

Profile of Robert J. Sampson

The patterns and dynamics of social life have intrigued Robert Sampson since his childhood. “One of my earliest memories as a kid is flipping through National Geographic magazines and being mesmerized by maps: maps of the world, the connections and social patterning of life, and its variability across the globe,” he recalls. “I was taken by that and puzzled by it.”

Sampson, the Henry Ford II Professor of the Social Sciences and chair of the sociology department at Harvard University (Cambridge, MA), has built his career on studying social patterns, formulating influential sociological theory, and developing methods to study the complex social networks of neighborhoods and cities. For his work on the origins of crime and violence and on the influence of neighborhoods on the life course, Sampson was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 2006.

In his Inaugural Article in this issue of PNAS, Sampson examines how growing up in severely disadvantaged neighborhoods affects verbal ability in black children (1).

Life and Crime in the City

Growing up in the small, industrial city of Utica, NY, in the 1960s, Sampson witnessed firsthand the changing patterns within his city. Utica is “a microcosm of the changes that have gone on in some of the larger, more famous cities in the United States,” he says. Once a bustling city, his hometown was hit with hard times as industries left and almost half of the town’s population went with them.

“I witnessed those changes growing up and was fascinated—why are some communities declining and people leaving, and why are others thriving?” he asks.

From a young age, Sampson was a keen observer of community and city life. The self-described “upstate New York kid” did not stray far from home for college or graduate school, choosing to attend the State University of New York (SUNY). As an undergraduate at SUNY-Buffalo, Sampson discovered the tools of psychology and sociology. He graduated in 1977 with a degree in sociology.

“I was always torn between being fascinated with the psychological aspects and the social aspects [during my studies],” Sampson says. “As an undergraduate, I had this notion that there were fundamental social patterns that had not been studied in a way that was really needed. I thought the answer was to be found more in sociology and the study of larger social processes, but always taking seriously the individual.”



Robert J. Sampson

In the late 1970s, Sampson entered graduate school at SUNY-Albany, where he refined his focus on the study of society. There he worked with some of the most influential sociologists of the time, including Peter Blau and Travis Hirschi. Hirschi, who later became Sampson’s dissertation advisor, had written what Sampson describes as probably the most cited and influential study of crime in the 20th century, called *Causes of Delinquency*, which helped launch Sampson’s research on crime.

“It was a very exciting time, very intense. I became interested in the study of crime from a social-ecological perspective,” Sampson says.

During graduate school, he also was introduced to a group of sociologists that have influenced his entire career. “I was taken by the classical work that was done in what’s known as the Chicago School of Urban Sociology,” Sampson recalls. The group used the rapidly growing population of Chicago in the early 1900s as a sort of “sociology laboratory” in which to study how social structures and the urban environment influenced human social behavior, particularly crime and delinquency.

“They were studying the massive changes that were occurring based on the waves of immigration coming from Europe,” Sampson says. “At that time, the issues of crime and social changes were a major concern. There are interesting parallels to today.”

Although he got his start studying crime, Sampson notes that his career has

evolved over time to the general study of well being, “including a number of seemingly disparate outcomes that I think need to be considered in the same context,” he says. “One way I look at the city is to try to understand how different social phenomena are clustered in the same places and follow similar patterns over time.”

Chicago Connections

After a postdoctoral fellowship at Carnegie Mellon University (Pittsburgh, PA), Sampson migrated to the home of his “intellectual mentors” in Chicago, first to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1984 to take his first faculty position in the sociology department, and in 1991 to the University of Chicago (Chicago, IL), where he became involved in a massive effort to study community-level social processes in urban neighborhoods.

In 1994, Sampson became the scientific director of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, a collaborative effort that has produced volumes of information on violence, race and ethnic segregation, inequality, order and disorder in urban environments, and the shifting structure of community networks.

For this multi-cohort study, more than 6,000 children were enrolled, with ages ranging from birth to age 18, and they

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and their caretakers were studied intensely during a 7-year period. The researchers investigated the various factors that contribute to juvenile delinquency, adult crime, substance abuse, and violence.

Sampson led the effort to assess the characteristics of the communities in which these children were raised. The first component was an independent survey of nearly 9,000 residents living in more than 300 different Chicago neighborhoods.

“We asked about their social ties, their trust, their values, their participation in organizations. It wasn’t just about them, but also about their neighbors and the level of community organization,” he explains. “So residents were used as informants, in a way, about the community.”

