows that those with strong attachments are less likely to commit crime after experiencing strain (Agnew, Rebellon,

& Thaxton, 2000; Agnew et al., 2002; Aseltine et al., 2000; Mazerolle et al., 2000; Moon et al., 2009). Strain will also likely lead to crime among those who associate with criminal others because family and friends will model delinquent behavioral responses to strain. Evidence supports that those with delinquent/criminal peers will be more likely to commit at least some types of crime when strained than those with fewer delinquent/criminal peers (Agnew & White, 1992; Aseltine et al., 2000; Baron, 2004; Baron & Hartnagel, 2002; Gallupe & Baron, 2009; Mazerolle & Maahs, 2000; & Mazerolle et al., 2000). Agnew (2006) posits that youth and adults are pressured into crime through strains that they experience. As a result of these strains, people will experience negative emotions such as anger, frustration, or depression. If they lack the resources to cope with strain through legal means or are predisposed to engage in crime, then people will be more likely to alleviate negative emotions through crime.

### **Self-Complexity**

Not everyone who experiences strain will commit crime, but a student's ability to cope with strain is tested as they enter the post-secondary setting with a new sense of independence, having to balance studies, work and leisure time without the structure and guidance of parents. Surveying student's self-complexity and coping mechanisms is relevant to this study to be able to differentiate between those who chose to alleviate their negative emotions through crime and those who do not. This study also will determine if students who chose to commit crime are predisposed to criminal activity due to environmental influences prior to entering college. It is also important to identify if those who do not succumb to criminal activity do so because of appropriate coping mechanisms or other inappropriate coping mechanisms that are legal but not healthy.

Matthews (2011) adds to Agnew's research by exploring self-complexity (SC) of identity to explain why some individuals respond to strain with crime. SC refers to the number of roles or identities that are important to a person and how different these roles or identities are from one another (Matthews, 2011). Matthew's (2011) used a sample of college students because they represent an ideal initial test of the relationship between strain, SC, and crime because this sample experiences a fair amount of strain (Hamilton & Fagot, 1988), engages in a variety of crimes and deviant acts (according to campus crime reports from college sampled), and prior studies show that college students vary substantially on SC. Matthews' (2011) sample included 357 undergraduate respondents from a mid-size private southern university who completed a web-based survey. While this sample was not representative of the general population, nationally representative samples on criminal behavior and strain do not include measures of SC.

SC includes the number of self-aspects a person finds meaningful or important to them as well as the degree of overlap in how the individual views him or herself within these aspects (Matthews, 2011). Drawing on insights from GST and from previous studies on SC, respondents were instructed to list their self-aspects which could include personally meaningful roles, identities, relationships, values, goals and/or activities (Matthews, 2011; Linville, 1987). The list of adjectives created by Matthews' (2011) study group are the same as included in this study.

### **Brief COPE**

Also included in this research is the University of Miami's Psychology Departments Brief COPE to measure participants' ability to deal with strain. The COPE Inventory was developed to assess a broad range of coping responses. The inventory

includes some responses that are expected to be dysfunctional, as well as some that are expected to be functional. It also includes at least 2 pairs of polar-opposite tendencies. This measuring tool provided information as to what coping mechanisms ISU students used as well as rating their levels of strain. The identified coping mechanisms may indicate if students who are not utilizing crime as a coping mechanism are using dysfunctional forms of coping that are still not deemed appropriate for a balanced individual.

To establish the subjects' criminal backgrounds, participants were asked to self-report their own, friends and family member's prior and current criminal activity. Self-reporting may decrease validity of their responses, but surveys were administered without identifying information to protect participants' anonymity and therefore increase their comfort with self-reporting crime. Prior and current criminal activity was defined at the point the participant turned 18 years old and no longer was considered a juvenile in the eyes of the justice system. Minor offenses are defined as curfew violations, underage drinking, and use of illegal drugs. Major offenses are listed as stealing, assault, theft or rape. Participants were instructed to report activity even if they had never been caught committing any of those offenses.

Using the University of Miami's Brief COPE to measure students' current coping mechanisms, this research can confirm and add to Matthews (2011) research by analyzing how students' coping mechanisms, both appropriate and not, play a role in how college students choose to handle strain. Coping strategies are used to manage situations in which there is a discrepancy between stressful demands and available resources for

meeting these demands (Carr, 2006). Distinctions can be made between problem-focused, emotion-focused and avoidant coping strategies (Carr, 2006):

Type	Aim	Functional	Dysfunctional
Problem focused	Problem solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepting responsibility for solving the problem</li> <li>• Seeking accurate information</li> <li>• Seeking dependable advice and help</li> <li>• Developing a realistic action plan</li> <li>• Following through on the plan</li> <li>• Postponing competing activities</li> <li>• Maintaining an optimistic view of one's capacity to solve the problem</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking little responsibility for solving the problem</li> <li>• Seeking inaccurate information</li> <li>• Seeking questionable advice</li> <li>• Developing unrealistic plans</li> <li>• Not following through on plans</li> <li>• Procrastination</li> <li>• Holding a pessimistic view of one's capacity to solve the problem</li> </ul>
Emotion focused	Mood regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making and maintaining socially supportive and empathic friendships</li> <li>• Seeking meaningful spiritual support</li> <li>• Catharsis and emotional processing</li> <li>• Reframing and cognitive restructuring</li> <li>• Seeing the stress in a humorous way</li> <li>• Relaxation routines</li> <li>• Physical exercise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making and maintaining destructive relationships</li> <li>• Seeking meaningless spiritual support</li> <li>• Unproductive wishful thinking</li> <li>• Long-term denial</li> <li>• Taking the stress too seriously</li> <li>• Drug and alcohol abuse</li> <li>• Aggression</li> </ul>
Avoidance focused	Avoiding sources of stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Temporarily mentally disengaging from the problem</li> <li>• Temporarily engaging in distracting activities</li> <li>• Temporarily engaging in distracting relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentally disengaging from the problem for the long term</li> <li>• Long-term engagement in distracting activities</li> <li>• Long-term engagement in distracting relationships</li> </ul>

(Carr, 2006)

The COPE Inventory was developed to assess a broad range of coping responses. The inventory consists of twenty-eight "I've been..." statements. Participants were asked to rate each statement on a scale of 1 to 4; (1) I haven't been doing this at all, (4) I've been doing this a lot. The inventory is categorized into fourteen different types of coping mechanisms: self-distraction, active coping, denial, substance abuse, use of emotional

support items, use of instrumental supports, behavioral disengagement, venting, positive reframing, planning, humor, acceptance, religion, and self-blame.

