



THE EFFECTS OF OFFICIAL LABELING ON  
JUVENILES' SELF-CONCEPTIONS

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Abstract

Using attitude, self-reported behavior, and arrest questionnaires, this study examines the impact of degrees of official intervention on three separate measures of self-concept (delinquent, sick, good) to determine if the impact of labeling varies by the type of offense for which the individual is arrested. We also determine if the direct effect of labeling on self-concept is greater or less than that of delinquent experience. The results of multiple regression analyses indicate that even after the removal of delinquent experience, there appears to be a statistically significant direct path from arrests for assault and running away offenses to delinquent self-concept and from arrest for vice offenses to sick self-concept. However, there is little evidence that delinquent experience independently influences self-concept.

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Labeling theory traditionally assumes that most delinquency is transitory if ignored (Tannenbaum, 1938) and that therefore the wisest response, at least to initial and minor delinquency, is a policy of judicial non-intervention or diversion from court (Lemert, 1971). Official sanctions are assumed to stigmatize juveniles, to reduce legitimate opportunities or activities, and to create or enhance a deviant self-concept, thereby leading to further delinquency. In short, labeling theory assumes that official responses to youthful misbehavior are often responsible for turning occasional delinquents into career delinquents. Critics of this perspective contend that it has been too deterministic and oversimplified (Empey, 1978). In particular, it has been too intent on proving that official sanctions do have negative effects on self-concept, and thus on subsequent behavior, and has ignored the possibility that these sanctions may sometimes be not only deserved but also simply incidental to an already established behavioral tendency. At the very least, there may be interaction between prior behavior (with the prior causes that such behavior implies) and official sanctions, with their potential labeling effects.

Prior research has not found the impact of official response on self-concept to be as significant as expected by the labeling perspective (Foster et al., 1972; Gibbs, 1974; Hepburn, 1977; and Mahoney, 1974). At best, those few stud-

ies examining the relationship have been inconclusive in their findings. For instance, Jensen (1972:99) found a "persistent tendency for those who have been officially labelled as delinquent to think of themselves and to feel thought of by others as delinquent more often than those who have not been so labelled." However, Hepburn (1977) found little evidence of a relationship between official labeling and self-concept when self-reported behavior was controlled, suggesting that Jensen's findings, based on tabular analyses that did not control for delinquency, were spurious.

In an attempt to reconcile the divergent findings of the two studies, Jensen (1980) redid his analyses, controlling for self-reported delinquency. Although he did find the relationship between official record and self-image to be, in part, spurious, he also found a significant direct relationship between official delinquency and delinquent self-image, prompting him to conclude that the conflicting outcomes may be due to differences in the two samples. Jensen's study used a large (2,589) stratified random sample of black and white high school males, while Hepburn obtained his data from smaller, purposive samples of 105 nondelinquent and 96 delinquent white males. As a result, Hepburn's data were weighted heavier with respect to youths reporting higher rates of delinquent acts. Let us assume that every labeling experience contributes some increment to a youth's

propensity to delinquency, but that the increment is smallest for those already heavily involved in delinquency and largest for those who are just entering upon delinquency. Then, the impact of labeling would vary inversely with delinquency, and Hepburn's data would be less likely than Jensen's to reveal a relationship between official labeling and delinquent behavior.

These findings suggest that not all individuals are equally sensitive to the negative impact of labeling. In fact, there is some evidence that the strength of the association between official labeling and delinquent self-concept is contingent on a variety of factors that may affect the social meaning of the sanctions. Among these factors are the type of norm violated, in addition to the point in the delinquent career in which the sanction occurs and the nature of the sanction imposed (Thorsell and Klemke, 1972; Tittle, 1975). For instance, an appearance before a judge that results in dismissal (reflecting the judge's faith in the youth's underlying goodness and ability to avoid future trouble, as so understood by the youth) may confirm a positive self-image and conformity (Mahoney, 1974). The impact of labeling also may be curvilinear and thus "likely to gain momentum as each police contact in some way reinforces the impact of prior contact" (Klein, 1974:298). Schur (1971) points out that one deficiency among labeling ana-

lysts is to view engulfment into deviant roles as something that occurs instantly. For instance, Becker (1963:31) says that

" . . . being caught and branded as deviant has important consequences for one's further social participation and self-image. The most important consequence is a drastic change in self-image."

