

Risk Factors in Childhood Anti-social Behavior and Adulthood Criminal Career

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to espouse what is known about human development and criminal careers. The study of criminal careers is of increasing interest in criminology. It is now generally recognized that it is important to try to understand criminal behavior across the life-course rather than focusing on fragmented incidents which provide only a partial picture of criminal behavior. This paper clarifies the crucial theoretical and methodological issues surrounding the study of criminal careers. It focuses on some major longitudinal studies discussing the onset, persistence, desistance and the duration of a criminal career. The important issues of prediction, risk and specialization are addressed. Criminal career has important implications, given that significant criminal justice, social and health policies such as crime control, and correctional treatment and management are predicated on achieving the reduction of criminal careers of serious and repeat offenders. The challenging question that points the way forward is: 'when do ex-offenders become like non-offenders?'

Introduction

Since the early works of Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (1930), the concept of the criminal career has been well established within the field of criminology. Most generically, the criminal career is conceived of as the longitudinal sequence of delinquent and criminal acts committed by an individual as the individual ages across the lifespan from childhood through adolescence and adulthood. Four key structural elements are defined and applied to the study of criminal careers: *participation/prevalence*, *frequency/incidence*, *seriousness*, and *career length* (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, and Visser, 1986). Participation is a macro-level measure of the proportion of the population that is involved in offending behavior, while frequency is the rate of offending for those individuals who are active offenders. Seriousness refers to the level of seriousness of the offenses being committed by a given individual, while career length refers to the length of time that an individual is actively offending. When aggregated across individuals, criminal careers typically exhibit a uni-modal *age-crime curve* for the population. Frequency, seriousness, and career length can vary greatly among individuals, who may range from having zero offenses across the lifespan to having one offense of a non-serious nature to being *chronic* or *career criminals* with multiple, serious offenses across a broad span of their lives.

Anti-social behavior covers a multitude of wrongs. It includes acts prohibited by the criminal law, such as theft, burglary, robbery, violence, vandalism, and drug use. As already mentioned, the definition of 'offending' in this paper focuses on these types of acts. It also includes other clearly deviant acts such as bullying, reckless driving, heavy drinking, and sexual promiscuity, and more marginally or arguably deviant acts such as heavy smoking, heavy gambling, employment instability, and conflict with parents. However, offending is commonly measured using either official records of arrests or convictions or self-reports of offending. The advantages and disadvantages of official records and self-reports are to some extent complementary. In general, official records include the worst offenders and the worst offences, while self-reports include more of the normal range of delinquent activity (Cernkovich et al., 1985). Self-reports have the advantage of including undetected offences, but the disadvantages of concealment and forgetting.

The Human Development Approach

The approach is essentially concerned with human development over time, and emphasizes the need to investigate such questions as why people start offending (onset), why they continue offending (persistence), why offending becomes more serious (escalation), and why people stop offending (desistance).

The factors influencing onset may differ from those influencing other criminal career features such as persistence, escalation, and why people stop offending (desistance), if only because the different processes occur at different ages (Loeber & Stouthamer, 1996; Blumstein, Cohen & Farrington, 1988a; Barnett, Blumstein & Farrington, 1987).

Most criminological theories focus on instantaneous or cross-sectional differences between official offenders and non-offenders or on cross-sectional correlates of the frequency or variety of self-reported offending. Furthermore, most criminological theories aim to explain offending when it is in full flow, in the teenage years. However, the human development approach focuses on within-individual changes over time and on the predictors of longitudinal processes such as onset and desistance, recognizing that the same person can be an active offender at one age and a non-offender at another. It also aims to explain the development of offending over all ages (Loeber & Leblanc, 1990; Nagin & Paternoster, 1991).

Putting this point in a slightly different way, a key issue in criminal career research is to determine how far aggregate changes with age or during the course of a criminal career reflect changes within individual offenders as opposed to changes in the composition of the offending population (Blumstein, Cohen & Farrington, 1988a). For example, juvenile offenders primarily commit their crimes with others, whereas adult offenders primarily commit their crimes alone (Reiss and Farrington, 1991; Tarling, 1993). Does this finding mean that offenders change their methods of offending as they get older, switching from co-offending to lone-offending? Or does it mean that one population of co-offenders desists (drops out) and is replaced by a new population of lone-offenders? The answer to this kind of question, which arises very frequently, has important theoretical and policy implications. Generally, the evidence suggests that changes occur within one population of offenders at different ages, rather than some offenders desisting and being replaced at later ages by a new population of offenders (Tracy & Kempf-Leonard, 1996; Tracy, Wolfgang & Figlio, 1990; Shannon, 1991).