This research established college students' criminal history, current criminal activities, self-identified roles and influences, and what role self-concept, strain, and one's ability to cope plays in one's decision to participate in criminal activity. The data from this research provided information on how college students are coping with strain and will allow the university to develop programs to better support students.

### **Variables Defined**

Criminal activity was deemed an imported behavior or a new behavior for college students based on participant's responses to "have you ever committed a crime?" This question was divided into prior to turning 18 and after turning 18. Participants were also asked whether the participation in criminal activity was for major offenses (ex. stealing, assault, theft, rape) or minor offenses (ex. curfew violation, underage drinking, use of illegal drugs). Minor and major offenses were then merged to create the variable "criminal behavior." A "criminal behavior" variable was also created for juvenile and adult minor and major offenses. Peer-reported major/minor offenses for siblings, childhood friends, current friends, and romantic partners were also merged to create subsequent "criminal behavior" variables in order to compare data. In addition, a new variable "Family Arrests" was created as a sum of family members designated as having been arrested. Using Matthews (2011) list of attributes and roles, participants checked which they relate to in order to rate participants' level of self-concept. From this data, a new variable "Sum Roles" was created denoting how many roles each participant selected as identifying with. Also, each of the identified attributes was categorized as

either positive or negative. New variables “Positive Attributes” and “Negative Attributes” were created as a tabulation of each category for better comparison. Participants’ coping mechanisms were identified with the University of Miami’s Brief COPE. (See questionnaire attached, Appendix A)

### **Data Collection**

Data on college students’ criminal activity, self-concept, and coping mechanisms were collected through self-reporting. Self-reporting data is subject to bias, social desirability, demand characteristics, and response sets, which all may affect the validity of finds; however, they are a relatively easy way to collect large amounts of data very quickly, are cheap, and can be self-administered. In this case, written surveys were given to a large number of people at the same time and were anonymous, which may have promoted honest responses. The participants were recruited from the CJS 102 roster containing 261 students. Students were surveyed during 2<sup>nd</sup> semester to allow students to establish routines and friendships at the post-secondary level. Students were asked to complete a 10 minute survey voluntarily during class time for extra credit. Students were required to verify that they were at least 18 years of age and completed a signed consent to participate in the study. An alternative assignment was offered for those students who chose not to participate in the study. Students completed an opscan to receive extra credit, but this opscan was not connected to the surveys in any way. A faculty member from the College of Criminal Justice Sciences proctored the survey in order to protect anonymity and minimize coercion and undue influence.

## **Sample**

Illinois State University Fall 2013 total enrollment was 19,924 (undergraduate 17,648; graduate 2,276). Sixty and five tenths (60.5) percent of undergraduate students are from the Chicago area; 20.8 percent are from McLean and surrounding counties. Nine hundred forty-three students are from out-of-state and 399 students are from 67 other countries. Fifty-five and nine tenths (55.9) percent of students are female and 18.2 percent are minorities. The current incoming Freshman have an average ACT score of 24 and transfer students have a GPA of 3.11. The population used in this study was a convenience sample and was not generalizable. Therefore, the results of this study are beneficial specifically to Illinois State University. The sample is diverse because the class surveyed is a general education class offered to all Illinois State University students. The survey results were tested to see if the sample population is comparable to the overall population at Illinois State University.

Using data from the survey will provide a better picture of the demographics at Illinois State University and the strain experienced by its students and how they choose to cope. By analyzing students' backgrounds, self-reported crime, self-concept, and appropriate support, interventions can be developed to help support students in order to help deter them from resorting to criminal activity.

CHAPTER V  
DATA AND RESULTS

**Introduction**

Bivariate correlations and analyses were conducted separately to report the outcome of the research questions in the current study. First, all of the variables were operationalized to allow the examination of both imported (juvenile) crime and new (adult) criminal behavior. Second, the bivariate analyses were conducted to determine which of the relationships showed meaningful relationships to college students' decision to participate in criminal behaviors. The SPSS outcomes for each of the research questions were constructed into correlation and analysis tables. A number of significant relationships were reported, followed by a brief interpretation of the results.

**Research Question A**

Runyan et al.'s (2013) findings indicated that students who engage in criminal activity during college are more likely to have engaged in misconduct prior to college. To confirm and extend Runyan, et al.'s (2013) findings, Juvenile Minor Offenses (JUVMINOR) and Juvenile Major Offenses (JUVMAJOR) were merged to create the new variable "Imported Behavior." This variable captures criminal offenses committed by the student prior to attending university. Adult Minor Offenses (ADULTMINOR) and Adult Major Offenses (ADULTMAJOR) were combined to create the new variable "New

Behavior,” to capture crimes committed since attending the university.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variables	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Juvenile Arrests	259	9	0	9	.13	.675
Adult Arrest	259	2	0	2	.07	.289
Imported Behavior	259	1	0	1	.81	.389
New Behavior	260	1	0	1	.87	.334
Juvenile Minor	260	1	0	1	.82	.389
Juvenile Major	259	1	0	1	.11	.311
Adult Minor	260	1	0	1	.87	.334
Adult Major	260	1	0	1	.06	.234
Criminal Influence: Current Friends	260	1	0	1	.95	.218
Criminal Influence: Childhood Friends	259	1	0	1	.97	.183
Criminal Influence: Siblings	246	1	0	1	.73	.444
Criminal Influence: Romantic Partners	259	1	0	1	.87	.334
Self-Complexity: Sum of Roles	250	8	2	10	6.99	1.794
Self-Complexity: Positive Attributes	260	30	2	32	20.81	7.167

As illustrated in Table 2, 80.8 percent of students reported committing a crime prior to attending college and 87 percent reported committing a crime since attending college. Self-reported criminal offending both before and after attending college is common in the sample. It is important to note that this includes both committing minor offenses, such as: curfew violation, underage drinking and use of illegal drugs, as well as major offenses, such as: stealing, assault, theft and rape.