Obviously, such statements place greater weight on the official reaction than may be justified. Even if the individual were to develop a deviant self-image following such a branding process, there is little evidence that this is either instant or permanent.<sup>1</sup> In short, the extent to which there is any labeling effect may be contingent on the social meaning of the sanction, as determined by the nature and context of the labeling process.

It also is possible that subsequent delinquency may be due to factors other than the negative impact of labeling on self-concept. For instance, Klein (1974:301) suggests that official recidivism is not necessarily a reflection of progression in a deviant career due to the acquisition of a deviant self-concept, but may reflect, instead, increased probability of arrest because of the "simple familiarity of offenders to social agents rather than altered self-images of offenders." This finding is supported by other research

investigating the stigmatizing effects of contact with agencies of juvenile justice. Foster et al. (1972) found that those youths who had come in contact with the juvenile justice system did not perceive any stigmatizing effect in regard to interpersonal relationships, parents, or school. The authors, however, emphasize that these youths do perceive an increased police awareness of their actions, although they also believe this increased surveillance will diminish if they are able to convince the police that they are no longer committing delinquent acts. Those individuals who are initially labeled may be more likely to appear in recidivism statistics than other offenders who have been spared the labeling experience. Alternatively, progression in a delinquent career may be neither artifactual nor the result of changing self-concept, but the result of already established and growing delinquent tendencies.<sup>2</sup> In this case, negative police reactions would simply reflect an accurate assessment of the youth's character and conduct (Hirschi, 1975). Therefore, an unbiased analysis of labeling effects also must take extent and seriousness of delinquent behavior into consideration.

This brings us to another labeling assumption: that of the universality of deviance. Self-report studies of delinquency have been cited as evidence of the universality of delinquent conduct. Unfortunately, the theoretical general-

izations drawn from these studies have been more extensive than is justified by the delinquency measures (Wellford, 1975). Recent studies by Elliott and Ageton (1980) and Hindelang et al. (1979) indicate that what is universal among juveniles is minor offenses, not serious crimes. The overrepresentation of minor offense items, often to the exclusion of those serious criminal code violations most likely to result in official response, has presented a somewhat distorted view of the universality of delinquency. In reality, only a small percentage of youths engage in those offenses most likely to come to the attention of police. The evidence suggests that it is the most delinquent youths, both in terms of self-reported seriousness and frequency of offenses, who are most likely to be arrested (Williams and Gold, 1972) or appear in court (Erickson, 1972; Erickson and Empey, 1963). Thus, although it may be argued that all youths violate the law, very few commit those serious or frequent offenses that are most likely to result in official reaction. Self-report studies are a potentially more accurate reflection of delinquent conduct if they provide a fairly representative set of offense items, ranging from status offenses to more serious criminal offenses, such as assault and robbery, and either an open or fairly broad response set indicating the number of times the offense has been committed. Otherwise, it is not possible to distin-

guish between minor and serious offenders. Such a distinction is crucial in any analysis of the effects of labeling.

Certainly, before we can justify policies based on the labeling perspective's contention that sanctions promote criminal conduct, it is important to determine if official reactions to delinquent behavior set in motion the series of events hypothesized by the labeling perspective. As noted above, the impact of sanctions may be more subtle and complex than initially hypothesized by the labeling perspective. Guided by such considerations, it is the purpose of this study to examine the impact of official labeling (arrest experience) on self-concept and to determine if this impact varies by the type of offense for which the individual is arrested. It is also our intent to determine if the direct effect of labeling on self-concept is greater or less than that of delinquent experience.

