

Online Socialization and Delinquency: Expanding the Study of Peer Influence in Criminology

Ph.D. Dissertation

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Abstract

Criminologists typically study peer influence within traditional contexts such as schools and neighborhoods. Spurred by the ubiquitous use of electronic devices, recent research finds that online peer delinquency can also have deleterious effects on adolescent behavior. This has important implications for the study of delinquency since youth today are digital natives, meaning their developmental years are spent in a world reliant on technology and Internet-connected devices. Through the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC), adolescents can forge friendships with those found within the cyber context, a virtual environment unrestricted by the confines of space and time. This context not only provides access to a distinct group of online peers, it connects youth with their face-to-face (FTF) friends, thereby enabling instantaneous contact with offline associations. Furthermore, extant research on CMC has revealed that individuals are disinhibited and disclose personal information when communicating online. The cyber context thus (1) extends the view of peer groups by providing access to online peers, (2) increases the frequency, duration, and intensity of contact with existing FTF peers, and (3) affects the content of communication which may alter what is perceived as peer deviance.

This dissertation uses self-reported data from a multi-site study of 3,641 middle school students to explore how youth interact with their friends as well as the association between peer delinquency and personal delinquency. Results indicate that few respondents prefer communicating online, but many find it easier to make friends online, and most communicate online with their FTF friends. The cyber context generally does not enable exposure to new peer delinquency; rather, it enhances the peer delinquency of those who are already exposed offline. Moreover, online peer delinquency from those who are not regularly seen in person emerges as a robust, independent predictor of self-reported delinquency. These results are discussed in terms of their implications for how criminologists should proceed with incorporating the cyber context into the study of delinquent peer influence.