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**Developmental Theories: Criminality over time and deterrence**

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the Developmental/Life-course theories, their findings, and applications to the real world. Otherwise known as Biosocial theories, these theories assume that criminal offending develops over the course of individuals’ lifetimes in different stages. This perspective has become a predominant theory in the modern world for describing criminality. These models follow individual criminal careers to explain how offending develops over time. The models focus on various aspects such as the *onset* of crime, *frequency* of crime, *intensity* of crime, *duration* of criminal activity, and *desistance* from crime. *Onset* is when an individual first engages in a crime. *Frequency* of crime refers to how often individuals commit crime at different stages of life (Pre-adolescent, adolescent, young adult, adult, or elderly). *Intensity* of crime refers to the severity of their acts any given stage. *Duration* of crime is how long an individual's career as a criminal last from *onset* to *desistance* from crime (when their criminal career ends).

These theories aim to explain what causes individuals to engage in criminal acts, what reinforces or inhibits those criminal acts, and what can stop those criminal acts from continuing. They focus on the effect of *early onset* of crime or beginning to engage in criminal acts at a

young age. There are arguments over what age constitutes *early onset* even though the commonly accepted age is thirteen years old. *Early onset* offenders are believed to have a higher risk of “habitual offending” or being “*life-course offenders*”. Meaning those who engage in crime early, are at a higher risk for developing serious or violent offending behaviors that persist throughout their life. This is because studies have shown that among persistent offenders there exists an escalation of *intensity* over their time offending. “This pattern involves an escalation from minor-status offending (e.g., truancy, underage drinking, smoking tobacco), usually committed early in the preteen or early years. This then leads to some higher-level petty crimes (e.g., shoplifting, smoking marijuana) and then to far more serious criminal activity, such as robbery and aggravated assault, and eventually murder and rape” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018).

Different developmental theorists have developed a plethora of reasons, such as *social control variables* and *social learning variables* to explain this phenomenon. While this does not describe all criminality, it does show a relative trend for people who engage in crime, without being caught, to start with minor offending and upscale towards more serious offenses the longer they go unchecked. “Virtually all studies on the life-course/developmental perspective show that most individuals who get arrested are never arrested again” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018). Being arrested serves as a great deterrent for future criminal activity because it exposes individuals to the criminal justice system and the potential repercussions of delinquent activity. The final aspect explored by theorists is what leads to the *desistence* of crime and if we can do anything to prevent or reduce *early onset* offenders in the future.

Theory

Developmental Theories gained prominence in the 1970’s when Robert Sampson and John Laub launched their “prototype developmental model” focusing largely on “individual stability and change” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018). This model drew heavily on a reanalysis of data collected from Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck that was published in the 1950’s. The Glueck’s study examined the criminal development of 1000 boys over the course of 40 years (500 delinquents 500 not). In their study they focused on variables such as IQ, body type, personality, and *social control/learning factors* on criminality. Sampson and Laub’s reanalysis of the data revealed that life changes or significant events in individuals’ lives affect their decision to engage in crime (or not to). It was believed the combination of these factors would set up individuals to either be able to commit crime easier or not. For example, a high IQ mesomorph would have an easier time committing crime and getting away with it then say a low IQ ectomorph. This ability to commit crime easier can be argued to influence individuals inclinations to commit crime.

Sampson and Laub were one of the first to theorize the role of life events in *desistence* from crime. They referred to these as “transitions, or specific events… that are important in altering long-term trends in behavior, which are referred to as trajectories… either toward or away from committing crime and are typically the cumulative result of certain or many specific transitions, such as marriage, employment, having children, or enlisting in military service, which drastically change a person’s criminal career. Sampson and Laub show sound evidence that many individuals who were once on a path toward a consistent form of behavior- in this case, serious, violent crime- suddenly (or gradually) halted due to such a transition or series of transitions” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018).