Table 2. Frequency Self-Reported Juvenile and Adult Offending

	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
Imported Behavior (Juvenile Major/Minor Acts)	211 (80.8%)	48 (18.4%)
New Behavior (Adult Major/Minor Acts)	227 (87.0%)	33 (12.6%)

Table 3. Frequency and Comparison between Self-Reported Juvenile and Adult Acts

	<b>ADULT: major/minor offenses</b>	
<b>JUVENILE: major/minor offenses</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>YES</b>
<b>NO</b>	21 (8.1%)	27 (10.4%)
<b>YES</b>	12 (4.6%)	199 (76.8%)

To further explore the question of whether criminal behavior was an imported or new behavior, the self-reported criminal behavior of prior and after adulthood were compared (see Table 3). This analysis suggests that crime on campus is an imported behavior rather than a new behavior acquired while on campus. The data shows that 76.8 percent of the sample population self-reported major and/or minor criminal acts as both juveniles and as adults; in comparison to, only 10.4 percent of the sample population reported that they participated in criminal activity as adults, but did not as juveniles (See Table 3). Matthews (2011) found that the reason that college students did not start participating in criminal activity until graduating high school and entering the post-secondary setting was primarily due to new found independence, strain and peer influence. This analysis suggests that this group is the exception rather than the norm. The average student in this sample committed criminal acts both as juveniles and as college students (Table 1).

Committing crime is not the same as being caught. Another way of measuring the continuity of crime in a person’s lifespan is the presence and absence of arrests. Almost seven percent of the sample reported being arrested as a juvenile and as adults (See Table 4). Interestingly, almost 77 percent of students reported participating in criminal activities both as juveniles and as adults. However, looking at the frequency with which the sample had been arrested, the large majority had never been arrested as a juvenile or an adult, only about 7 percent had been arrested. 87.6 percent of the students surveyed reported that they had not been arrested as a juvenile, but of those 87.6 percent, 5 percent had been arrested as adults; whereas, 5.8 percent who reported they had been arrested as juveniles, only 1.5 percent had been arrested as adults (Table 4).

Table 4. Frequency: Self-Reported Juvenile and Adult Arrests

	YES	NO
Juvenile Arrests	19 (7.3%)	240 (92.0%)
Adult Arrests	17 (6.5%)	242 (92.7%)

To better understand the relationship between juvenile and adult offending and juvenile and adult arrests, correlation coefficients were produced. The correlation matrix suggest a strong positive relationship between juvenile and adult offending [ $r(257) = .44, p < .01$ ] and juvenile and adult arrests [ $r(257) = .31, p < .01$ ] which supports Loeber & Farrington’s (2012) research findings that “bad” individuals who already from childhood are out of control and that many of them become life-course persistent delinquents. Research also demonstrates that according to the age-crime curve, their criminal activity will have peaked in late adolescence and will decrease subsequently into adulthood (Farrington, 1986; Temblay & Nagin, 2005; Laub & Sampson, 2003). With respect to

age-based prevalence estimates, most studies tend to indicate that prevalence peaks in the teenage years (around 15-19) and the declines in the early 20s (Blumenshine et al., 1986; Piquero et al., 2003). However, new data suggests that going to college extends the adolescent period, potentially presenting individuals with a greater abundance of criminal opportunities and lower levels of informal social control – both of which increase the likelihood of criminal perpetration (e.g. Cohen & Felson, 1970; Hirschi, 1969; Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996).

### **Research Question B**

To answer the question, are crimes that college students are committing major or minor offenses, students were asked to self-report any major or minor laws they broke, even if it did not result in arrest. Minor laws are defined as curfew violation, underage drinking or use of illegal drugs; major laws are defined as stealing, assault, theft or rape. These variables are dummy coded (1 = Yes, 0 = No). As illustrated in Table 5, the vast majority of students who participated in this research indicated (87.3%) they were guilty of breaking minor laws as adults in the college setting. It is interesting that almost 6 percent of the sample reported committing serious and sometimes violent crimes while on campus. To determine if the students who reported breaking minor laws were the same student who reported breaking major laws, the correlation between the two variable was determined. The correlation coefficient between major and minor offenses as adults is only 0.09, which is not considered statistically significant, demonstrating that it is likely that different students are committing the major (i.e. stealing, assault, theft or rape) versus the minor (i.e. curfew violation, underage drinking or use of illegal drugs) offenses.

Table 5. Frequency: Self-Report Adult Minor/Major Offenses

Adult Offenses (New)	YES	NO
Minor	227 (87.3%)	33 (12.6%)
Major	15 (5.8%)	245 (93.9%)

### Research Question C

To explore who influences students' criminal behavior, students were queried about several different group's criminal behaviors, including: parents, siblings, childhood friends, current friends and romantic partners. Research supports that people who have greater criminal association, will be more likely to be criminal. Further, evidence shows those with strong attachments are less likely to commit crime after experiencing strain (Agnew, Rebellon, & Thaxton, 2000; Anew et al., 202; Aseltine et al., 2000; Mazerolle et al., 2000; Moon et al., 2009). Strain will also likely lead to crime among those who associate with criminal other because family and friends will model delinquent behavioral responses to strain. Evidence supports that those with delinquent/criminal peers will be more likely to commit at least some types of crime when strained than those with fewer delinquent/criminal peers (Agnew & White, 1992; Aseltine et al., 2000; Baron, 2004; Baron & Hartnagel, 2002; Gallupe & Baron, 2009; Mazerolle & Maahs, 2000; & Mazerolle et al., 2000). When asked to report on the major/minor criminal activity of their peers, the data are consistent that a vast majority of students are committing minor offenses (94.6%) as oppose to major offenses (29.1%) (Table 6).