#### METHODOLOGY

##### Data Source

Data collected from 1976 - 1978 as part of a federally-funded evaluation of the Connecticut Deinstitutionalization of Status Offenders (DSO) project served as the data source for this study. These data were obtained from standardized attitude, self-reported behavior, and arrest questionnaires that were given at the time of entry into the DSO program.

Obviously, this is not a random sample of youths; these are youths who have come to the attention of diversion personnel. However, the focus of this study is not on the generalizability of the results; it is on measuring the effects of official response and delinquent conduct on self-concept. To this end, it is important that there be variation in each of these variables. The data do meet this criterion. The responses represent a broad range of variation in delinquent experience, arrest experience and self-concept.

##### Measurement

Dependent Variable: three separate measures of self-concept (delinquent, sick, good) were developed using a principal-component method of factor analysis (Kim, 1975).<sup>3</sup> Individual items used in the construction of these scales were measured by asking the respondents to what extent (very well, pretty well, a little, not at all) each statement described them. The items included in each index were as follows: delinquent (someone who: gets into fights a lot, is a bad kid, gets into trouble, does things that are against the law, breaks rules, will spend time in jail, will get into trouble for things he/she does); sick (someone who: is sort of mixed up, is an unhappy person, is often upset, is messed up, needs help, has a lot of personal problems, is emotionally disturbed, will need help for personal prob-

lems); and good (someone who: is well-liked, is a good citizen, gets along well with other people, is a respectable person, is liked by neighbors, will do okay in life in things like school, jobs, having a family, and so on). The actual indices were constructed by summing the factor scores<sup>4</sup> of those items included in each index.

#### Independent Variables

Delinquent Experience: Incidence of delinquent behavior was measured by asking the respondents to indicate how many times (0 - 15+) within the last six months they committed each of 26 offenses. Six separate delinquency indexes,<sup>5</sup> each representing a different grouping of offenses, were constructed by summing the frequencies of offenses within the respective category: ASSAULT (personal assault, group assault, robbery); PROPERTY (auto theft, burglary, breaking & entering, vandalism < \$50, vandalism > \$50, shoplifting, theft < \$50, theft > \$50, buying or receiving stolen goods); DRUGS<sup>6</sup> (using pills, using drugs such as cocaine, heroin or morphine, selling drugs); VICE (drinking without permission, using pot, getting drunk, driving under the influence, sex); ROTNKID (cutting classes, staying out without permission, disobeying parents, disobeying school rules, truancy); and RUNAWAY (running away from home).

Official Response to delinquent behavior was measured by asking the respondents to indicate whether they had been arrested for each of the 26 offenses during the past 6 months. The same six categories (ASSAULT, PROPERTY, DRUGS, VICE, ROTNKID, RUNAWAY) were used in constructing the six arrest indexes. Each index was constructed by summing the number of separate offense types for which the individual was arrested within that offense category. A general measure of arrest (NUMARST) was also constructed by summing the total number of offense types for which the individual was arrested, across all categories.

#### RESULTS

// TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE //

Table 1 includes the zero-order coefficients for each of the self-concept indexes with each of the arrest indexes. Looking first at the summary measure (NUMARST), we find that arrests and delinquent self-concept are significantly related and that being arrested for an increasing number of offense types is more likely to result in a delinquent self-image (.24) than in either a sick (.13) or a good one (-.09). This varies with specific types of offenses, however. While a delinquent self-concept is significantly related to arrests for ASSAULT (.29) and RUNAWAY (.24)

offenses, a sick self-concept is associated with arrests for ASSAULT (.24) and VICE (.20), and a good self-image is negatively related (-.21) to arrest for PROPERTY offenses.

Overall, these findings are consistent with the labeling assertion that official sanctioning results in some form of negative self-image. On the other hand, there is no indication of any strong or generalized labeling effect. That is, the correlations are all rather low and variable in significance. Before any further discussion, however, we must control for the level of prior delinquency in case it accounts for both arrest and self-concept.