One of the major early findings from this effort was that the level of violence in a community is linked to cooperative social action and social “cohesion” (2). Sampson describes social cohesion as “the togetherness or connectedness of a place. For example, are residents in a community trusting of one another or is there a deep level of cynicism and distrust?”

Cohesion, Sampson says, is a key factor in the level of “collective efficacy,” the willingness of neighbors to intervene on behalf of the common good in a community. He found that collective efficacy varied widely across communities and was a strong indicator of the level of violence and crime.

“This matters, not just at the community level, but at the societal level,” he says, noting similar findings in cities like Stockholm, which he has also studied, and where adults assume a greater collective responsibility for children than in the United States. “There are real cultural differences.”

Although his Chicago studies provided a number of theoretical concepts about community life, “it’s not just about the theory,” he says. “It’s about the integration of theory with method.”

To obtain more objective measures of neighborhood characteristics than the surveys had provided, Sampson and his colleagues had to develop new methods and statistical analyses to assess these neighborhood characteristics, and they developed a sociological toolkit that he calls “ecometrics” (3, 4).

“We know how to measure a person’s personality and individual characteristics, but measuring collective processes at a community or neighborhood level is a different methodological problem,” Sampson says.

At the same time the residents’ surveys were ongoing, Sampson and his colleagues interviewed key community leaders and took to the streets with video cameras, slowly recording each side of the street for

approximately 22,000 blocks in the neighborhoods where the children in the study lived. The researchers measured the quality of housing, presence of graffiti, amount of loitering and fighting in the streets, the number of bars, and the amount and nature of advertising in the community.

“We wanted, from a scientific perspective, an independent, objective assessment that multiple people can view, and that we can empirically come to some agreement,” he says. For each block, Sampson and his colleagues created independent measures of social structure, street and

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sidewalk conditions, physical housing and additional factors, comparing those measures with the results from the community surveys.

“We found that people are, for the most part fairly rational. Where people perceive disorder to be more of a problem [in an area], we independently verified that,” he says.

This was an expected and reassuring finding, he notes. But he was most intrigued by another finding: that people living in the same environment—even within the same block—disagreed about the nature of the disorder in the community (5).

Civil Society

“At some fundamental level, there either is or is not a burned out house there, but how people experience that—how they perceive the urban landscape and what it means for them—varies across individuals by race, ethnicity, and social class.”

Specifically, he found that whites, on average, perceived more disorder than other ethnic groups in similar scenarios, and that the perception of disorder increases with an increasing concentration of minority and immigrant groups. “In two neighborhoods with the same level of observed, objective disorder,” he explains, “blacks, whites, and Latinos all perceive there to be more disorder when the concentration of minority groups went up. That’s a pretty powerful finding. [It] helps explain why, even when crime is going down while immigration is increasing, people believe the opposite.”

Another component of the Chicago studies was examining the factors that underlie civic action, or “civil society.” Ac-

cording to Sampson, civil society traditionally has to do with the notion of how individuals are participating in social life through voting and civic memberships.

In recent years, there has been concern that such participation has been in decline, but Sampson’s studies suggest something more complex. Although traditional associations like close personal relationships with neighbors are declining, new kinds of “hybrid” associations are emerging to take their place.

One key type of hybrid association is nonprofit organizations. “We’ve shown that, more so than poverty, more so than racial composition, even more so than the nature of social ties among people, that the density of nonprofit organizations is very strongly predictive of the rate of collective action,” he notes (6).

Not content to look at communities at just one point in time, Sampson has also investigated how communities change over time. “Communities are dynamic entities, with people moving in and out, and we want to understand the mechanisms of how things are changing.”

Sampson and his colleagues have followed the participants from the Chicago project wherever they have moved through the years. Most recently, he used this longitudinal format to look at various long-term predictors of adult well-being. In his Inaugural Article, Sampson applied new methods for assessing how time-varying social environments influence later cognitive ability, specifically verbal ability, in black children (1).

Sampson and his coauthors traced the sequence of household moves over seven years for more than 2,000 children, aged 6 to 12, in relation to concentrated disadvantage (racially segregated areas with high rates of poverty, unemployment, and single-parent families). The researchers found that living in such areas had long-lasting detrimental effects on children’s verbal ability, which they found to be the equivalent to missing a year of school. Moving out of those areas in later years did not improve the children’s verbal ability, suggesting that the original effects are durable.

“It’s a lot of work to follow people, but we’re able to identify a very high proportion of the sample, wherever they were,” he says. “That means that we can say something about the nature of the community they’re in, the community they went to, the predictors of the moves, and how the moves affect their lives.”