Table 6. Frequency: Peer-Report of Adult Minor/Major Offenses

	YES	NO
Current Friends-Minor	247 (94.6%)	14 (5.4%)
Current Friends-Major	76 (29.1%)	184 (70.5%)

Table 7. Frequency: Peer-Report Adult Minor/Major Offenses of Family, Friends and Paramours

	Have Committed Criminal Acts	Have <u>Not</u> Committed Criminal Acts
Siblings-Minor	183 (73.5)	66 (26.5)
Sibling-Major	32 (12.6)	215 (87.4)
Childhood Friends-Major	248 (95.4)	136 (52.3)
Childhood Friends-Minor	123 (47.3)	12 (4.6)
Current Friends-Minor	247 (94.6%)	14 (5.4%)
Current Friends-Major	76 (29.1%)	184 (70.5%)
Paramour-Minor	200 (76.6%)	60 (23.0%)
Paramour-Major	34 (13.0%)	224 (85.8%)

To explore the strength and direction of the relationship between the criminal offenses of the students and their peers, correlation coefficients were produced. In keeping with previous findings, the data suggest a strong positive correlation between students who participate in criminal behavior with those who have friends who also participate in criminal behavior [ $r(257) = .15, p < .05$ ]. Even stronger is the relationship between having friends who participate in crime and students who reported being arrested for their criminal behavior [ $r(257) = .25, p < .01$ ].

The data also suggested that students who participate in criminal behavior also have siblings, childhood friends and romantic partners who do as well (Table 7). Of the 261 students surveyed, 94.6 percent reported that their current friends, 73.5 percent of their siblings, 95.4 percent of childhood friends and 76.6 percent of their paramours, or love interests, had committed minor crimes. When looking at their reports of major criminal offenses, the numbers were much smaller at 29.1 percent peers, 12.6 percent siblings, 47.3 percent childhood friends and 13.0 percent of paramours. This is an important distinction because the across the board the crimes being committed appear to be minor in nature, which is similar to the self-reported current criminal behavior percentages of the respondents.

To compare overall influences to commit crime, minor/major offenses for each category were collapsed to form new variables of “criminal behavior” for each category. The relationship between the behavior and the student’s criminal offending, as well as arrest, were then explored through correlation coefficients. The correlation matrix suggest a strong positive relationship between siblings [ $r(257) = .25, p < .01$ ], childhood friends [ $r(257) = .27, p < .01$ ], current friends [ $r(257) = .34, p < .01$ ], and paramours criminal offending [ $r(257) = .33, p < .01$ ] and adult offending (See Table 8). There was also a strong positive relationship between current friends arrests [ $r(257) = .26, p < .01$ ] and paramour arrests [ $r(257) = .31, p < .01$ ] and adult arrests; as well as, current friend arrests and adult criminal behavior [ $r(257) = .15, p < .05$ ] (Table 9). These data tells us that the people who students are spending time with influences whether they participate in criminal activity. The friends that college students are making and spending time with and those whom they choose to date have a relationship to their current criminal activity.

These findings support Rowe & Farrington's (1977) research findings that deviant people tend to meet and gravitate towards each other in schools, neighborhoods, clubs, bars, etc. and that people choose friends and partners who are similar to themselves. Krueger et al. (1998) also found that sexual partners tended to be similar in their self-reported anti-social behavior.

Table 8. Frequency/Correlation of Family, Friends and Paramours Criminal Behavior and Adult Criminal Behavior

	Criminal Behavior (Combined Major/Minor Offenses) n% yes	Adult Arrests	Adult Criminal Behavior
Siblings	180 (69.0)	.034	.250**
Childhood Friends	250 (95.8)	.072	.266**
Current Friends	247 (94.6)	.086	.336**
Romantic Partners	200 (76.6)	.034	.334**

\*\* p<.01,\* p<.05

Table 9. Frequency/Correlation of Family, Friends and Paramour Arrest and Adult Arrests/Criminal Behavior

	Arrested n% yes	Adult Arrests	Adult Criminal Behavior
Siblings	43 (16.5)	.053	.046
Childhood Friends	107 (41.0)	.066	.073
Current Friends	146 (55.9)	.259**	.154*
Paramours	33 (12.6)	.208**	.111
Parents	40 (15.3)	.099	.003

\*\* p <.01,\* p <.05

## **Research Question D**

Agnew (2006) posits that individuals are pressured into crime through strains they experience. Not everyone who experiences strain will commit crime, but a student's ability to cope with strain is tested as they enter the post-secondary setting with a new sense of independence, having to balance studies, work and leisure time without the structure and guidance of parents. Matthews (2011) added to Agnew's research by exploring self-complexity (SC) of identity to explain why some individuals respond to strain with crime. According to Matthews (2011) self-complexity (SC) is determined by the number of identities (roles) individuals perceive as important to themselves and the varied characteristics they ascribe to these identities. Matthews (2011) theorized that the more roles an individual identifies with the lower the delinquent behavior because those who identify with multiple roles are better at dealing with strain. In this study students were given thirteen roles, taken from the final list of attributes used in Mathews (2011) study which also incorporated some of the attributes from Linville's (1985, 1987) word list, and asked to mark the boxes of the roles they identified with. In addition, they were provided with forty-eight attributes, also from Matthews (2011) study and Linville's (1985, 1987) word list, and asked to check which attributes with which they most identified.

To obtain the number of roles each student identified with, a new variable was created "SumRoles" by adding the number of roles identified. On average, students identified with almost 7 ( $X = 6.99$ ,  $SD = 1.79$ ) roles. To explore the relationship between the number of roles a student identified with and their participation in criminal offending and arrest, correlation coefficients were produced. The data shows that the greater the

amount of roles a student identified with, the less likely they were to participate in criminal behavior [ $r(257) = -.04, p < .01$ ] and get arrested [ $r(257) = -.01, p < .1$ ] (Table 10).

