Key Issues in Criminal Career Research

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KEY ISSUES IN CRIMINAL CAREER RESEARCH

New Analyses of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development

This book examines several contentious and understudied criminal career issues using one of the world's most important longitudinal studies, the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD), a longitudinal study of 411 South London boys followed in criminal records to age 40. The analysis reported in the book explores issues related to prevalence, offending frequency, specialization, onset sequences, co-offending, chronicity, career length, and trajectory estimation. The results of the study are considered in the context of development/life-course theories, and the authors outline an agenda for criminal career research generally and within the context of the CSDD specifically.

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continued after the Index

Foreword

In *The Great Instauration*, a work published in 1620 that heralded the coming of science as the dominant arbiter of truth, Sir Francis Bacon proclaimed that the measure of a science was how much it contributed to the alleviation of the miseries of mankind. While we sometimes debate the role that science can and should play in forming public policy, there is no doubt that the goal of science is to improve understanding to enhance control. This is very clear in the scientific study of crime where from the beginning the goal has been to understand the distribution and occurrences of crime so as to identify ways through which such behavior could be prevented and controlled. That is why understanding of the "criminal career" – its beginning, its ending, and the kinds of events that occur in between – is such an important endeavor. This is especially true for those whose criminal involvements are extreme even by the standards of those who commit serious crimes – the "career criminals" who make a career out of serious criminal behavior. This focus on the extreme criminal, in part, explains why early criminologists so easily accepted the notion that the only criminals of consequence are those who have been identified by the criminal justice system. They understood that there were other criminals and crimes that the criminal justice system did not frequently encounter, but they also understood that the crimes that most directly contributed to the miseries of mankind were those that were the focus of the criminal justice system.

While many understood the importance of preventing and controlling these extreme criminals, the early focus of criminology was on crime more generally. It was not until publication of research by Wolfgang and

Sellin in the late 1960s that criminologists understood the importance of focusing on what they called chronic delinquent offenders. As a graduate student during that time, I was fortunate to work at their research center. While my focus (as one of many students) was on the issue of age of onset, everyone understood the importance of the work of others at the center that established that in a birth cohort, 6% of the cohort accounted for 52% of the recorded delinquencies, 80% of the serious delinquencies, and a disproportionate amount of the confinements. Ten years later when I was working at the Department of Justice, I was introduced to the Attorney General as a criminologist. He asked me what were three things that I knew as a criminologist that he should know as the Attorney General. One of my responses concerned the importance of chronic offenders. While he seemed impressed with the precision of my response, he observed that while the existence of such offenders was well known, what was needed were ways to identify them before they committed so many crimes. Not much has changed since 1976 – until this book.

Wolfgang and Sellin's *Delinquency in a Birth Cohort* was different from much of criminology in its almost total absence of attention to theory. This work merged the two great elements of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1950s and 1960s—criminology and demography. The focus was on careful and complete description before explanation. Much of criminology to that point (and too much since) consisted of descriptions that reinforced poorly developed theories. Of course, the absence of explanation did not stop some from moving directly from description to control and prevention. Scales to predict repeat offenders, risk instruments to assist judges, and career offender prosecution units developed as responses to the description and estimation of the number and impact of chronic offenders. All of these efforts were well intended, and all were unlikely to succeed without a better understanding of why some offenders continued to offend more than others. The failure of these efforts even led some to suggest that there were no chronic offenders, and that if there were, their identification and control were impossible. Fortunately, some (most notably Blumstein and Farrington in their different but complementary ways) continued research that demonstrated that chronics exist, that their rate of offending (or lambda, a notation Blumstein used not only to introduce simplicity to statements about frequency but also to begin a more structured way of thinking about criminal careers) is different, and that they have characteristics that distinguish them from those who do not offend or who offend at a much lower rate. Still, the development of a theoretical understanding of the differences among these different kinds of offenders remained elusive.