Table 1 also gives the Beta coefficients that were computed by regressing each self-concept index on each offense-specific arrest measure, while controlling for all other prior arrest measures (apart from the prior arrest measure under consideration) and for all delinquent experience variables.<sup>7</sup> If the relationship between self-concept and arrests is spurious, we would expect this coefficient to be nonsignificant when controlling for delinquent experience.

At first glance, the findings appear to be contrary to the predictions of the labeling perspective. Once the effects of prior delinquent experience have been removed, the labeling impact of overall arrests (NUMARST) is of little consequence for delinquent self-concept (B=.03). Upon closer examination, however, we find that those specific

types of arrests initially associated with a delinquent self-concept (i.e., arrests for ASSAULT and RUNAWAY) continue to have a significant direct impact on delinquent self-concept after the removal of delinquent experience. This also appears to be the pattern with respect to the other self-concept measures.<sup>8</sup> In short, even after the removal of delinquent experience, there appears to be a statistically significant direct path between official reaction to certain types of offenses and self-concept.

#### Delinquent Experience and Self-Concept

It also has been suggested (Conklin, 1981) that changes in self-concept may result more from delinquent experience itself than from official reaction to this experience. In order to examine the direct relationship between delinquent experience and self-concept, we regressed each self-concept index on each delinquent behavior index, while controlling for all prior arrest and delinquent experience measures (with the exception of that specific delinquent experience measure under consideration). The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.

// TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE //

Looking first at the zero-order coefficients, ASSAULT (.22), PROPERTY (.28), DRUGUSE (.20), VICE (.24), ROTNKID

(.27), and RUNAWAY (.25) are all positively associated with a delinquent self-concept. However, the Beta coefficients indicate that the direct, offense-specific impact of delinquent experience on delinquent self-image is of little consequence for any offenses except RUNAWAY (B=.25). It also appears that delinquent experience does not contribute significantly to either a sick or a good self-image.

#### DISCUSSION

This study examined the direct effects of both official labeling and delinquent experience along three dimensions of self-concept (delinquent, sick, good). One of the major advantages of this investigation is that it classified both arrests and delinquent experience by type of offense, thereby providing us with more specific information regarding these factors as they relate to self-concept. For instance, the initial relationship between the overall arrest measure and delinquent self-concept disappeared when prior delinquent experience was controlled. However, to conclude from this that arrest does not affect delinquent self-concept would be false, since arrests for assault and running away offense types continued to be significantly related to delinquent self-concept. In addition, arrests for vice type offenses continued to be significantly related to sick self-image.

It is easy to understand why only arrests for vices had a strong direct association with sick self-image. The offenses within the VICE offense category tend to be expressive, as opposed to instrumental, acts. Rather than being done in order to achieve some immediate goal, such as monetary gain through theft, they tend to reflect rebellious or avoidance behavior. These are the types of offenses we would be most likely to associate with youths who are "messed up," "unhappy," "having personal problems," etc. The strong direct association between arrest for vices and sick self-image, in conjunction with the absence of a direct association between vice behavior and sick self-concept, supports the labeling assertion that the act of officially dealing with the behavior has a significant impact on how individuals perceive themselves.

On the other hand, it is not immediately apparent why arrests for assault and running away should have stronger effects on delinquent self-concept than do arrests for other offense categories. One possibility is that assault and runaway, for different reasons, are the two categories most likely to result in detention and further, relatively severe, official processing. It is also possible that the absence of stronger associations among the other offenses indicates important variations in the labeling process. Although our study attempted to deal with such variation in



terms of number of different offenses for which the individual was arrested, thereby providing some measure of the cumulative impact of official reaction, it was unable to consider more subtle factors. For instance, how did the individual agents of the juvenile justice system react to the juveniles? It is quite possible that police and detention personnel were more hostile towards those juveniles committing assault related offenses than towards those who simply stole property, while at the same time responding to vice offenders in a pathology-seeking manner.

