



# School Affiliation and Offending in Stockholm

## A Socio-structural Approach

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### Introduction

Juvenile crime and education are two ever-present topics in the public debate. In Sweden, the focus of this debate usually highlights either extensive and increasingly serious criminality among young people or a school institution in crisis. These two negative pictures however are rarely connected. With regard to crime, the school setting is instead commonly emphasized as one of the most important societal arenas for crime prevention. The potential of schools as crime preventive institutions has furthermore generated a large and complex body of criminological research, dominated by an emphasis on teachers and school staff as agents of social control (Groß et al., 2018; Gottfredson, 2001). While the school-crime relationship has been explored from a range of different theoretical perspectives (Hirschi, 1969; Christie, 1972; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Gottfredson, 2001), the research has come to rely heavily on the individual level of analysis (Farrall et al., 2020).

The intention of my PhD project was therefore to add to the relatively scarce literature focusing on multilevel approaches in relation to the school-crime association. For the purpose of specifically focusing on socio-structural aspects of the school setting, the present-day urban metropolitan school context in Stockholm constitute a relevant study object. While especially the larger cities in Sweden have experienced increased residential and school segregation, crime policy efforts have suffered from the lack of a socio-structural perspective in contemporary criminology in the sense that they have become more individualized (Case & Haines, 2009). On a more general level the ambition of my research was also to 1) add to the quantitative criminological literature in this field by developing an enhanced understanding of the interplay between macro and micro mechanisms in relation to offending, 2) extend the use of school surveys in this regard, and 3) draw attention to the social density of disadvantaged students in the urban context of Sweden (Stockholm), which in large is a neglected issue in the contemporary discourse on the potential of schools as central locations for crime prevention (Wahlgren, 2014).

By combining integrated contextual theories of crime with a multilevel methodological approach, the overall aim of my thesis was to extend the



empirical knowledge and advance the understanding of the importance of school affiliation for involvement in crime among Stockholm adolescents.

Student and teacher survey information and register data on student sociodemographic composition in Stockholm schools 2006-2016 were analyzed to explore whether and why self-reported serious forms of offending varies between schools. The thesis consists of three independent, but interrelated, studies and a contextualizing background section. The background section provides a backdrop to the thesis' overall theme of school and juvenile crime in the metropolitan context of Sweden. Briefly, it covers a review of previous Swedish studies on the school context and student outcomes, a description of Swedish school- and crime prevention policy during the recent decades as well as more in depth reviews of the benefits and limitations of the theories and methods that I used. The three empirical studies address individual, social and compositional aspects of the school setting in relation to self-reports of serious types of criminalized acts (hereafter offending). To capture the complexity involved and to add to the literature in the field, a special focus was directed at the interplay between these different aspects. Although the three empirical studies have their own specific scopes, the contents and the aims of the three articles was roughly summarized as focusing on the following overarching questions:

1. Does self-reported serious offending vary systematically between schools in Stockholm, when controlling for individual characteristics?
2. How much of this variation can be ascribed to (1) the structural socio-demographic characteristics of schools and (2) certain social aspects of the school setting?
3. Could the interrelated macro and micro components of strain theory be useful in explaining such variation and/or as a means of deepening a contextual understanding of the school-crime relationship?
4. Could certain individual and social aspects of the school setting have a moderating effect on offending, given exposure to certain well-established risk factors?

In this short essay, I will focus on summarizing the empirical findings of the studies in relation to the four overall research questions listed above. For the ones interested in more in-depth discussions of methods, measures, theories and limitations I'd like to refer to the thesis as a whole (Sandahl, 2021b).