The physicist Paul Dirac is quoted in Simon Singh's classic analysis of Einstein as saying that, "In science one tries to tell people, in such a way as to be understood by everyone, something that no one ever knew before them." In science there is careful description, then experimentation, then understanding (or scientific theory), and then control. This pathway requires many to contribute before the breakthrough in knowledge, hence the metaphor of standing on the shoulders of giants to advance science. Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein have met Dirac's challenge and truly have advanced our understanding of career criminals (I cannot get out of my mind a picture of Piquero standing on Farrington standing on Blumstein). Not only do they provide the definitive analysis of the literature on career criminals and offer new insights from the Cambridge Study in Delinquency Development to the central empirical questions raised by the concept of criminal careers (e.g., age of onset, lambda, specialization, trajectories, termination), they, more importantly, begin the careful development of a theoretical model that provides the link between description and improving the conditions of "mankind." In its modern formulations, developmental criminology (or life-course criminology) has a strong descriptive and explanatory approach that complements the concept of criminal careers. As a major contributor to this literature, Piquero has demonstrated the connections between these two streams in criminological thought. In *Key Issues in Criminal Career Research*, the authors link the rich empirical literature on criminal careers with a theoretical approach that assumes the existence of a diversity of offenders and their individual criminal histories.

Scientific theory summarizes agreed-upon facts through statements about what is currently unobservable but consistent with those facts. Facts without theory are description; theory without facts is nonscientific speculation. Theory of the latter type accumulates but is not cumulative. Much of criminological theory is nonscientific, not because the authors do not value science but because the rush to theory limits the facts they consider. One study produces findings that generate a theory. In *Key Issues* we find 40 years of facts analyzed, summarized, and interpreted using a theoretical approach that fits the facts. While this does not yet provide the simple causal model that others offer as explanations of all crime, it does set us on the path for developing explanations of criminal careers that can be used to prevent and control this most troublesome form of criminal behavior.

One of the most frequently encountered criticisms of social sciences is that we state the obvious in ways that only insiders can understand. Jargon and statistical obfuscation are the most obvious manifestations of this

criticism. As Dirac stated, science should be understandable to all – not its methods but certainly its findings. Piquero et al. have met this standard. Complex material is clearly presented. Useful, but not misleading, summaries are provided. The clarity of writing reflects the authors' clarity of understanding of the issues.

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University of Maryland

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This book is dedicated to Donald J. West, founder of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD).

Contents

Introduction

> "Who are YOU?" said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, "I – I hardly know, sir, just at present – at least I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then." "What do you mean by that?" said the Caterpillar sternly. "Explain yourself!" "I can't explain MYSELF, I'm afraid, sir," said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see." "I don't see," said the Caterpillar. "I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly," Alice replied very politely, "for I can't understand it myself to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing."
>
> (From *Alice in Wonderland*, Chapter 5, "Advice from a Caterpillar").

Criminologists have long been interested in the longitudinal patterning of criminal activity over the life-course, or how and why criminal behavior begins, continues, and ends. Prominent qualitative and quantitative studies have sought to describe individual initiation, continuation, and cessation of criminal offending. For example, Quetelet's (1831) *Research on the Propensity for Crime at Different Ages* was one of the first large-scale studies to provide a description of the aggregate relationship between age and crime. Shaw's (1928) *The Jack-Roller* told the captivating story of Stanley's delinquency in Chicago at the turn of the century. A key "turning point" (Laub, 2004:12) was Wolfgang and colleagues' (1972) *Delinquency in a Birth Cohort*, which highlighted the fact that a small group of juvenile offenders was responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime. Undoubtedly, the Wolfgang birth cohort study stimulated the development of the criminal career paradigm that provided a framework

for criminologists to ask questions regarding the onset, persistence, and desistance of criminal activity over the life-course (Piquero et al., 2003). One key outcome of the Wolfgang et al. study was the establishment of a National Academy of Sciences Panel on Criminal Careers (Blumstein et al., 1986), funded in part by the National Institute of Justice. Subsequently, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in the United States mounted three longitudinal studies, known as the Causes and Correlates studies, in Pittsburgh, Denver, and Rochester, NY (Huizinga et al., 2003; Loeber et al., 2003; Thornberry et al., 2003), to advance knowledge about the development of offending and about risk and protective factors.

