

## The Life-Course Approach



This research project uses a life-course approach to study ex-meth users in New Zealand.

By integrating personal, social and environmental factors, life-course theories focus on changes in relationships and behavior as people twist and turn along the pathway of life, and how, in turn, these changes affect behaviours such as drug use patterns.

The life-course approach operates at 3 levels by focusing on differences in experiences, events and life-course trajectories

1.	<i>within</i> individuals
2.	<i>among</i> individuals sharing a common personal characteristic, such as meth use
3.	<i>across groups</i> of individuals who have experienced a common historical, social, cultural and/or economic environment (Giele and Elder, 1998b)

However, what gives the life course approach its *life* is the sentient individual who is:

1.	encountering new circumstances and relationships
2.	going through important life changes
3.	deciding whether to continue on the present trajectory or change their life course

After all, it is this socially situated sentient individual, or “minded self” (Clausen, 1998:196), who is “integrating events and experiences and giving them meaning” (Giele and Elder, 1998: 184).

Thus, we can enquire into how a group of New Zealanders transition from non-meth user → to meth user → to ex-meth user, as they go through vital changes, encounter new circumstances and relationships, and make certain choices whilst situated within a changing cultural, social structural, and historical setting (Clausen, 1998).

The four pillars that frame the life-course view are:

1.	time-marked events
2.	a person’s roles and experiences
3.	relationships within family, work, community, etc.
4.	location in a particular historical and cultural context (Giele and Elder, 1998b)

Thus, a life-course approach sets out to obtain data on:

<b>human agency</b>	health, wellbeing, and subjective aspects of meaning and satisfaction
<b>linked lives</b>	relationships in family, school, work, friendship, marriage and other social domains
<b>timing</b>	event histories in these major domains of activity
<b>location</b>	social, cultural and historical context (Giele and Elder, 1998)

The life-course view acknowledges that “people’s lives are uniquely shaped by the timing and sequencing of life events” (i.e., at what age and life phase did an experience or event occur?) (Scott and Alwin, 1998: 99).

The life-course approach also recognises the “mutual influence of person and social context over time” (Giele and Elder, 1998). Thus, the life-course approach recognises the bi-directional nature of relationships, because “each person’s life is intertwined with the lives of other people, influencing and being influenced by social relationships” (White Riley, 1998: 31).

The life-course view also recognises that society is always changing, therefore members of different cohorts (born at different times) grow older in different ways (White-Riley, 1998).

Using a life-course approach therefore requires placing methamphetamine use within a larger historically-situated life-course setting (Laub and Sampson, 2003). If successful, this research can portray “the inner logic of lives” - as told in their own words - of a group of adult meth users in New Zealand (Laub and Sampson, 1998: 229).

### Turning Points & Desistance



This research uses a retrospective life-course approach (i.e., working backward in time to acquire knowledge about past events and experiences) in order to identify the pathways or ‘turning points’ into-through-and-out of meth use (Boeri and Whalen, 2009; Teruya and Hser, 2010).

For Clausen (1998: 202), a turning point can be defined as “a time or event when one took a different direction from that in which one had been traveling”. And while life is littered with little turning points, Clausen (1998: 203) notes important turning points are only recognised “as one looks back long after the events or circumstances that produced the turning points”.

Specifically, this research draws from Laub and Sampson’s criminological use of the term turning points to better illuminate these perceptual road marks along the life-course (Hareven and Masaoka, 1988). In seeking to understand continuity and change in human behaviour over the life-course, Laub and Sampson’s ‘age-graded

*theory of informal social control* postulates that transitional life events (e.g., employment, marriage) and specific social bonds (e.g., conformist co-workers, a cohesive marriage) function as turning points to help 'knife off' criminal trajectories set in childhood. The theory posits that during the transition to adulthood delinquent pathways can be redirected toward conformity by key institutions of social control (e.g., employment, marriage). Thus weak social bonds to parents, prosocial peers, teachers and school explain the onset of offending, while investment in strong conventional social bonds in adulthood explain desistance from crime (thus we can ask: is meth use related to a decline or weakening of conventional social bonds, and, conversely is desistance from meth related to strengthening of conventional social bonds?) (Laub and Sampson, 2001).