## **1. Short note on data and methods**

The empirical studies included in the thesis were based on the same principal data source, the Stockholm School Survey (SSS), which is a cross-sectional school questionnaire conducted every second year among grade 9 students



(approximately 15 year-olds) in the municipality of Stockholm. This data is also the source of the main dependent outcomes of self-reported serious forms of violent and general offending used in the thesis. Aside from investigating whether and to what extent offending varies between schools, school-level indicators of the social and structural context were incorporated. These external school-level variables were defined by means of administrative school data on the sociodemographic student composition of each school (labelled 'deprivation' or 'school concentrated (dis)advantage'). In addition, the final study included a third source of data, the Stockholm teacher survey (STS), to account for the average level of teacher-rated social cohesion in each school.

Multilevel modeling (MLM) was employed as the main statistical method. In contrast to standard multiple regression analysis, which assumes independence between individuals the multilevel approach accounts for structures of nested data, with the term multilevel referring to two or more levels of analysis (Snijders & Bosker, 2012). The most common field of criminological research in which MLM is a suitable statistical tool involves studies focused on distinguishing neighborhood effects from effects that arise as a result of the individual residents that are nested within the neighborhood. In school studies, like the ones included in my thesis, this refers to students (level 1) nested in classes (level 2), which are in turn nested within school units (level 3). The main focus of attention in this thesis has been on students nested within schools. The special focus directed at the interplay between individual, cultural and structural mechanisms also motivated the use of so called cross level interaction analysis.

## 2. Main findings

The findings of the thesis contribute with an advancement of the understanding of the significance of school affiliation for involvement in crime by accounting for the classic sociological idea that social context shape individual behavior (Merton & Rossi, 1968; Bernburg et al., 2009). Besides making visible the interrelationship between structural and social context, the findings also showed that some individual level associations vary from one school setting to another. In the following, the central conclusions drawn on the basis of the studies' findings are summarized in relation to the four overall research questions listed above.

### *2.1 Variation in offending between Stockholm schools*

As a precondition for the more in-depth aims of the thesis, the first overall research question concerned whether self-reported serious offending varies systematically between schools when individual characteristics were controlled for. Study I confirmed that there are indeed such differences between



Stockholm schools that remain even after controls for individual characteristics (Sandahl, 2016). In short, this indicates that the likelihood of having reported involvement in serious crime to a certain extent is dependent on school affiliation. It was furthermore shown that this applies to both boys and girls and in relation to both outcomes of violent and general offending. In addition, information provided in the background section of the thesis indicates that the amount of variation in offending that could be ascribed to the school level seems to have increased between 2006 and 2016.

## 2.2. *Structural versus cultural context*

The second overall research question posed concerned how much of the variation in offending between schools that could be ascribed to (1) the structural socio-demographic composition of schools and, (2) certain social aspects of the school setting. The findings showed that most of the variation in self-reported violent and general offending between Stockholm schools could be ascribed to structural mechanisms associated with the student composition of schools (Sandahl, 2020; 2021a). Thus, attending a disadvantaged school is associated with an increased likelihood of offending, irrespective of the student's individual characteristics.

To interpret these findings, I adopted Sampson's (2012) assessment that compositional effects of this kind are due to a social process that is embedded in the socio-structural context. This has meant not dismissing the methodological importance of accounting for selection, but at the same time also viewing such mechanisms as neighborhood [school] contextual effects in themselves. Neighborhoods, Sampson (2012) argues, affect individual decisions (selection) and experiences, which in turn influence social mobility and eventually also neighborhood composition. Applied to the Swedish urban school context and considering the non-random process by which students are allocated to schools as a result of residential segregation and the school policy system,<sup>1</sup> the thesis has regarded and interpreted selection as a mechanism of school segregation. This led to the conclusion that most of the variation in serious offending between Stockholm schools can be explained by school segregation.