Table 10. Correlation between Sum of Roles, Arrests and Adult Criminal Behavior

	Adult Criminal Behavior	Adult Arrests
Sum of Roles	-.043**	-.105 <sup>a</sup>

\*\*  $p < .01$ , <sup>a</sup>  $p < .10$

On average, students identified about 21 positive attributes ( $x = 20.81, SD = 7.17$ ), with a range of  $32 - 2 = 30$ . To identify the strength and direction of the relationship between the number of positive attributes and the students' criminal offending and arrests, correlations coefficients were produced. The total number of positive attributes, which was calculated by counting the number of positive attributes that students identified with, had a significant positive correlation [ $r(257) = .43, p < .01$ ] with the sum of roles denoted by participants. The data also shows that students who identified with more positive attributes [ $r(259) = -.06, p < .01$ ] were less likely than those students who identified with more negative attributes [ $r(260) = .04, p < .01$ ] to participate in criminal behavior. This was determined by tabulating the positive and negative attributes separately and then running correlations with criminal activity. Students with the highest number of identified roles (See Table 11) also demonstrated a high correlation with positive roles and personality descriptors [ $r(259) = .43, p < .01$ ]. This confirms Matthews' (2011) research that higher levels of SC reduce the impact of stress because individuals who view themselves differently among a variety of roles or identities experience fewer negative emotions when something negative occurs in one area of life;

as oppose to, those individuals who are lower in SC that are more susceptible to strain and turn to maladaptive behaviors and crime as a way to cope.

Table 11. Frequency/Percent of Number of Roles Self-identified

# of Roles	Frequency	Percent
2	3	1.2
4	22	8.8
5	28	11.2
6	47	18.8
7	44	17.6
8	50	20.0
9	37	14.8
10	19	7.6

### Research Question E

Agnew (2006) and Matthews (2011) both state that an individual’s ability to cope with strain determines whether or not they will resort to criminal behavior. To measure student’s coping mechanisms, the Brief COPE, created by the University of Miami’s Psychology Department, was used in this study. The inventory is categorized into fourteen different types of coping mechanisms. Coping strategies are used to manage situations in which there is a discrepancy between stressful demand and available resources for meeting these demands (Carr, 2006). It is argued (Huck et al., 2012) that students who utilize positive coping mechanisms are less likely to engage in deviant behaviors and by comparison, students who respond to strain with negative coping mechanisms, are more likely to respond with criminal and deviant behavior.

Table 12. Frequency/Percentage/Correlation of Coping Mechanisms and Juvenile/Adult Arrests/Criminal Behavior and Sum of Roles

Rank order by Coping Mechanism Frequency	Frequency of most utilized coping mechanism (%)	Sum Of Roles	# Juvenile Arrests	# Adult Arrests	Imported Behavior	New Behavior
Positive Reframing	85 (32.6)	.106	-.059	-.010	-.037	-.011
Self-distraction	83 (31.8)	.080	-.090	-.079	-.002	.025
Acceptance	78 (29.9)	.066	-.007	.127*	-.050	.076
Active Coping	74 (28.4)	.088	-.013	.004	.087	.024
Emotional Support	68 (26)	.066	-.066	-.041	-.032	.101
Planning	67 (25.7)	.001	-.110	.047	-.094	.033
Instrumental Support	66 (25.3)	.101	-.020	.020	-.072	.026
Humor	46 (17.6)	.068	-.015	.145*	.190**	.181**
Religion	45 (17.2)	.167**	-.050	-.037	-.167**	-.133*
Self-Blame	37 (14.1)	-.108	.095	.145*	-.023	.068
Venting	18 (6.9)	-.011	.032	.124**	-.020	.007
Denial	10 (3.8)	.008	.007	.053	.046	.030
Substance Abuse	7 (2.7)	-.100	.090	.175**	.144*	.149*
Behavioral Disengagement	7 (2.7)	-.059	.065	.082	.066	.009

\*\* p <.01,\* p <.05

The results of this study support previous research. Students who identify multiple roles and positive self-descriptors also utilized more positive and appropriate coping mechanisms. For example, depending on religious beliefs as a coping mechanism was negatively correlated to student's participating in criminal behavior before [  $r(257) = -.67, p < .01$  ] and after [  $r(257) = -.133, p < .05$  ], college. By comparison, students who reported the negative coping skills of substance abuse [  $r(257) = .175, p < .01$  ] and venting [  $r(257) = -.124, p < .01$  ] were positively correlated with adult arrests (Table 12). Acceptance [  $r(257) = .13, p < .01$  ] and humor [  $r(257) = .15, p < .01$  ] also demonstrated a

significant positive correlation with adult arrests. Humor was also significantly correlated to new (imported) criminal behavior [  $r(257) = .19, p < .01$ ]. Tying the data to the results on roles, the data also demonstrated a negative correlation between the sum of student roles with substance abuse [  $r(257) = -.10, p < .01$ ], behavior disengagement [  $r(257) = -.06, p < .01$ ] and venting [  $r(257) = -.01, p < .01$ ] as coping mechanisms. Proving Matthews' (2011) and Linville's (1985, 1987) research that students who identify with a higher number of roles are able to disseminate stress more appropriately because their "cognitive eggs are not all in one basket."

General strain theory states that people are pressured into crime because of the strains or negative events or conditions they experience (Agnew, 2006). Numerous studies have produced support for the effect of strain on crime (Agnew, 2002; Aseltine et al., 2000; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1998; Moon et al., 2009; Paternoster & Mazerolle, 1994). The social psychological consequences of experiencing strain include a variety of negative emotions that may be alleviated through crime, although not the norm, depending on characteristics of the individual, their environment and their ability to cope appropriately to strain.

