

Deviant actions of others can spur individuals to opt out of offending, study finds

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Researchers who study crime are increasingly recognizing that context matters—that is, that actions, including crime, are shaped by the people

and settings in which individuals offend. A new study examined whether others' deviant actions prompted individuals to opt out of offending or reverse their intentions to offend based on the size of the offending group. The study identified opt-out thresholds for offending that differed based on the criminal situation.

The study was conducted by researchers at the University of Maryland, the University of Colorado Boulder, Simon Fraser University, and the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Crime, Security and Law. It appears in *Criminology*.

"The group context is often framed as a situational incentive to participate in risky behavior," explains Jean McGloin, professor of criminology and [criminal justice](#) at the University of Maryland, who led the study. "But the social context of decision-making may be more complex, with some groups providing disincentives for offending."

Prior studies have documented that peers provide situational benefits, intrinsic rewards, and shifts in the tolerance of risk, which provides individuals with incentives to offend. In this study, researchers investigated individuals' threshold for opting out of offending behavior. The authors used hypothetical vignettes that captured individuals' intentions to take part in a violent offense (fighting) and a property offense (theft). They surveyed nearly 2,000 [undergraduate students](#) at three large public universities—one on the east coast of the United States, one in a western U.S. state, and one in a Canadian province—who represented a range of ethnicities and were on average 19.4 years old.

Students read a scenario involving a crime and were asked to imagine themselves in the situation. They were then asked whether they would take part, with a variety of responses possible depending on how many others joined in. Respondents were also asked to imagine their threshold for opting out and for opting in, and asked to explain how the number of

others who participated in the offense might affect their choices.

The study found that individuals have a threshold for opting out of offending, a point at which they reverse their initial intention to offend. The study also found that patterns of opt-out thresholds differed across criminal situations: Respondents were more likely to report opt-out thresholds when responding to the fighting scenario than to the theft scenario.

Researchers identified some situations in which the group was the disincentive—situations in which individuals indicated that they would offend alone but then changed their minds when others joined in, which the authors deemed a reverse bandwagon effect. Researchers also observed situations in which people endorsed both a bandwagon effect (i.e., joining in when others did) and a reverse bandwagon effect, with the group promoting and then deterring offending intentions for the same individual.

The reverse bandwagon effect, the authors suggest, highlights important distinctions in how social interdependencies shape offending. Considering only how others' behavior can prompt decisions to offend can provide a misleading sense of the relation between group size and decisions to offend.

"Our findings expand our understanding of the interdependent nature of offending decisions and suggest that those studying crime may need to be more nuanced in discussing how the offending behavior of others shapes individuals' choices," notes Kyle Thomas, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Colorado Boulder, who coauthored the study.

The authors note that since those who participated in their study are representative of neither the general U.S. population nor typical

offenders, the findings are likely not generalizable.

Provided by American Society of Criminology

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