One particular outgrowth of the criminal career paradigm is the developmental approach to studying criminal activity over the life-course, an approach that has become a staple within the field of criminology (Laub and Sampson, 1993; Le Blanc and Loeber, 1998; Loeber and Le Blanc, 1990; Piquero and Mazerolle, 2001; Tremblay et al., 2003). A core assumption of developmental and life-course criminology (DLC) is that changes with age in delinquency and criminal activity occur in an orderly way (Thornberry, 1997:1). Many of the DLC theories that were developed after the National Academy of Sciences Panel on Criminal Careers (Blumstein et al., 1986) were a reaction to what was perceived by many as a largely atheoretical criminal career paradigm. Thus, many of these DLC theories focused on factors influencing onset, persistence, and desistance (Farrington, 2005; Le Blanc, 1997; Loeber and Hay, 1994; Moffitt, 1993; Patterson et al., 1989; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Thornberry and Krohn, 2001).

Generally speaking, DLC is concerned with three main issues: the development of offending and antisocial behavior, risk factors at different ages, and the effects of life events on the course of development (Farrington, 2003:221). First, researchers have documented involvement and changes in criminal activity throughout adolescence and into early adulthood (Tracy et al., 1990; Tracy and Kempf-Leonard, 1996), with few studies documenting race and/or gender differences in criminal activity into adulthood (Moffitt et al., 2001; Piquero and Buka, 2002) and even fewer studies providing information on criminal activity past the early 30s (Robins, 1978). Sampson and Laub's (2003) recent follow-up of members of the original Glueck and Glueck (1950) study into their 70s is a striking counterexample. Second, researchers have paid close attention to the risk factors associated with entrance into – and continuation of – criminal activity as well as the protective factors that prevent individuals from starting offending and that help them stop offending (Farrington, 2000; Hawkins and Catalano, 1992; Loeber and Farrington, 1998). Finally,

criminologists have found that some life events like marriage and steady employment can help reduce criminal activity and foster desistance (Farrington and West, 1995; Horney et al., 1995; Laub et al., 1998; Piquero et al., 2002), while other life events such as incarceration can encourage further criminal activity (Sampson and Laub, 1997) and reduce the chances of legitimate employment (Western, Kling, and Weiman, 2001).

There appear to be ten widely accepted conclusions about the development of offending (Farrington, 2003:2):

1 The age of onset of offending is most typically between ages 8 and 14, earlier with self-report data and later with official records, while the age of desistance from offending is typically between 20 and 29 (though a small subset of offenders continue well into adulthood).
2 The prevalence of offending peaks in the late teenage years: between ages 15 and 19.
3 An early age of onset predicts a relatively long criminal career duration and the commission of relatively more offenses.
4 There is marked continuity in offending and antisocial behavior from childhood to the teenage years and adulthood. In other words, there is relative stability of the ordering of people on some measure of antisocial behavior over time, and people who commit relatively many offenses during one age range have a high probability of also committing relatively many offenses during a later age range.
5 A small fraction of the population ("chronic offenders") commit a large fraction of all crimes; chronic offenders tend to have an early onset, a high individual offending frequency, and a long criminal career.
6 Offending is more versatile than specialized; violent offenders in particular appear to offend frequently in other kinds of offenses.
7 The types of acts defined as offenses are elements of a larger syndrome of antisocial behavior that includes heavy drinking, reckless driving, promiscuous sex, and so forth.
8 It appears that, as people enter adulthood, they change from group to lone offending. In fact, most offenses up to the late teenage years are committed with others, whereas most offenses from age 20 onward are committed alone.
9 The reasons given for offending up to the late teenage years are quite variable, including excitement/enjoyment, boredom, and/or emotional or utilitarian reasons. From age 20 onward, utilitarian motives become increasingly dominant.

