

Speaker: Synøve Andersen (University of Oslo, Norway)

Presentation title: The direct and indirect effect of police contacts in adolescence on offending in adulthood: A longitudinal test of labelling theory

Recent efforts have revitalized Labelling Theory as a prominent theory for explaining both between- and within-individual differences in criminal behavior. Inspired by these efforts, the current analysis seeks to test the extent to which central mechanisms detailed by Labelling Theory mediate the relationship between police contacts in adolescence/early adulthood and criminal behavior measured more than 20 years later. The analysis relies on a unique dataset that combines five waves of longitudinal survey data collected over a 28-year time period and administrative register data on police contacts, employment and education for approximately 2100 respondents who were in their mid- to late teens when the data collection started. The focus is on four sets of relevant mechanisms (see Bernburg, 2019): reduced life chances, criminal embeddedness, weak social ties, and a deviant self-concept. Whereas most previous analyses focus on one (and primarily the former two) of these mechanisms, the richness of the Young in Norway Longitudinal used in this analysis makes it possible to explore all of them in the same institutional framework. Preliminary analyses show that there is a positive association between police contacts in adolescence/early adulthood and self-report delinquency 20-30 years later, which cannot be attributed to initial differences in delinquent behavior, SES or other relevant background factors. Moreover, there is a positive association between police contacts and the majority of the mediating variables, with the main exception being weak social ties. Finally, controlling for all mediating variables reduces the initial association between police contacts and adult offending by approximately 25 percent, where the largest reduction in the estimates comes from controlling for unemployment and criminal embeddedness. While the results cannot be given a strictly causal interpretation, the analysis provides tentative support for Labelling Theory in a Norwegian context.