In addition, Studies II and III also showed that some of the investigated cultural mechanisms contributed to a small proportion of the between-school variation. Specifically, it was shown that attending a school characterized by an atmosphere of anger, life dissatisfaction and poor prospects among its students increases the odds of involvement in offending. However, these contextual associations were partly explained or dependent on the external measures of concentrated (dis)advantage, in either a confounding, mediating or moderating way (Sandahl, 2020; 2021a). This means that the socio-demo-

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1. This refers to mechanisms contributing to unequal educational opportunities. See Sandahl (2021b) for a description of school reforms and school segregation in the Swedish school context.



graphic composition of schools may be directly associated with both school cultural mechanisms and with the offending outcomes. Making visible the interrelationship between structural and social context is important since many previous school contextual studies have not been able to account for structural aspects of this kind.

### 2.3. *The applicability of strain theory*

The possibility of further deepen the understanding of the interplay between macro- and micro-level mechanisms in relation to offending by means of combining multilevel analysis with contextual theories has previously for the most part been utilized by scholars influenced either by Sampson's theory of collective efficacy or by related theoretical concepts such as communal school organization (Groß et al., 2018). The third overall research question in my thesis concerned the applicability of a strain theoretical framework to school variation in offending as a complement to such perspectives. More specifically, it concerned whether some interrelated macro and micro components of strain theory can be useful in explaining such variation or in deepening the understanding of the importance of school affiliation for offending.

These concepts relate to a limited part of Agnew's (1999) comprehensive and integrated MST (Macrolevel Strain Theory) in Study II, and the concept of relative deprivation (Merton & Rossi, 1968) in Study III. In line with the more frequently used theory of collective efficacy (Sampson, 2012), these approaches enable one to cut across different levels of analysis.

The findings provided limited support for an independent association between aggregated negative emotions (labeled contextual strain) and offending. However, based on Agnew's (1999) assumption that the effect on offending of this group-level feature of anger and frustration might be conditioned by subcultural mechanisms at the individual level, cross-level interactions provided support for such a conditional effect in one instance. Attending a school with an atmosphere characterized by anger seemed to primarily influence students who were already more likely to commit crime, while students who were not at such heightened risk did not seem to be affected by the context to the same extent (Sandahl, 2020).

The purpose of using the theoretical concept of relative deprivation was to elaborate on a specific macro-micro link by introducing the classic notion of social comparison in order to contextualize how individuals perceive disadvantage (Merton & Rossi, 1968). This idea reflects a central component of the concept of relative deprivation which, according to Bernburg et al. (2009), has rarely been empirically investigated. Study III approached this notion by combining a categorized measure of schools' segregation profiles (to capture a form of absolute deprivation) with the students' perceptions of poor future prospects relative to those of others (to capture a form of relative dimension). In addition, a measure of the students' grade scores was included, because a previous study on this topic also took grades into consi-



deration as a more objective indicator of poor prospects (Alm & Estrada, 2018). The findings showed that the relative deprivation based assumption that the effects on offending of perceiving one's future prospects to be worse than comparable others should be stronger in privileged schools was not supported. Instead, the subjective perception of poor future prospects was strongly and independently associated with both violent and general offending, regardless of school affiliation. In contrast however, the association between poor grades and both general and violent offending was considerably stronger in privileged schools, which may indicate a 'social comparison effect' linked to the school setting. In the school cluster labeled 'immigrant deprived schools', there was no association between poor grades and offending (Sandahl, 2021a).

One possible interpretation of this finding, related to the strain framework and to ethnographic research conducted in Swedish suburban schools (Sernhede, 2018), would be that the awareness of one's restricted opportunities to succeed in established society simply makes striving for good grades less important. This would further mean that students attending deprived suburban schools in Sweden are less affected by the achievement orientation that, according to Messner & Rosenfeld (2013), has characterized the school institution in late modern societies. In relation to the third research question, however, the finding reinforces the claim that people's experiences are shaped by the social context.