Something I found fascinating about this theory is that, whether the life transitions contribute to crime or prevent it, is due largely in part of the offender’s perception of their scenario. If they feel trapped (abusive parents, toxic relationships, low socioeconomic status, etc.) they can turn to crime as a means to vent. If they feel free (supportive parents, healthy relationships, perception of being well-off, etc.) then they not only won’t turn to crime but will do better in the other areas of their life (social, educational). This is because they don’t have negative perceptions that cause them to be disheartened and feel powerless. Presuming they turn to crime to have the power or control over their lives they thought they were lacking. The distinguishing factor of their theory; however, was that “early antisocial tendencies among individuals, regardless of social variables, are often linked to later adult criminal offending. Furthermore, some social-structure factors (e.g., family structure, poverty, etc.) also tend to lead to problems in social and educational development, which then lead to crime” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018).

They emphasized the *early onset* of anti-social tendencies as a warning for developing into a *life-course offender* and that delinquent peers, siblings, or family members would further increase an individual’s likelihood to engage in crime. At the same time, positive changes in one’s life such as getting married would persuade offenders to stop their life of crime. People naturally lean away from crime when they have good social supports such as a spouse. Their perceptions of themselves and what they need to do changes. Additionally, negative events (being arrested, police encounters, etc.) can also lead to a reduction in criminal tendencies. There is not a universal reasoning that will influence an individual’s likelihood to engage in crime (or not to). Instead, it is a combination of many social factors, outside variables, and individual perception on those.

The next major proponent in developmental theory is a theorist named Terrie Moffitt. In 1993 Moffitt proposed a theoretical perspective that distinguished offenders into two categories: *Adolescence-limited offenders* and *life-course offenders*. This framework dubbed “Moffitt’s developmental taxonomy” was the first to distinguish offenders into subgroups and developed upon the phenomenon’s discovered by Sampson and Laub. *Adolescence-limited offenders* are the majority of offenders and the *frequency* of their crimes are predominantly in their teenage or young adult years. Moffitt proposed that these offenders had “a desire to engage in activities exhibited by the adults they were trying to emulate” and that “their offending was largely caused by association with peers” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018).

This is consistent with Sampson and Laubs claim that social structure factors can lead to crime. If a major peer in your life (say a sibling, parent, best friend, cousin, etc.) was a criminal offender then they would influence you in your early years by being a role model against traditional values. Potentially leading to the *early onset* of criminal tendencies, as this would in turn cause you to emulate their actions to fit in or impress them. Moffitt described this as “a rite of passage” and went so far as to claim “such activities are… quite normal among all people who have normal social interactions with their peers in teenage or young adult years… (about 1% to 3%) of the population are nonoffenders who, quite frankly, do not have normal relations with their peers and therefore do not offend at all, even in adolescence ” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018). To consider engaging in criminal acts as a “normal social interaction”, makes it seem as if those who do not are ostracized or prevented from being a part of a seperate social group. Revealing something telling of a society riddled with exclusivity. With that in mind, it makes it quite understandable how those individuals (lower SES or indifference to conformity) could easily be influenced by their peers or role models who engaged in deviant acts. Role models in youth (grandparents, parents, siblings, close family ties, etc) influence individual perception on the value of crime. Either reinforcing illegal perceptions and behaviors; or, reinforcing legal perceptions and actions. Additionally, the events that happen over the course of someone’s life do the same. Events that encourage good social support like high school graduation, marriage, good job security, etc. reinforce legal perceptions and behaviors. Events like exposure to negative policing, crime in the home, crime in close social groups, etc. can influence the early onset of criminality.

