The role of the social environment in causing stability and change in offending had been largely unexplored in criminological theory. This chapter presents a case for the importance of the social environment in explanations of crime involvement. The chapter begins with a review of three current theories (Gottfredson and Hirschi's general theory of crime, Moffitt's dual developmental taxonomy, and Sampson and Laub's general theory of social control) and discuss how each fails to fully develop the explanation of crime in context. It then discusses how Wikström's situational action theory of crime causation may address this deficiency by taking an ecological developmental approach. The chapter argues that the situational action theory presents a better description of what is to be explained by defining crimes as acts which break moral rules. Moral rules apply to specific settings, therefore explanations of crime must take into consideration the context of action. We argue that the situational action theory provides a clearer depiction of the nature of human behavior by viewing individuals as rule-guided (rather than self-interested) actors who exhibit agency through deliberate and habitual choices. Individuals may choose whether to act in accordance with a moral context, but they must first perceive that moral context and consider breaking one of its rules. Thus to explain why individuals choose to commit acts of crime, the chapter must first explain what features of a setting lead them to perceive crime as an alternative for action. Finally, the chapter argues that the situational action theory provides a more robust explanation of crime involvement by positing a situational mechanism by which individuals' propensity to offend interacts with their exposure to criminogenic settings. The expression of propensity depends upon the characteristics of the settings to which an individual is exposed. Thus to explain why individuals commit acts of
crime, the chapter needs to explain both the propensity to offend and what triggers its expression. The chapter concludes that what drives persistent offending is therefore both stability in individuals' propensity to offend and their exposure to criminogenic social environments, and recommend innovative methodological approaches for studying these important variables.

Looking Backward and Forward
Michael E. Ezell and Lawrence E. Cohen

This book began by discussing three critically important questions: how stable are individual differences in the propensity to commit criminal acts across the life course; whether there are two (or more) discrete groups of offenders with distinct age-crime curves concealed within the aggregate age-crime curve; and whether the relationship between offending at one age period and a subsequent age period endures when time-stable individual differences in criminal propensity are controlled. The first two questions could be assessed with multivariate analyses of the age-crime curves of different latent classes of juvenile offenders, while the third question could be assessed through a series of multivariate analyses of the relationships between the arrest rates of individuals at adjacent ages within these different latent classes. This final chapter presents general theoretical and substantive conclusions, possible directions for future research, and the policy implications that follow from the analyses. First, it assesses the relationship between age and crime and the relationship between past and subsequent criminal activity.

Death Penalty Mitigation
Jose B. Ashford and Melissa Kupferberg

This book provides an introduction to socio-legal forms of mitigation in capital sentencing. It examines scientific formulations, concepts, and frameworks for structuring social history investigations and assessments of moral culpability. A fundamental aim of this book is to provide
mitigation professionals not only with an understanding of the context of mitigation in criminal justice thinking, but also ways of contextualizing issues of blame and culpability. Cases are used to illustrate how to identify, evaluate, and present mitigation evidence in assessing issues of culpability in the mitigation of punishment in death penalty cases. It also exposes mitigation professionals to recent developments in the social sciences with implications for assessing issues of practical rationality, diminished volition, unfortunate forms of socialization, criminal propensities, socio-cultural deprivation, and gang involvement. These topics are linked with legal and philosophical conceptions of moral culpability that offer mitigation professionals new ways of thinking about both proximal and remote forms of mitigation. These socially oriented lenses, used in examining these concepts and legal issues, offer alternative ways of thinking about issues of capacity, choice, and character in assessing diminished forms of moral culpability. The book concludes with recommendations for future research and other strategies for promoting the improvement of practice in the field of capital mitigation.

Age and Crime among Latent Classes of Serious Youthful Offenders

Michael E. Ezell and Lawrence E. Cohen

in Desisting from Crime: Continuity and Change in Long-term Crime Patterns of Serious Chronic Offenders

Published in print: 2004 Published Online: March 2012
Item type: chapter

One of the foremost controversies in contemporary theoretical criminology concerns how to simultaneously explain the sources of both continuity and change in criminal behaviour over time. The ‘paradox of persistence’ is a descriptive empirical finding that highlights the importance of the processes of both continuity and discontinuity in criminal offending patterns across the life course. The explanation as to why criminal propensity is either stable/instable (or a mixture of both properties) is of fundamental importance to the discipline of criminology because it has important theoretical implications for explaining two of the robust or ‘brute facts’ of criminology: the reported inverse relationship between age and crime, and the reported positive association between past and subsequent criminal activity. This chapter explores the empirical relationship between age and crime within latent classes of juvenile offenders. It also tests the hypothesis that there is uniformity in the shape of the age-crime curve of different latent classes.
by analysing the statistical significance of allowing the magnitude of the age parameters to vary across the latent classes.