In conclusion, this research has identified that most criminal activity on campus is imported behavior that students have continued from prior to entering college. The data also indicate the vast majority of criminal behavior taking place on campus are minor offenses (i.e. curfew violation, underage drinking or use of illegal drugs). When analyzing who influences college students to commit crimes, there was a strong correlation between students who participate in criminal behavior and having friends who also participate in criminal behavior. Even stronger is the relationship between having

friends who participate in crime and student who reported being arrested for criminal behavior. The data also suggested that students who participate in criminal behavior also have siblings, childhood friends, and romantic partners who do as well. In addition, this research shows that the more positive attributes a student identifies with the less likely they were to participate in criminal behavior. Also, students who identified with the highest number of roles demonstrated a high correlation with positive roles and personality descriptors which the data shows reduces the impact of strain. Students who identified with multiple roles and positive self-descriptors also utilized more positive and appropriate coping mechanisms which was proven to have a negative correlation with participation in criminal behavior.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION/ CONCLUSION

#### **Summary of Research**

This research study explored what factors influenced college students' decisions to commit crime. General strain theory states that people are pressured into crime because of the strains or negative events or conditions they experience. College students represent an ideal population to test the relationship between strain, self-complexity, and criminal behavior because they experience a fair amount of strain (Hamilton & Fagot, 1988), engage in a variety of crimes and deviant acts (according to campus crime reports from college sampled), and vary substantially in their levels of self-complexity. Agnew (2006) focused on five different factors that condition the effect of strain on crime: (1) poor coping skills and resources, (2) low levels of conventional social support, (3) low social control, (4) association with criminal others and beliefs favorable to a crime, and (5) exposure to situations where the costs of criminal coping are low and the benefits high. Even if a person encounters one of these factors, it does not mean that he/she will decide to start committing crime. Agnew (2006) asserted that several groups are at risk of responding to strain with crime: (1) those who lack conventional social support, (2) those low in social control, (3) those who do not believe crime is wrong, (4) those who have few emotional bonds with conventional others, and (5) those who are not invested in

conventional activities. Evidence shows that those with strong attachments are less likely to commit crime after experiencing strain (Agnew, Rebellon, & Thaxton, 2000; Agnew et al., 2002; Aseltine et al., 2000; Mazerolle et al., 2000; Moon et al., 2009). The findings of this study support these findings. Students who were criminal before coming to college and have fewer positive attributes and lower self-complexity participated in criminal behavior at a higher rate than other students on campus.

Matthews (2011) found that most college students did not start participating in criminal activity until graduation from high school and entering the post-secondary setting due to new found independence, strain, and peer influence. However, this analysis suggested that the sample population is the exception rather than the norm. The average student in this sample committed criminal acts both as juveniles and as college students demonstrating that criminality was an imported behavior not a new one formed in the post-secondary setting. The findings confirm Runyan et al.'s (2013) previous results which indicated that students who engage in criminal activity during college were more likely to have engaged in misconduct prior to college.

When analyzing who influenced college students to commit crimes, there was a strong correlation between students who participated in criminal behavior and those who had friends who also participated in criminal behavior. There was also a strong relationship between having friends who had been arrested and students who reported being arrested for their criminal behavior. The results also suggested that students who participated in criminal behavior also had siblings, childhood friends and romantic partners who did as well. Evidence supports that those with delinquent/criminal peers will be more likely to commit at least some types of crime when strained than those with

fewer delinquent/criminal peers (Agnew & White, 1992; Aseltine et al., 2000; Baron, 2004; Baron & Hartnagel, 2002; Gallupe & Baron, 2009; Mazerolle & Maahs, 2000, & Mazerolle et al., 2000). This data supports Agnew's (2006) research that association with criminal others factors into whether or not an individual resorts to criminal behavior in response to strain.

Matthews (2011) extended Agnew's research by exploring self-complexity of identity to explain why some individuals respond to strain with crime. Matthews found that individuals who are lower in self-complexity are more susceptible to strain (Matthews, 2011). Consistent with Matthews' (2011) findings, the data illustrated that the more positive attributes a student identified with the less likely they were to participate in criminal behavior. Students who identified with more positive attributes were less likely than those students who identified with more negative attributes to participate in criminal behavior. Students who identified with the highest number of roles demonstrated a high correlation with positive roles and personality descriptors which reduced the impact of strain. Students who identified with multiple roles and positive self-descriptors also utilized more positive and appropriate coping mechanisms, which has previously been found to have a negative correlation with participation in criminal behavior. For example, depending on religious beliefs as a coping mechanism was negatively correlated to student's participating in criminal behavior before and after college. By comparison, students who reported the negative coping skills of substance abuse and venting were positively correlated with adult arrests. This study also established that vast majority of the students who participated in this research indicated they were guilty of breaking minor laws (i.e. curfew violation, underage drinking or use of illegal drugs) as adults in

the college setting. This data supports the previously reported correlation between criminal activity and self-reported drug and alcohol use as a coping mechanism to deal with strain.

The study clearly illustrated that individuals who described themselves with positive attributes and have attachments to others, as defined by the number of roles they identify with, had more positive coping mechanisms and were less likely to participate in criminal behavior as a result of strain. Future research should extend this study by identifying the specific crimes that college students are committing, the frequency at which they are being committed, identifying the specific causes of strain students report experiencing and what campus supports they have accessed/utilized.

### **Limitations**

The research study had limitations that are of importance in consideration of the findings. First, concerning the methodological limitations, the study-produced findings based on a convenience-sample conducted with one criminal justice sciences class of 261 students. For this reason, findings should cautiously be applied and may not be generalizable. Second, while college students have been found to experience strain (Matthews 2011; Hamilton & Fagot, 1988; Fisher, Sloan, Cullen & Lu 1998), students in this study were not asked directly about the strain they experience. Also, this study was survey based with self-reported data. The main issue with self-reporting as a means to collect data is that it relied on the honesty and credibility of the participants. Participants may not respond truthfully, either because they cannot remember or because they wish to present themselves in a socially acceptable manner. Another issue is that questions may not always have been clear or understood by participants and there is no way to

determine if the respondents really understood the questions. The survey was also proctored in a group setting in a lecture class, which can also affect a participant's answers to the survey; however, the survey was proctored by an independent party not associated with the research and participation was completely voluntary.

### **Implications**

In conclusion, on the specific college campus surveyed, the vast majority of students surveyed are committing minor crime. Suggesting that interventions should be created to help students develop more appropriate coping mechanisms in response to strain. It is also evident that a great deal of these students are importing criminal behaviors prior to college to the campus. One suggestion, would be to develop a required Freshman class, workshop, seminar or mentoring program aimed at educating students about appropriate coping mechanisms, where they can locate and access support, time to develop rapport with guidance counselors and legal options to campus parties, underage drinking and illegal drug use. These classes are often offered as an intervention after a student has committed a minor crime, but considered within the theoretical framework, the student has already exhibited a reaction to strain at that point. If students were educated about appropriate coping mechanisms prior to feeling strain, a reduction in criminal behavior is possible.