The second type of offender he identified (*Life-course offenders)* are the smaller portion (4-8%) of all offenders and as the name implies have the largest *duration* criminal careers that can span their lifetimes. Moffitt identified them as “the most violent and chronic” offenders saying that they “commit the vast majority of the serious, violent offenses in any society, such as murder, rape, and armed robbery” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018 p.364). These individuals are distinguished here from *adolescence-limited offenders* in that the reason they engage in crime is “an interaction between neurological problems and the disadvantaged or criminological environments in which they were raised” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018 p.364). Moffitt identifies both neurological problems (low IQ, disorders, addiction, etc.) and experience as proponents that lead to development into *life-course offenders*. He said “if an individual has only neurological problems or only came from a poor, disadvantaged environment, then that individual will be unlikely to develop a life-course persistent trajectory toward crime. However, if a person has both neurological problems and came from a disadvantaged environment, then that individual will have a very high likelihood of becoming a chronic, serious, violent offender” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018). Moffitt’s taxonomy was foundational to our modern understanding of criminology because it emphasized the significance of our early life experiences on reaffirming the role of peer influences on behavior and developing into a criminal offender. Many people in the early years of their life waver between criminal activities and legal. I believe that by the time people are around 25 their likelihood to be a life course offender is most visible. In addition to this, it revealed that multiple types of development can explain criminality and recognized that offenders are driven to commit crime because of many different factors. Making it through primary and secondary education systems is a good indication of job security and a more legal perception influencing their behaviors. On the other hand, those with more illegal perceptions tend to commit crime at a young age and then show signs of an increase in the severity of those crimes over time. At the same time, when someone has good social supports like a supportive family, friend group, teachers, significant other, etc. they tend to cease illegal perceptions and act in more legal ways. Individuals perceptions of the events in their life and on those who they know heavily influence their likelihood to engage in criminal behaviors. When they have people in their life who they respect that reinforce acting in a legal way they are more likely to do so. The same goes for when the people they respect do not.

*Early Onset* offenders are at the greatest risk for developing into *Life-Course offenders* but those with neurological problems and in delinquent environments are at the highest risk of developing into *early onset offenders*. These offenders started very young (under 13) and will likely continue to commit crime as adults on or off, distinguishing them from those who only offend in their teenage or young adult years. As I mentioned before, if a peer that is essential to your development as a child (parent, sibling, or similar relationships) exposes you to illegal actions in your early years. Then you are far more likely to have an *early onset* of criminality. This is because individuals conform to fit the perception of those they respect. In some cases, when someone spends the majority of their time with that person and they tend to act in illegal manners then they will be validating and perpetuating each other’s deviancy. In others, when individuals spend the majority of their time with those who follow the law (coworkers, friends, family, pets) they avoid criminal activity.

The final major proponent to developmental theories who can be argued to have added the most to our understanding of criminology is a man named Terrence Thornberry. In 1987 Thornberry evaluated the causation of criminality through peers and published his model dubbed “Thornberry’s Interactional Model of Offending”. This model was the first to recognize a reciprocal relationship between peer associations. Meaning, he identified individuals’ relationships with each other as both a predictor of future criminal offenses and a factor that influences the *duration* and *intensity* of criminal careers. Specifically, negative peer influences (those from delinquents or criminal offenders) can lead people to offend while also perpetuating those offenses in the future. “Thornberry uniquely claims that the processes of both *social control* and *social learning* theory affect each other in a type of feedback process. Thornberry’s interactional model incorporates five primary theoretical constructs… these five concepts are commitment to school, attachment to parents, belief in conventional values (these first three are taken from *social control* and bonding theory), adoption of delinquent values, and association with delinquent peers (these last two are drawn from *social learning* and differential association-reinforcement theory)” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018).

The two social process theories that Thornberry draws from were fundamental in of all the mentioned theorists understanding of criminal behavior. *Social control* theories focus on the role of socialization in **preventing** individuals from engaging in crime. Whereas *social learning* theories are more of an analysis of what socialization **causes** individuals to learn antisocial perceptions and criminal behaviors. As such, bonding theory, which was introduced by Travis Hirschi in 1969, presumes that individuals are predisposed to commit crimes at birth based on the scenario in which they are born into and grow to understand. Individual’s must learn the actions that are socially acceptable (and not) at the early stages of life. “Hirschi claimed also that the stronger a person is bonded to conventional society, the less prone to engaging in crime he or she will be… the stronger the social bond, the less likely that an individual will commit criminal offenses” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018 p.279). Hirschi’s theory of social bonds focuses heavily on an individual’s attachment to their society and highlighted the importance of healthy attachment early on in life to prevent future delinquency.

Differential association theory was introduced by Edwin Sutherland in the 20th century in an attempt to analyze the transmission of criminal values through generations. His claims were that “criminal behavior is learned” through “interaction with other persons” and predominately within ones “intimate personal groups” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018). The impact of this theory is visible in the later theorists’ beliefs on how family can impact probability of criminality. Together the two social process theories work to explain how legal relationships promote reduced criminal activity and criminal relationships work to increase likelihood of offending.