Further studies should also examine the roles of other significant individuals in the labeling process. The labeling perspective tends to assume that the reactions of societal agents will be ratified by those important to the individual. However, it is quite possible that this will not be the case. For many delinquent youths, arrest may be followed by some parental support to mitigate any stigmatizing effects (i.e., parental counterlabeling). This is not approval, rather it may simply be a willingness to forgive and forget. On the other hand, runaways are probably runaways because relationships with parents are already bad.<sup>9</sup> When they do get arrested, parental reaction is more likely to reinforce than to counteract the stigmatizing effect of arrest on self-concept. Our finding that both arrests for running away and prior running away experience have statis-

tically significant direct relationships with delinquent self-concept are consistent with such an explanation. The secrecy and protection surrounding the juvenile justice process, as well as the eventual destruction of records, also may afford the youth the opportunity for a truly fresh start.

For some youths, the opinions of official agents may be of little interest, and therefore, easy to reject. However, there is a good chance that these same youths, being weakly bonded to representatives of law-abiding society, are also already strongly disposed to delinquency and possibly possessed of subculturally derived delinquent self-concepts ("we bad; we be mean mothahs"). Official labeling might have little effect upon their self-concepts, not so much because they do not really care about the opinions of official agents, as because their delinquent self-concepts are already pretty well formed. There also is some evidence that the social meaning of sanctions is not uniform across all social groups. For instance, Jensen (1972) found the impact of official labeling on self-concept to be most relevant for lower-class white youths and least relevant for both blacks and upper-status whites. Jensen (1972:93) suggests that these latter groups are less affected by the labeling experience because they "...find themselves in contexts where others neutralize or reject the label." Thus, blacks may be able to reject the label because it is too

common and therefore does not serve as a basis for defining one's self vis-a-vis other selves (Gould, 1969) or because it is viewed as something created and applied by "outsiders." Upper-status white youths may be able to neutralize the label because it does not affect their relationships with significant others. Hewitt (1970) argues that, unlike lower-status delinquents, higher-status delinquents are protected from the social implications of stigmatization by a subculture that permits them such mistakes. This also is consistent with Jensen's (1972) findings that higher-status whites are less likely than lower-status ones to feel that they are defined as delinquent by others.

In sum, the self is a many-faceted object that evolves out of a long and complex interaction with others. The facets of the self are themselves interrelated in various ways. They may be consistent, mutually supportive, and resistant to change in consequence of one or even several dramatic experiences. Or they may be conflicting, dissonant, and therefore vulnerable to change. The interaction process varies in many ways: whom we interact with, our bonds and ties to them, how they function for us as normative or comparison reference groups, and the frequency and intensity of the interaction. All of these will play some part in the shaping of the self-concept. Furthermore, these relationships themselves constitute some sort of system, the elements of which may support and sustain or deny and undermine

one another. We need to know a great deal more about how all of these and other things interact to produce the self. However, it should be clear that no particular sort of experience, however consequential it may be, is likely to be strongly and consistently correlated with any particular outcome for the self. When we deal with the effects of official labeling on the self-concept, we should be prepared to discover that the effects will not only be variable in magnitude and even direction, depending upon a wide variety of circumstances, but that the paths through which those effects are accomplished will also vary. In other words, the object of research on labeling theory should not be to prove or disprove some simple relationship, but to explore and clarify the different ways in which official labeling fits into and contributes to the larger process of self-formation.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Most labeling research assumes that the initial act of labeling has the greatest impact on self-concept. However, it is reasonable to assume that the initial contact may be "forgiven" or rationalized by the individual or significant others. It is also reasonable to assume that the internalization of a new self-concept requires the acceptance of new values and orientations (Ageton and Elliott, 1974). Such changes do not occur instantly. If this is the case, it will be only after several contacts with official agents, and perhaps greater penetration into the criminal justice system that such changes occur and the self-concept begins to be affected.
2. Progression in a delinquent career also may reflect the discovery that the benefits of delinquency outweigh the costs. For the most part, apprehension is low and sanctions against juveniles are mild, while the benefits (thrills, peer prestige, material gain) may be great.
3. The three factors that emerged with the Connecticut data are consistent with those that emerged in the national evaluation analyses that included data from eight states.