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## APPENDIX

### SURVEY AND CONSENT

#### **Informed Consent to Participate in Human Subject Research**

##### AGE

You must be 18 or older to participate.

Yes, I am over 18.

No I am 17 and under.

##### CONSENT

I have received a complete explanation of the study and I agree to participate.  
(BELOW)

I do not wish to participate.

Cara Rabe-Hemp, Professor of Criminal Justice Sciences and Annie Cvetan, graduate student at Illinois State University are conducting research to explore what influences a student's decision to commit crime. You are being asked to participate in this study.

You are being asked to complete a survey that should take up no more than 10 minutes of your time. There is no information on the survey that can identify who you are. For these reasons, there is no anticipated risk to you as a result of your participation in this study other than the inconvenience of the time to complete the survey and the discomfort you may feel in disclosing your criminal behavior and influences. Upon return of the survey you will be asked to complete an opscan form to identify you to receive 10 points extra credit. Again, your opscan form cannot be linked to your survey responses.

No information about you will be released to anyone and publication or presentation of the study data would in no way identify you as a participant. Participation in this study is voluntary and will not impact your academic standing in the course. An alternative assignment is available for 10 extra credit points, if you would rather. If you want to

withdraw from the study, at any time, you may do so without penalty or loss of benefits. Any information collected on you up to that point would be destroyed. Once the study is completed, you may receive the results of the study. If you would like these results, or if you have any questions in the meantime, please contact:

Cara Rabe-Hemp, Professor  
 Criminal Justice Sciences, Illinois State University  
 414 Schroeder Hall East, Campus Box 5250  
 (309) 438-2739  
 cerabe@ilstu.edu

If you have any complaints about your treatment as a participant in this study or believe that you have been harmed in some way by your participation, please call or write:

Research Ethics and Compliance Office  
 Phone: (309) 438-2529  
[rec@ilstu.edu](mailto:rec@ilstu.edu)

[If you experience discomfort and would like to speak to a counselor:](#)

Call (309) 438-3655 or stop by room 320 of the [Student Services Building](#) to make an appointment with Student Counseling Services or [Providing Access to Help](#) (PATH): 309-827-4005, 1-800-570-7284 or dial 2-1-1

CRIMINAL HISTORY		
Have you ever: (Check the correct answers)	Yes	No
Been arrested?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Been on probation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spent time in jail?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spent time in juvenile detention?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spent time in youth corrections?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spent time in prison?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ARRESTS</b>		
How many times were you arrested <b>BEFORE</b> turning 18?		
How many times have you been arrested <b>SINCE</b> turning 18?		
<b>JUVENILE</b>		
<b>BEFORE 18, Did you ever:</b>	Yes	No
Break a minor law (like curfew violation, underage drinking, or use of illegal drugs)? <b>EVEN IF YOU DID NOT GET CAUGHT!</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Break a major law (like stealing, assault, theft, rape) <b>EVEN IF YOU DID NOT GET CAUGHT!</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>ADULT</b>		
<b>SINCE</b> turning 18, have you ever:	Yes	No
Broke a minor law (like curfew violation, underage drinking, or use of illegal drugs)? <b>EVEN IF YOU DID NOT GET CAUGHT!</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Broke a major law (like stealing, assault, theft, rape)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

EVEN IF YOU DID NOT GET CAUGHT!							
<b>CRIMINAL CONTACT</b>							
Who do know that has ever been arrested? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)							
<input type="checkbox"/> Mother	<input type="checkbox"/> Father	<input type="checkbox"/> Sister	<input type="checkbox"/> Brother	<input type="checkbox"/> Grandparent	<input type="checkbox"/> Uncle		
<input type="checkbox"/> Cousin	<input type="checkbox"/> College friends	<input type="checkbox"/> Date	<input type="checkbox"/> Boyfriend/girlfriend	<input type="checkbox"/> Childhood friends	<input type="checkbox"/> Aunt		
<b>MOM &amp; DAD</b>							
				Yes	No	Not sure?	
Has your biological father ever spent time in jail/prison?				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Has your biological mother ever spent time in jail/prison?				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>SIBLINGS (If you do not have siblings, skip to the next section)</b>							
How many siblings do you have?		Older than you?		Younger than you?			
How many of your siblings have been arrested?							
Are your siblings that have been arrested younger or older than you?				<input type="checkbox"/> Younger	<input type="checkbox"/> Older	<input type="checkbox"/> Both	
Have any of your siblings:				Yes		No	
Broke a minor law (like curfew violation, underage drinking, use of illegal drugs)? EVEN IF THEY DID NOT GET CAUGHT!				<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Broke a major law (like stealing, assault, theft, rape) EVEN IF THEY DID NOT GET CAUGHT!				<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>CHILDHOOD FRIENDS</b>							
How many of your childhood friends have been arrested?							
Have any of your childhood friends:				Yes		No	
Broke a minor law (like curfew violation, underage drinking, use of illegal drugs)? EVEN IF They DID NOT GET CAUGHT!				<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Broke a major law (like stealing, assault, theft, rape) EVEN IF They DID NOT GET CAUGHT!				<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
How many of your childhood friends have broken the law:							
<input type="checkbox"/> None							
<input type="checkbox"/> A few							
<input type="checkbox"/> Some							
<input type="checkbox"/> Half							
<input type="checkbox"/> Most							
<input type="checkbox"/> All							
<b>COLLEGE FRIENDS</b>							