Thornberry used this to show how different variables can affect development at different points in our lives. He claimed “that association with delinquent peers will have more effect in the mid-teenage years than at other ages” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018). Further emphasizing the significance of the early years in future development. A major question Thornberry aimed to answer was “do certain individuals decide to hang out with delinquents based on their previous behavior, or do they learn criminality from delinquents with whom they associate?” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018). Based on my research I would say it is not one or the other but either or.

This is where his model is distinguished from the others thus far. He was the first to say that the majority of factors that have been identified to cause criminality are related reciprocally. “Thus, Thornberry postulated that engaging in crime leads to hanging out with other delinquents and that hanging out with delinquents leads to committing crime” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018). Both are common causes that lead to criminal activity and association with criminals, as well as sustain/perpetuate those actions and associations. This creates a sort of feedback loop where a lack of moral beliefs on criminal offending leads to delinquency. That lack of faith in legality is something that is learned by either witnessing others engage in crime or engaging in crime themselves. “While the weakening of the bond to conventional society may be an initial cause of delinquency, delinquency eventually becomes its own indirect cause precisely because of its ability to weaken further the person’s bonds to family, school, and conventional beliefs” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018). As if acting like a virus, this belief in anti-social values causes individuals to dissociate with their peers who still have bonds to conventional society and in turn makes their intimate personal groups be filled with delinquents perpetuating their delinquent values on each other. “Variables relating to social control or bonding and other sources cause delinquency, which then becomes, in itself, a predictor and cause for the breakdown of other important causes of delinquency and crime” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2018). Acting as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy where individuals either commit crime and then convince their peers to commit crime or are convinced to commit crime and then associate more with those who also commit crime.

Out of all the theories on criminal behavior I have learned, developmental theories are in my opinion the most logically consistent explanations of crime to date. The reason for this is that these theories identified that there is no one cause of criminality. Instead, different people are led to engage in crime for different reasons. The main factor that overlaps and develops through the multiple models is the significance of early life on future behavior, but each model uniquely added something to our modern understanding of crime.

Sampson & Laub’s model was unique in their emphasis of different transitions effect on criminal trajectory and what perceptions lead to the *desistence* or perpetuation of offending. This emphasized how different events and our perception of how they affect us can promote or prevent criminality. Moffitt’s model built on theirs but was unique in his distinguishing of offenders into subgroups (*Adolescent-limited* and *Life-course*). This allowed our understanding of crime to change because it identified that people who only engage in crime in early years do so for different reasons then those who violate over the course of their lives. It also highlighted the significance of socialization in creating law abiding citizens and anti-social behaviors attributing to delinquency or illegal beliefs.

Finally, Thornberry’s model built on Moffitt’s but was unique in that his was the first to identify the effect of relationships as reciprocal in the making of a criminal. Giving an equal weight to the factors that lead to deviancy and those that lead away form it. He did this by identifying these factors as both antecedent and reciprocal on behavior. Adding to our understanding of how interactions and events can have a multitude of effects on the causation of criminality given individual circumstances. While I believe these theories together are currently the best explanation we have for criminal behavior, they are by no means perfect, and by themselves none of these theories can adequately explain what makes a criminal. Only when the theories presented are combined do I believe that most criminality can be accounted for. Historically the argument has been what affects us more nature or nurture? These theories argue that it is nature via nurture, so, both.

Sampson and Laub’s model can arguably be one of the more objective studies of criminality. However, given all that they added their method still cannot predict the trajectories of *life-course offenders*. This is because as identified earlier *life-course offenders* are developed by a combination of neurological problems and negative peer association. This model can only predict criminality from events and association, so it is insufficient in explaining criminal offenders with neurological deficits. In a criticism of this theory by Daniel Nagin and Richard Trembley they stated “the inability of Sampson and Laub (2003) to predict ex ante a life-course persistent trajectory does not logically imply that no such trajectory exists”(Nagin & Tremblay, 2005). Essentially arguing that the absence of this model in their theory is not enough to say this type of offender does not exist. There is ample statistical evidence pointing towards *life-course offenders* being the most violent and most at risk for severe offenses.