4. The formula used for computing each of the factor scores is:  $fs = fsc * z$ , where  $fsc$  is the factor score coefficient for that variable and  $z$  is the standardized value of that variable.
5. Although a single summarizing measure would have been more parsimonious with respect to the analyses, it was felt that such a measure would have masked more than it revealed. Recent studies by Elliott and Ageton (1980) and Hindelang et al. (1979) suggest that a unidimensional summary measure may obscure important distinctions between offenses.
6. This was later broken down into DRUGUSE and DRUGPUSH.
7. Because NUMARST is a composite of all prior arrests, its Beta coefficient was computed in a separate equation in which only the prior behavior measures were controlled.
8. A closer examination of the DRUG ARRESTS measure revealed that its strong negative association with sick self-concept was due to an item pertaining to drug pushing, as opposed to drug using. Although it would make conceptual sense to treat arrests for drug using and drug pushing as separate indicators, the fact that there was only one arrest for each of these items makes such a distinction moot here. However, later analyses do separate drug experience into DRUGUSE and DRUGPUSH.

9. An examination of court files for many of these youths suggests that running away was very often in response to a poor home situation.

TABLE 1

ZERO-ORDER CORRELATION AND STANDARDIZED PARTIAL REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS  
FOR SELF-CONCEPT INDEXES ON REPORTED PRIOR ARREST INDEXES

	ASSAULT ARRESTS	PROPERTY ARRESTS	DRUG ARRESTS	VICE ARRESTS	ROTKID ARRESTS	RUNAWAY ARRESTS	NUMARST
DELINQ. SELF	r= .29 <sup>a</sup> B= .26 <sup>b</sup>	-.09 -.16	.04 -.02	.17 -.21	.17 -.04	.24 <sup>b</sup> .18 <sup>b</sup>	.24 <sup>b</sup> .03
SICK SELF	r= .24 <sup>b</sup> B= .20	-.07 .04	.01 -.34 <sup>a</sup>	.20 <sup>b</sup> .35 <sup>a</sup>	.07 .04	.10 -.04	.13 .11
GOOD SELF	r= .01 B= .17	-.21 <sup>b</sup> -.24 <sup>b</sup>	-.15 .12	-.16 -.26	.02 .10	-.02 -.06	-.09 -.02

a=p<.01; b=p<.05  
N=73

TABLE 2

ZERO-ORDER CORRELATION AND STANDARDIZED PARTIAL REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS  
FOR SELF-CONCEPT INDEXES ON REPORTED PRIOR OFFENSES

	ASSAULT OFFENSES	PROPERTY OFFENSES	DRUGUSE OFFENSES	DRUGPUSH OFFENSES	VICE OFFENSES	ROTKID OFFENSES	RUNAWAY OFFENSES
DELINQ. SELF	r= .22 <sup>b</sup> B= .02	.28 <sup>a</sup> .18	.20 <sup>b</sup> .05	.08 -.12	.24 <sup>b</sup> .14	.27 <sup>a</sup> .14	.25 <sup>b</sup> .25 <sup>a</sup>
SICK SELF	r= .04 B= -.07	-.02 -.10	.13 .10	.15 .11	.06 .02	.05 -.03	.15 .14
GOOD SELF	r= -.13 B= -.09	-.15 -.08	-.15 -.21	.00 .15	.01 .15	-.10 -.05	.01 .06

a=p<.01; b=p<.05  
N=73

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