In emphasizing the qualitative nature of social bonds, Laub and Sampson argue it is not employment or marriage 'by itself' that causes desistance, but rather job and/or marriage stability, commitment and mutual ties. Thus for Laub and Sampson (2003: 280), "personal agency looms large" in desistance (and persistence) trajectories. This is why they put forward the term '*situated choice*' as a way to understand the simultaneous interaction between an individual's agency and their structural location within society (i.e., the choices people make are not made under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already and transmitted from the past). From this perspective, desistance is understood as a process of maturation that is the result of the interaction between: 1. identity change (personal agency), and 2. changing social networks (social structures) (Phillips, 2017).

Laub and Sampson (2001) argue desistance stems from a variety of complex processes - cognitive, psychological, interpersonal, developmental and sociological. They pinpoint the following as key elements in the desistance process:

1.	Aging
2.	Deciding to 'go straight' (including motivation to change, cognitive restructuring, and a reorientation of the costs-and benefits of delinquent/criminal conduct),
3.	Securing legal, stable work,
4.	A good marriage,
5.	New social networks
6.	Social support

Such factors imply the predictors of desistance may be the reverse of the risk factors predicting the onset of offending. This 'asymmetrical causation' implies that the individual and family circumstances that predict onset of delinquent/criminal behaviour have a limited capacity to predict desistance (Uggen and Piliavin, 1998). This is because adult social bonds are more important for understanding changes in criminal trajectories.

## The Meth Career

Drawing from a criminal career approach that seeks to understand continuity and change in behaviour over time, this study of the 'meth career' seeks to better understand the impact experiences, events and relationships exert on a meth user's life-course trajectory. We may ask the following questions,

1. What are the turning points in the lives of meth users?
2. What turning points facilitated the onset of meth use?
3. What turning points facilitated continued involvement in meth use?
4. What turning points led them away from continued use of meth use?

In addition, Laub and Sampson found both *incremental* and *abrupt* change in offending. In trying to understand the pace of change, and the factors that differentiates these divergent pathways, we may ask whether incremental desistance from meth use is linked to changes in social bonds and institutional affiliation (e.g., getting married, employment, having children, changing peer relations), or whether abrupt desistance from meth use is linked to a single event (such as arrest, divorce) that functions as a "settling influence" to 'knife off' meth use? Laub and Sampson (1998: 222) also discovered "cumulative disadvantage" was the main factor in the persistence of criminal behaviour into adulthood. Cumulative disadvantage is a developmental process in which the negative influences of structural disadvantage (e.g., dropping out of school, having a criminal record) persist throughout adult development. Can cumulative disadvantage account for persistence in meth use?

By investigating the longitudinal sequence of meth-related experiences, this research asked ex-meth users:

1. How, when and why did you start using meth (*onset*)?
2. How, when and why did you continue using meth (*continuity*)?
3. How, when and why did your meth use became more frequent or serious (*escalation*)?
4. How, when and why did you stop using meth (*desistance*)?
5. How do you maintain the state of desistance (*recovery*)?
6. How is your life post-meth use (*post-recovery*) (Boeri et al. 2011; Piquero et al., 2003)

In between the *onset* and *desistance* of their meth use, this research also enquired into how their usage *progressed* – i.e., how their use and life changed over time (Boeri, Harbry and Gibson, 2009). This means this research has sought to better understand how their *social roles* (as a son/daughter, student, worker, friend, husband/wife, father/mother) and their *social bonds* with others influenced changes in their drug use over time – and, conversely, how their drug use influenced those social roles and bonds. This research also sought to gain

a deeper understanding about the level of *control* (or lack thereof) ex-users felt they had over their methamphetamine use – and how that changed over time (Boeri, Sterk and Elifson, 2006).

To be precise, this research aimed to:

**Identify turning points in the onset, persistence and desistance from methamphetamine use throughout the life course.**

In this study an '*ex-methamphetamine user*' is defined as:

**Someone who used methamphetamine for at least six consecutive months sometime in the past, but who has not used in the past year or longer.**

With greater knowledge of the processes that underlie turning points in methamphetamine use, the findings obtained from this research will be directed toward informing better prevention, intervention, and treatment programs for New Zealand's methamphetamine users (Granfield and Cloud, 1996; Boeri, Harbry and Gibson, 2009, Teruya and Hser, 2010).