Terrence Moffitt’s developmental taxonomy identified two primary types of offenders. While this theory added much to the world of criminology, it cannot predict all criminality. An analysis of his theory revealed “that differences between LCP antisociality and AL antisociality are quantitative distinctions in degree rather than qualitative differences in kind… Hence, LCP antisociality may be a more severe form of conduct disorder that differs only in degree from AL antisociality instead of a categorically distinct pattern of conduct disorder-related behavior” (Walters, 2011). This analysis revealed that the reasonings behind these separate classifications (*life-course offenders* and *adolescent limited*) did not work 100% of the time. There were people who were *Life-course offenders* without neurological problems as well as people who had neurological problems and were only *adolescence-limited offenders.* The analysis goes on to say that “the etiology of LCP antisocial behavior is comprised of many risk factors, that these risk factors interact or accumulate, and that no single set of risk factors is necessary or sufficient for development of the LCP pattern” (Walters, 2011). Walters suggests a revision of this taxonomy to understand the true differences “by factor analytic research designed to identify the actual number of dimensions that underlie the LCP–AL distribution” (Walters, 2011). I would guess what is found is that those who view committing crime as an opportunity will commit crime smarter and more often potentially indicating a greater chance of life course offending. On the other hand, those who commit crime but do not view crime as an opportunity will likely cease criminal activity and be adolescence limited offenders.

Finally, Thornberry’s model distinguished the reciprocal effect of peer association on criminality. This model added the most to criminology out of the three theories discussed but is riddled with limitations. In his doctoral dissertation Sangmoon Lee identifies many fallacies in Thornberry’s process. “They did not adequately include theoretically significant measures of both social control and social learning variables. They did not fully cover the transition throughout adolescence. They also did not adequately examine the variation of social category and individual criminal propensity” (Lee, 2003). Lee argues that the causal effects identified by Thornberry are limited to males and that peer associations can predict delinquency but not family attachment. He says that gender plays a significant role in predicting criminality and his study supported this. “The effect of family attachment on delinquency is stronger for females than males. The effect of deviant peers on delinquency is stronger for males than females. Female delinquency has stronger negative effect on family relations than male delinquency” (Lee, 2003). Lee’s study found that age, gender, and types of offenses all play into the probability of criminality. He built on what Thornberry started by identifying family attachment and deviant peers as the primary factors that predict the *early onset* of criminality. His predictions made me realize that in the home a female caretaker who is deviant will have a greater chance of making her kids deviant than a male caretaker. Additionally, friend who are male deviant characters will have a greater effect on individual deviancy than female deviant friends. Some possible reasonings for this is that in the home a mother is commonly the most supportive figure for children so they will take after them more. Also, males have an easier time presenting deviant thoughts without rejection so they could likely influence their peers more than their female counterparts. Ultimately, he found that for those who begin offending later the main influence is deviant peers and this relationship is not reciprocal but instead unidirectional.

Application

Developmental/Life-Course theories are applicable for many types of crime. They can be used to explain the factors that lead to petty crimes, violent crimes, as well as some white-collar crimes. These theories have shown us that offenders gradually escalate as their criminal career goes on. As such, many petty crimes are committed by offenders who only recently started offending and may be being influenced by deviant peers. Conversely, violent crimes tend to be committed by long term offenders and are often committed individually. While there are outliers to this, these theories can be applied on a situational case by case basis to explain offenderss motives. These theories best explain the most common crimes as they identify the majority of offenders. The types of crimes that these theories fail to explain are crimes committed by psychopaths, such as arson, kidnapping, and torture. Something interesting I found was that for the large portion of these theories they aim to explain the main causes of criminality. However, what happened was they explained various reasons why individuals would begin criminal tendencies so the majority of the crimes that are applicable are the thousands of crimes that go unreported annually. Additionally, these theories presume that individuals engage in crime knowing beforehand that it is criminal. So, crimes committed in the spur of the moment (emotionally caused murder, self-defense) or accidental crimes (vehicular manslaughter) that were committed by prior nonoffenders cannot be adequately explained with this theory. They did not engage in a critical evaluation of crime in these cases because they were crimes of passion that were committed by a temporary lapse in emotional control.