Risk Factors for Offending

Risk factors are prior factors that increase the risk of occurrence of events such as the onset, frequency, persistence, or duration of offending. The major risk factors for offending that are reviewed in this paper are the individual difference factors of impulsivity and intelligence, and family, socio-economic, school, and situational factors. These factors often have additive, interactive or sequential effects, but will be considered one by one.

Impulsivity

Daring, poor concentration, and restlessness were all related to both official and self-reported delinquency (Farrington, 1992d). Daring at age 8-10 was an important independent predictor of chronic offenders (Farrington and West, 1993) and of violence and spouse assault at age 32 (Farrington, 1989a, 1994c). Poor concentration or restlessness at age 8-10 was also an independent predictor of chronic offenders, and also of adult social dysfunction at age 32 (Farrington, 1993b).

Many other investigators have reported a link between the constellations of personality factors termed 'hyperactivity-impulsivity-attention deficit' or HIA (Loeber, 1987) and offending. It has been suggested that HIA might be a behavioral consequence of a low level of physiological arousal. Offenders have a low level of arousal according to their low alpha (brain) waves on the EEG, or according to autonomic nervous system indicators such as heart rate, blood pressure, or skin conductance, or they show low autonomic reactivity (e.g. Venables and Raine, 1987; Raine, 1993). In the Cambridge Study, a low heart rate was significantly related to convictions for violence, self-reported violence, and teacher-reported violence, independently of all other explanatory variables (Farrington, forth-coming). In several regression analyses, the most important independent risk factors for violence were daring, poor concentration, and a low heart rate. Other researchers (e.g. Wadsworth, 1976; Raine et al., 1990) have also identified a low heart rate as an important predictor and correlate of offending.

Low Intelligence

Low intelligence is an important predictor of offending, and it can be measured very early in life. For example, low intelligence measured at age 3 significantly predicted officially recorded offending up to age 30 (Stattin and Klackenber-Larsson, 1993).

The key explanatory factor underlying the link between intelligence and delinquency is probably the ability to manipulate abstract concepts.

People who are poor at this tend to do badly intelligence tests such as the Matrices and in school attainment and they also tend to commit offences, probably because of their poor ability to foresee the consequences of their offending and to appreciate the feelings of victims (i.e. their low empathy). Certain family backgrounds are less conducive than others to the development of abstract reasoning. For example, lower-class, poorer parents tend to talk in terms of the concrete rather than the abstract and tend to live for the present, with little thought for the future, as Cohen (1955: 96) pointed out many years ago. In some ways, it is difficult to distinguish a lack of concern for future consequences, which is a central feature of Wilson and Hernstein's (1985) theory, from the concept of impulsivity.

Modern research is studying not just intelligence but also detailed patterns of cognitive and neuropsychological deficit. Neuropsychological research might lead to important advances in knowledge about the link between brain functioning and offending. For example, the 'executive functions' of the brain, located in the frontal lobes, include sustaining attention and concentration, abstract reasoning and concept formation, anticipation and planning, self monitoring of behavior and inhibition of inappropriate or impulsive behavior (Moffitt, 1990). Deficits in these executive functions are conducive to low measured intelligence and to offending. Moffitt and Henry (1989) found deficits in these executive functions especially for delinquents who were both anti-social and hyperactive.

Family Factors

Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber (1986) completed an exhaustive review of family factors as correlates and predictors of juvenile conduct problems and delinquency. They found that poor parental supervision or monitoring, erratic or harsh parental discipline, parental disharmony, parental rejection of the child, and low parental involvement with the child (as well as anti-social parents and large family size) were all important predictors. Broken homes and early separations are also risk factors for offending. In the Newcastle Thousand Family Study, Kolvin et al. (1990) reported that parental divorce or separation up to the age of 5 predicted later convictions up to the age of 33, McCord (1982). Criminal, anti-social, and alcoholic parents also tend to have delinquent sons, as Robins (1979) found.

These results are concordant with the psychological theory (e.g. Trasler, 1962) that criminal behavior develops when the normal social learning process, based on rewards and punishments from parents, is disrupted by erratic discipline, poor supervision, parental disharmony, and unsuitable (anti-social or criminal) parental models. However, some part of the link between criminal parents and delinquent children may reflect genetic transmission (see e.g. Wilson and Hernstein, 1985; Eysenck and Gudjonsson, 1989).

Socio-Economic Deprivation

Most delinquency theories assume that offenders disproportionately come from lower-class social backgrounds, and aim to explain why this is so. For example, Cohen (1955) proposed that lower-class boys found it hard to succeed according to the middleclass standards of the school, partly because lower-class parents tended not to teach their children to delay immediate gratification in favor of long-term goals. Consequently, lower-class boys joined delinquent subcultures by whose standards they could succeed. Cloward and Ohlin (1960) argued that lower-class children could not achieve universal goals of status and material wealth by legitimate means and consequently had to resort to illegitimate means. More consistently, low family income, poor housing, and large family size predicted official and self-reported, juvenile and adult, offending.