## 10 Episode Meth Drama Series

With 35 main 'characters' and 30 supporting cast members, this research follows both the format of a TV or Netflix drama series and the life-course method. Spread over 10 papers, episodes 1-5 will trace the life-course of our characters over time from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood as they transition from family to school to work, and as they navigate friendships, romantic relationships, marriage and parenting. Then episodes 6-10 will trace their meth use from beginning to end, and beyond.

'Drama' is an appropriate word to describe the life of the frequent meth user, for as I-3 colourfully stated, "*When you are a quite heavy user everything is just fucking drama*". Or as -10 said, "*There is always drama in the meth world*". The stimulant effect of meth helps to partly explain the dramatic nature of living with meth, but as T-1 said, "*meth thrives on heartache and heartbreak*".

<b>Episode 1</b>	Family
<b>Episode 2</b>	School, Friendship and Work
<b>Episode 3</b>	Romantic Relationships, Marriage and Parenting
<b>Episode 4</b>	Psychological and Physical Health; Religion and Spirituality
<b>Episode 5</b>	Drug Use History and Key Life Influences
<b>Episode 6</b>	Onset of Meth Use
<b>Episode 7</b>	Persistence, Escalation and Impact of Meth Use
<b>Episode 8</b>	Morality, Control, Craving and Tolerance
<b>Episode 9</b>	Desistance from Meth Use and Life Post-Meth Use
<b>Episode 10</b>	The Life Satisfaction Chart

## Bibliography

- Boeri, Miriam, Claire E. Sterk and Kirk W. Elifson. 2006. Baby Boomer Drug Users: Career Phases, Social Control, and Social Learning Theory. *Sociological Inquiry*, 76(2): 264–291.
- Boeri, Miriam and Thor Whalen. 2009. Older Drug Users: A Life Course Study of Turning Points in Drug Use, 2009-2010. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.
- Boeri Miriam, Liam Harbry and David Gibson. 2009. A Qualitative Exploration of Trajectories Among Suburban Users of Methamphetamine. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, 3: 139-151.
- Boeri, Miriam Williams., Thor Whalen, Benjamin Tyndall and Ellen Ballard. 2011. Drug use trajectory patterns among older drug users. *Substance Abuse and Rehabilitation*, 2: 89-102.
- Clausen, John. A. 1993. *American Lives: Looking Back at the Children of the Great Depression*. Free Press.
- Clausen, John. A. 1998. 'Life Reviews and Life Stories'. In Janet Z. Giele and Glen H. Elder (eds.), *Methods of Life Course Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (pp.189-212). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Giele, Janet. Z. and Glen H. Elder. 1998. Life Course Research. Development of a Field. In, Janet Z. Giele and Glen H. Elder (eds.), *Methods of Life Course Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (pp.5-27). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Giele, Janet. Z. and Glen H. Elder. 1998. 'Part III. Strategies for Analysis. Introduction'. In, Janet Z. Giele and Glen H. Elder (eds.), *Methods of Life Course Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (pp.5-27). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Granfield, Robert., and William Cloud. 1996. The Elephant That No One Sees: Natural recovery among middle-class addicts. *Journal of Drug Issues* 26(1): p.45-61.
- Hareven, Tamara. K., and Masaoka, K. 1988. 'Turning points and transitions: Perceptions of the life course,' *Journal of Family History*, 13(1), 271-289.
- Laub, J.H., Sampson, R.J. 'Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Data'. In Janet Z. Giele and Glen H. Elder (eds.), *Methods of Life Course Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (pp.213-230). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Laub, J.H., Sampson, R.J. 2001. Understanding desistance from crime. *Crime Justice*, 28, 1–69.
- Laub, John. L. and Robert J. Sampson. 2003. *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives. Delinquent Boys to Age 70*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press.
- Phillips, J., 2017. Towards a rhizomatic understanding of the desistance journey. *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 56 (1), 92–104.
- Piquero, A.R., Farrington, D.P., Blumstein, A., 2003. The criminal career paradigm. *Crime Justice*, 30, 359–506.
- Scott, Jacqueline., and Alwin, Duane. 1998. 'Retrospective Verses Prospective Measurement of Life Histories in Longitudinal Research'. In Janet Z. Giele and Glen H. Elder (eds.), *Methods of Life Course Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (pp.5-27). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Teruya, Cheryl., and Yih-Ing Hser. 2010. Turning Points in the Life Course: Current Findings and Future Directions in Drug Use Research. *Current Drug Abuse Review*; 3(3): 189–195.