An additional advantage with the adoption of a strain theoretical framework to study the variation in offending between schools, I argued, is the opportunity it provides to focus on the neglected perspective of structure and social context in interpreting the findings. As regards the consequences of school segregation, for example, the use of this framework contributes to an ability to make policy recommendations on the basis of more nuanced conclusions than those produced by studies that focuses exclusively on the complex role of local schools as compensatory environments. Thus, compared to the classic social ecological perspective, the strain perspective has the potential to shift attention from a potentially stigmatizing one-sided focus on deprived schools and deprived neighborhoods, to something that concerns the structure of society as a whole.

#### 2.4. *The potential compensatory function of schools*

In addition to the focus on schools as environments that are conducive to crime, a couple of aspects related to the potential compensatory function of schools was investigated in the thesis. With reference to the fourth and final overall research question, this regards whether certain individual and cultural aspects of the school setting have a moderating effect on offending, given exposure to a number of well-established risk factors. More concretely, Study I investigated the potential moderating effects of the students' perceptions of their schools' social and learning environments on the association between



adverse family conditions and offending (Sandahl, 2016). Moreover, Study III explored whether the school's teacher-rated degree of 'social cohesion' moderated the predictive capacity of subjective and objective poor future prospects in relation to offending (Sandahl, 2021a).

A moderating effect on the relationship between adverse family conditions and offending was found only for the measure of meaningful schoolwork in study I. More specifically, it was found that perceiving schoolwork as meaningful was particularly important for boys with adverse family conditions. Study III investigated whether teacher-rated social cohesion at the school level, derived from the trust part of the collective efficacy concept (Sampson, 2012), could moderate the association between some individual-level risk factors and offending. No such compensatory effect could be confirmed in the analyses (Sandahl, 2021a). It cannot be ruled out, however, that the weak support for this potential compensatory effect is partly due to data limitations, since a fair examination of compensatory effects of the school environment would require longitudinal data. Thus, these findings should not be taken as evidence that this feature of the school environment is irrelevant in relation to other outcomes or contexts.

One possible interpretation of the lack of an association in relation to offending is nevertheless that the possible crime reducing effect of school practice is simply difficult to realize in certain structural settings. Although referring to neighborhoods, Sampson (2012) argues that collective efficacy is difficult to achieve, because it tends to be undermined by sociodemographic segregation. Furthermore, he refers to a collectivity based on mutual trust and social cohesion among all members of a neighborhood, which in this case means that students' and teachers' perceptions of these features should be equally important in such a measure. In contrast to mutual trust, ethnographic research conducted in schools located in 'deprived' suburbs in Sweden has argued that the perceptions of social exclusion among many students attending these schools, combined with the vision of schools as maintaining and conveying »traditional Swedish norms«, creates tension in these schools (Sernhede, 2018). More specifically, the students refer to the self-image of Swedish schools as democratic institutions that provide equal opportunities for students as something that is not consistent with their own experiences (Sernhede, 2018).

An interpretation in accordance with Merton's (1938) classical ideas would be that, rather than being a result of different school cultures, the explanation of between-school variation in offending may perhaps be found in the contradiction between the values of equal opportunities conveyed by Swedish society at large and the self-image of restricted opportunities among the students in certain schools and neighborhoods.



### 3. Implications for social crime prevention policy directed at schools

The findings and arguments presented in my thesis point to a broader focus on school policy as a complement to crime policy. Especially considering that education research stresses increased residential segregation and the current Swedish school policy system as factors that are currently serving to deepen and intensify school segregation (Östh et al., 2013). For example, school choice in Sweden has been shown to be conditioned by parental education, immigration status and access to informal networks in which information about a school's reputation is commonly shared (Bunar & Ambrose, 2016). There are also indications that the definition of a school's status as being 'good' explicitly means that the school is 'safe' and 'orderly' and that some parents avoid choosing certain schools because they provide the 'wrong networks' for their students (ibid., 2016). Given some of the central findings in my research showing the concentration in certain schools of poor future prospects, frustration and offending, it is easy to imagine that such characteristics would further weaken the reputation of these schools in the local school market and thereby further intensify the process of segregation.

Kontaktuplysninger

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