How many of your College friends have been arrested?		
Have any of your College friends:	Yes	No
Broke a minor law (like curfew violation, underage drinking, use of illegal drugs)? EVEN IF They DID NOT GET CAUGHT!	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Broke a major law (like stealing, assault, theft, rape) EVEN IF They DID NOT GET CAUGHT!	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How many of your College friends have broken the law:		
<input type="checkbox"/> None		
<input type="checkbox"/> A few		
<input type="checkbox"/> Some		
<input type="checkbox"/> Half		
<input type="checkbox"/> Most		
<input type="checkbox"/> All		
<b>ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS</b>		
How many people you have dated or been in a relationship with before turning 18 have been arrested?		
Have any of the people you have dated or been in a relationship with before turning 18:	Yes	No
Broke a minor law (like curfew violation, underage drinking, use of illegal drugs)? EVEN IF They DID NOT GET CAUGHT!	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Broke a major law (like stealing, assault, theft, rape) EVEN IF They DID NOT GET CAUGHT!	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How many people you have dated or been in a relationship with before turning 18 have broken the law:		
<input type="checkbox"/> None		
<input type="checkbox"/> A few		
<input type="checkbox"/> Some		
<input type="checkbox"/> Half		
<input type="checkbox"/> Most		
<input type="checkbox"/> All		
<b>INFLUENCES</b>		
Who do you consider the most influential in your decisions about breaking the law? (RANK 1 = Most influential, 6 = Least Influential):		

Mother  
 Father  
 Brothers/Sisters  
 Other Family  
 Childhood friends  
 Current/college Friends

**TELL US ABOUT YOU**

Which best describes your:

Gender:		<input type="checkbox"/> Female			<input type="checkbox"/> Male		
Race:	<input type="checkbox"/> White/Caucasian/Anglo	<input type="checkbox"/> Black/African American	<input type="checkbox"/> Asian/Pacific Islander	<input type="checkbox"/> American Indian/ Native American	<input type="checkbox"/> Other		
Family income:	<input type="checkbox"/> \$0 to \$24,999	<input type="checkbox"/> \$25,000 to 39,999	<input type="checkbox"/> 40,000 to 49,999	<input type="checkbox"/> 50,000 to 74,999	<input type="checkbox"/> 75,000 to 99,999	<input type="checkbox"/> 100,000 to 149,999	<input type="checkbox"/> 150,000 or more

Age:

How often have you been in contact with a family member in the last month?

<input type="checkbox"/> Every day	<input type="checkbox"/> Once a week	<input type="checkbox"/> 2-3 times/week	<input type="checkbox"/> Once this month	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at all	
Are you employed?			<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Part-time	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Full-time

**SELF-CONCEPT**

What roles do you identify yourself as? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

<input type="checkbox"/> Mother/Father	<input type="checkbox"/> Sister/Brother	<input type="checkbox"/> Student	<input type="checkbox"/> Leader	<input type="checkbox"/> Mediator	<input type="checkbox"/> Helper	
<input type="checkbox"/> Husband/Wife	<input type="checkbox"/> Boyfriend/Girlfriend	<input type="checkbox"/> Friend	<input type="checkbox"/> Athlete	<input type="checkbox"/> Listener	<input type="checkbox"/> Single	

What adjectives best describe you? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

<input type="checkbox"/> Kind	<input type="checkbox"/> Ambitious	<input type="checkbox"/> Hardworking	<input type="checkbox"/> Open-minded	<input type="checkbox"/> Unique	<input type="checkbox"/> Lazy
<input type="checkbox"/> Strange	<input type="checkbox"/> Generous	<input type="checkbox"/> Procrastinator	<input type="checkbox"/> Witty	<input type="checkbox"/> Anxious	<input type="checkbox"/> Passive
<input type="checkbox"/> Happy	<input type="checkbox"/> Competitive	<input type="checkbox"/> Compassionate	<input type="checkbox"/> Fun	<input type="checkbox"/> Arrogant	<input type="checkbox"/> Scared

<input type="checkbox"/> Caring	<input type="checkbox"/> Friendly	<input type="checkbox"/> Humorous	<input type="checkbox"/> Optimistic	<input type="checkbox"/> Clumsy	<input type="checkbox"/> Selfish
<input type="checkbox"/> Honest	<input type="checkbox"/> Focused	<input type="checkbox"/> Intelligent	<input type="checkbox"/> Pessimistic	<input type="checkbox"/> Mature	<input type="checkbox"/> Lovable
<input type="checkbox"/> Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Easygoing	<input type="checkbox"/> Responsible	<input type="checkbox"/> Passionate	<input type="checkbox"/> Indecisive	<input type="checkbox"/> Smart
<input type="checkbox"/> Creative	<input type="checkbox"/> Stubborn	<input type="checkbox"/> Determined	<input type="checkbox"/> Polite	<input type="checkbox"/> Insecure	<input type="checkbox"/> Loyal
<input type="checkbox"/> Curious	<input type="checkbox"/> Helpful	<input type="checkbox"/> Disorganized	<input type="checkbox"/> Shy	<input type="checkbox"/> Judgmental	<input type="checkbox"/> Driven

Rate the following statements a 1, 2, 3 or 4 according to how you deal with stressful situations:	1 =I haven't been doing this at all 2 =I've been doing this a little bit 3 =I've been doing this often 4 =I've been doing this a lot
1. I've been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off of things.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I've been concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I'm in.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I've been saying to myself "this isn't real."	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I've been using alcohol or other drugs to make myself feel better.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I've been getting emotional support from others.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I've been giving up trying to deal with it.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I've been taking action to try to make the situation better.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I've been refusing to believe that it has happened.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I've been saying things to let my unpleasant feelings escape.	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I've been getting help and advice from other people.	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. I've been using alcohol or other drugs to help me get through it.	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. I've been trying to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive.	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. I've been criticizing myself.	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do.	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. I've been getting comfort and understanding from someone.	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. I've been giving up the attempt to cope.	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. I've been looking for something good in what is happening.	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. I've been making jokes about it.	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. I've been doing something to think about it less, such as going to the movies, watching TV, reading, daydreaming, sleeping or shopping.	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. I've been accepting the reality of the fact that it has happened.	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. I've been expressing my negative feelings.	<input type="checkbox"/>

22. I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs.	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. I've been trying to get advice or help from other people about what to do.	<input type="checkbox"/>
24. I've been learning to live with it.	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. I've been thinking hard about what steps to take.	<input type="checkbox"/>
26. I've been blaming myself for things that happened.	<input type="checkbox"/>
27. I've been praying or meditating.	<input type="checkbox"/>
28. I've been making fun of the situation.	<input type="checkbox"/>