Turning Points

Whereas children growing up in disadvantaged conditions undoubtedly have a number of obstacles to overcome, Sampson has found that “childhood is not a destiny.”

For 20 years, Sampson has also worked on a longitudinal project of children born in Boston between 1928 and 1930 and tracked the paths of their lives. Data were first gathered on these children in the 1940s by Sheldon and Eleanor Gluck at Harvard University as part of a study in criminology, but the study then lay dormant for many years. In the late 1980s, Sampson and John Laub, a fellow graduate student from his Albany days, stumbled across dusty boxes containing reams of data in the basement of the Harvard Law School. Sampson and Laub spent several years reconstructing the data and began asking new questions.

The boxes “contained all of the original records from the study—probably 50 linear feet,” Sampson recalls. “It was just amazing. While the data were old, they were so good and so unprecedented that they could help us understand contemporary questions about juvenile delinquency, but more importantly, about the transition to young adulthood.”

The original study was aimed at determining the factors that distinguish delinquents from nondelinquents, Sampson says, “but we were more interested in how people change over time. For example, do delinquent children grow up to be adult criminals?”

What Sampson found was encouraging. “We found that, yes, there are pathways that children get set on, but there are also turning points that can redirect trajectories through time,” he says.

“The delinquent boys all had the same disadvantaged backgrounds—they were poor; they had criminal records; many had been thrown into the same reform school—yet some of them turned out to work 30 years without missing a day, while others were in prison at age 55 for committing armed robbery.”

“We went back and looked at things like military service, employment, marriage, incarceration. . . and found that these were important turning points that explained the trajectories of crime in a way that does not support the notion

that childhood is a destiny,” says Sampson.

The project has been the topic of dozens of articles and two books. The first, *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points Through Life*, describes the men’s lives up to age 32, and *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70*, integrates narrative life histories with quantitative analysis of their full life-course trajectories (7, 8).

The findings indicate that military service, coupled with the educational and training advantages provided by the GI Bill, was one of the biggest turning points for these men in bettering their lives.

Another influence was marriage. And given the sample’s powerful design, the researchers could follow the same person through changes in their marital status to assess the impact of marriage, without factors that might obscure confounding effects when comparing one married group to an unmarried group (9).

“When they are married, men have a lower rate of committing crime than when they’re not married,” he says. “We think it has to do mainly with the monitoring of their behavior, especially drinking and time spent with peers.”

But because this does not seem to hold true for women, “men tend to marry up and women down, I’m sorry to say,” he quips.

Science of Social Policy

In 2003, Sampson returned to the East Coast, accepting a faculty position at Harvard University. In 2005, he became the chair of Harvard’s department of sociology.

While continuing his work on these aforementioned large-scale projects, Sampson keeps in mind the social and political implications of his work.

“I consider myself a basic researcher, but I care deeply about civic life and the health of cities. I’m a believer in cities.”

He hopes to launch an initiative at Harvard on urban change and community well-being to promote the importance of social research on communities

and to help develop tools for intervention and improving the quality of community life.

“One way that we can help improve the quality of life is by monitoring and measuring the key aspects,” he notes. “We have been obsessed as a society for decades about the unemployment rate and gross national product, for example. But maybe it’s the level of trust and the nature of crime and social relationships that are more important.”

Sampson believes that the role of scientists is not to say what policymakers should do, but to provide the best possible information and menus of potential options from which they can select.

“I care deeply about change, but it’s important to have objective information in a way that’s understandable and bears on the social problems of the day.”

Sampson is also working on a new book to bring together his work on the social processes of the changing city.

“At a very ambitious level, my most recent research has tried to develop a more general theory of the city and to answer fundamental puzzles that I’ve been grappling with my entire career, going back to questions of ecological concentration.”

“If you go back as far as we have data,” he says, “poverty, crime, homelessness, tuberculosis, cholera, etc. . . . are ecologically concentrated. And it’s not clear that there’s a simple explanation that can be traced just to individuals.”

Finding the answers to these puzzles requires both “methodology and a theory that takes seriously the collective or emergent properties of social life,” he says.

“It’s not just about the composition of the population or the aggregated characteristics of individuals, but the social connections, networks, and social mechanisms that give rise to community effects,” Sampson concludes.

“That really, to my mind, is one of the central features of what a sociological perspective offers.”

Melissa Marino, *Freelance Science Writer*

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