It seems clear that socio-economic deprivation is an important risk factor for offending. However, low family income, poor housing, and large family size are better measures and produce more reliable results than low occupational prestige. Poverty may have an effect on offending indirectly, through its effects on parenting factors such as supervision and discipline, as Sampson and Laub (1994) concluded.

School Factors

It is clear that the prevalence of offending varies dramatically between different secondary schools, as Power et al. (1967) showed more than twenty years ago in London. Characteristics of high delinquency-rate schools are well known (Graham, 1988). For example, such schools have high levels of distrust between teachers and students, low commitment to school by students, and uncertain and inconsistently enforced rules. However, what is far less clear is how much of the variation should be attribute to differences in school climates and practices, and how much to differences in the composition of the student body.

It would seem a major problem is that most risk factors tend to coincide and tend to be inter-related. For example, adolescents living in physically deteriorated and socially disorganized neighborhoods disproportionately tend also to come from families with poor parental supervision and erratic parental discipline and tend also to have high impulsivity and low intelligence. The concentration and co-occurrence of these kinds of adversities makes it difficult to establish their independent, interactive, and sequential influences on offending and anti-social behavior. Hence, any theory of the development of offending is inevitably speculative in the present state of knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

The most popular theory of offending events suggests that they occur in response to specific opportunities, when their expected benefits (e.g. stolen property, peer approval) outweigh their expected costs (e.g. legal punishment, parental disapproval). For example, Clarke and Cornish (1985) outlined a theory of residential burglary which included such influencing factors as whether a house was occupied, whether it looked affluent, whether there were bushes to hide behind, whether there were nosy neighbors, whether the house had a burglar alarm, and whether it contained a dog. Several other researchers have also proposed that offending involves a rational decision in which expected benefits are weighed against expected costs (e.g. Farrington and Kidd, 1977; Cook, 1980). However, Trasler (1986) argued that rational choice theory may be more applicable to 'instrumental' property crimes than to 'expressive' crimes of violence or sex crimes.

While it is obvious that offences require opportunities, it is also probable that some individuals are more likely than others to seek out and create opportunities for offending and to select suitable victims. The 'routine activities' theory of Cohen and Felson (1979) attempted to explain how opportunities for crime arose and changed over time. They suggested that, for a predatory crime to occur, the minimum requirement was the convergence in time and place of a motivated offender and a suitable target, in the absence of a capable guardian. They argued that criminal opportunities varied with routine activities that provided for basic needs such as food and shelter. For example, the increasing number of working women, coupled with the increase in single-parent female-headed households, created increasing numbers of houses left unoccupied during the day, thus providing increasing opportunities for burglary.

However, the human development approach has important implications for criminological theories: they should address developmental processes (Loeber & Leblanc, 1990). The theory proposed here suggested that offending depend on energizing, directing, inhibiting, and decision-making processes. It aimed to explain the development of criminal potential and the occurrence of criminal acts. In addition to explaining between-individual differences in the prevalence or frequency of offending, theories should explain within-individual changes: why people start offending, why they continue or escalate their offending, and why they stop offending. For example, onset may depend primarily on poor parental child-rearing behavior, persistence may depend on criminal parents and delinquent peers, and desistance may depend on settling down spouses and co-habitees (Paternoster & Brame, 1997).

Conclusion

This paper shows that much has been learned in the past thirty years about human development and criminal careers (Blumstein, Cohen & Farrington, 1988a). With a major knowledge investment in new longitudinal studies, there can be considerable further advances in theory, and consequent improvements in crime prevention and control. Because of the link between crime and numerous other social problems, any measure that succeeds in reducing crime will have benefits go far beyond this (Paternoster & Brame, 1997). Any measure that reduces crime probably also reduce alcohol abuse, drunk driving, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, family violence, truancy, school failure, unemployment, marital disharmony, and divorce. It is clear that problem children tend to grow up into problem adults, and that adults tend to produce more problem children. In other words, knowledge of criminal careers has practical value. If we know why offenders get involved in life of crime, we may be able to implement policies that prevent criminal careers from developing. If we know why some career offenders "retire" from crime, we may be able to create programs that hasten their departure from crime. There is evidence that relatively few career criminals account for a large proportion of all of the crime that occurs (Conklin, 1989). This suggests that the punishment and treatment of career offenders might have a significant impact on the crime rate. Major efforts are urgently needed to advance knowledge about and reduce anti-social behavior and therefore, criminal behavior.

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