One of the most significant factors of these theories was the early *onset of crimes* potential effect on continued offending. This is because the more time individuals spend offending the greater chance that their offenses will escalate into more severe forms of offenses. Events over the course of one’s life that will increase their chances of criminality are events that cause anti-social tendencies or beliefs. Violence or criminality in the home is a very common example. The exposure to non-law-abiding role models can greater affect individuals’ perceptions on the value of crime. Additionally, encounters with the police where someone they love is getting in trouble reduces faith in the legal system and may also perpetuate illegal behaviors. At the same time, events where individuals feel as though they were not adequately protected by the social contract may also lead to criminal offending. So being robbed and then the police turning a blind eye will cause individuals to no longer seek police aid to solve their problems and take them into their own hands.

Prevention

Proponents of developmental theory focus heavily on the importance on the early years of life on future delinquency. As such, prevention of crime through a developmental perspective focuses on creating a stable environment for youth. The way to do this is by supporting policy for pre- and post-natal care, monitoring children through development, providing neurological examinations, and funding biological research in prisons and treatment facilities. If proponents of the developmental theory were placed in charge of the criminal justice system, they would bring about universal health care for both pregnant women and their newborns. They would create “legally mandated interventions for pregnant women who are addicted to drugs or alcohol” (Cozens, Love, 2015). They would fund universal preschools and attempt to reduce exposure to toxic substances such as lead. The justification for this is that all the models of biosocial theory suggest the early stages of life are the most significant predictors for criminality. In trying to create the best early years possible, theorists hope to see reduced criminal offenses because children will be able to develop educationally and socially without interference. Creating a system to monitor high-risk pregnancies and high-risk infants will reduce the likelihood of substance abuse by mothers putting infants at a neurological disadvantage.

In my own opinion, there are many other factors that can help prevent the development of criminality. For example, good social support that encourages staying in school (by parents, guidance counselors, teachers, friends, etc.) will help keep keeps away from delinquency and illegal behaviors. Strong law-abiding role models will help the development of law abiding citizens because these social structures serve as the most direct route of deterrence. Additionally, exposure to community policing and other forms of positive policing will help individuals develop a positive viewpoint towards the legal system and officers from a young age. In the modern world with increasing publicity of police violence, increasing mass shooting, increasing population, and increasing political polarization faith in the legal system and government is exceptionally fleeting. Only those lucky few who live relatively sheltered lives will grow up with complete faith in legality and the legal system. For the vast majority however, exposure to poverty, violence, and criminality in general will serve as a catalyst for a period of illegal activity. Whether this illegal activity continues into adulthood, or not, is a matter of if these individuals get caught, continue to prefer the company of deviant peers, lack strong social support or job security, or more.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to analyze the Developmental/Life-course theories, their findings, and applications to the real world. The models by Sampson and Laub, Moffitt, and Thornberry all fundamentally altered the way we see criminal offenders. Sampson and Laub identified different transitions effect on criminal trajectory and what perceptions lead to the *desistence* or perpetuation of offending. Moffitt created subgroups for offenders (LCP and AL) and Thornberry identified relationships as reciprocal to promoting delinquency. These theories, however, were not perfect. Individually, each theory has many shortcomings. Thornberry’s model didn’t take into account gender, Sampson and Laubs cannot adequately explain *life course offenders*, and Moffit’s can only be used to explain a limited portion of criminality. In my opinion, what makes developmental theories the most significant to date is the combined use of all three models together. Together they can be used to explain what causes most offenders to initially commit crime (even if not reported), the causes of delinquency, and to explain what drives offenders to stop committing crime altogether. Consequently, these theories also made it apparent that criminals who become long term offenders start with smaller forms of crime and escalate as time passes. As such, it could be argued that police intervention in schools could serve as a deterrent for crime if done correctly. Educating children about the repercussions of criminal activity on themselves, their family, peers, and society overall could be an effective deterrent. Additionally, early interventions for children who engage in criminal activity early will be essential to preventing them from escalating into *life course offenders*. Noticing when children start to behave in illegal manners and educating them about why not to or encouraging good social support by getting them involved with their community (student council, volunteering with children, etc.) will raise their faith in legality and help deter them from engaging in crime long term.

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