10 Different types of offenses tend to be first committed at distinctively different ages. This sort of progression is such that shoplifting tends to be committed before burglary, burglary before robbery, and so forth. In general, diversification increases up to age 20; but after age 20, diversification decreases and specialization increases.

Still, there exist some contentious DLC issues that have not been well studied and/or have generated discrepant results. Eight issues in particular are identified here:

1 While it is clear that the prevalence of offending peaks in the late teenage years, it is less clear how the individual offending frequency (i.e., the frequency of offending among those who offend) varies with age. Some studies suggest that individual offending frequency accelerates to a peak in the late teenage years and decelerates in the 20s, whereas others suggest that individual offending frequency changes much less with age (Loeber and Snyder, 1990).
2 It is not clear whether the seriousness of offending escalates up to a certain age and then de-escalates, or whether it is much more stable with age.
3 While it is clear that an early onset of offending predicts a long career and many offenses, it is far less clear whether an early onset predicts a high individual offending frequency or a high average seriousness of offending. Nor is it clear whether early-onset offenders differ in degree or in kind from later-onset offenders or how much there are distinctly different behavioral trajectories.
4 Although chronic offenders commit more offenses than others, it is not clear whether their offenses are more serious on average or whether chronic offenders differ in degree or in kind from nonchronic offenders.
5 While it is clear that certain offenses occur on average before other types and that onset sequences can be identified, it is not clear whether these onset sequences are merely age-appropriate behavioral manifestations of some common underlying theoretical construct or if the onset of one type of behavior facilitates or acts as a stepping stone toward the onset of another. In other words, onset sequences could reflect persistent heterogeneity or state dependence (Ezell and Cohen, 2005; Nagin and Farrington, 1992a, b; Nagin and Paternoster, 1991, 2000). Similarly, little is known about onset sequences in which

childhood antisocial behavior might have some kind of influence on later offending.

6 Although there is some research that appears to indicate that offenders are more versatile than specialized, these findings have been produced largely by research using official records through age 18. Very little information has been provided about how specialization/versatility varies with age into adulthood (Piquero et al., 1999). Even less attention has been paid to the extent to which observations of specialization or versatility vary between official and self-report records (Lynam et al., 2004).

7 While much attention has been paid to the topic of desistance (Bushway et al., 2001; Giordano et al., 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2001; Laub et al., 1998; Maruna, 2001), little attention has been paid to developing estimates of career length or duration (Piquero et al., 2004) as well as residual career length (Blumstein et al., 1982; Kazemian and Farrington, 2006). Such information bears directly on policy issues regarding appropriate sentence lengths. For example, shorter residual careers would suggest shorter rather than longer sentences.

8 There has been very little research conducted on co-offending generally (Sarnecki, 2001; Warr, 2002) or on changes in co-offending over the course of a criminal career specifically (Reiss and Farrington, 1991).

Because there exists little descriptive work on the longitudinal patterning of criminal activity into adulthood (Blokland et al., 2005; Ezell and Cohen, 2005; Laub and Sampson, 2003), we focus on the first, more descriptive aspects of DLC and attempt to shed some light on the several contentious DLC issues noted above, as well as on several others not specifically identified by Farrington (2003), including how offending trajectories vary with age. A highlight of our work is that we examine these contentious issues with one of the world's most important and widely used longitudinal studies: the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD), a longitudinal study of 411 South London boys followed in criminal records from age 10 to age 40.

The empirical findings in this book are the results of new analyses using this classic data set, which is described in Chapter 3. Our hope is to provide descriptive information on the offending careers of over four hundred male adolescents followed into adulthood. These data are among the longest available time spans that document and describe the