Career Patterns in Crime

By Patrick A. Langan, Ph.D., and Lawrence A. Greenfeld
BJS Statistician

This special report is the first in a series using available national data on crime to address issues of major public and policy concern. Policies and proposals for reducing the Nation's serious crime problem are often based upon assumptions about offenders' behavior over long periods of time—assumptions, in many cases, of their careers in crime. To illustrate, proposals for reducing crime through incapacitating dangerous offenders derive in part from assumptions about the volume of crime prevented by removing offenders from society during the most active period of their criminal careers. Therefore, investigating career patterns of crime plays an important role in society's struggle against crime.

Prior research

Most studies of criminal careers are retrospective studies of officially known offenders, meaning that only known offenders formally arrested or convicted are selected for study and only their past criminal histories are examined. Most retrospective studies of officially known offenders rely on official records for information about criminal careers, but some obtain this information through survey interviews with offenders. The latter are referred to as "self-report" surveys and are particularly useful when they elicit from offenders information not only about the crimes for which they were arrested or convicted, but also the crimes that escaped official detection. Illustrative of retrospective studies of known offenders are the recently published Rand Corporation reports. "Patterns of Offense and Dispositions of Criminal Behavior in California and Massachusetts, 1980," and "Assumptions About Crime and Criminal Justice Policy: A Re-Examination of Self-Report Data, 1962 and 1972." These studies used both official records and self-reports to document the crime activity of 1,750 men who

Sound criminal justice policies must be based on factual information about the criminal careers of repeat offenders. Too often, such information is not available to policymakers who consider various proposals for reducing the Nation's serious crime problem. The pressing need for verifiable data on criminal careers was the impetus for this study. The research in this report proceeds from the understanding that studies of criminal careers, even when not directed at particular policies or proposals, are useful in providing policymakers with relevant new information.

The subjects of the study are the middle-aged males (40 years and older) in State prisons throughout the country. Information on their criminal careers was available in a nationwide survey sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. This group was studied because they were old enough to have established criminal careers spanning several decades (as indicated by their own accounts of their confinement histories). The study reveals that not all the men had long careers in crime. In fact, to nearly half of them, their first prison sentence began after age 40. The study describes the criminal careers of the men and, in doing so, often insights into how the criminal justice system operates and raises some provocative questions about its effectiveness. The study should be of not only useful to policymakers at all levels of government but also interesting to the public.

Steven R. Schlesinger
Director
were inmates of prisons and jails in three States in 1979. Emphasis was on learning about certain offenders and their criminals, as well as the prison rates for young adults who had been incarcerated in the 1–5 and 6–12 years prior to the survey. Among other things, the study examined the criminal careers of inmates, especially in both adolescence and young adulthood, and the effects of prison experience for this group of offenders during this 1–5 to 3–year period.

Previous studies of offenders who entered prison, the next most common kind of study, begin with a sample of inmates of prisons and jails (usually observed or confirmed) and trace their criminal past-back in time, usually for a period of a few years. Typically, previous studies of inmates rely on official records for information about the inmates’ past, but this kind of information is usually unreliable, often incomplete, and not informative in a fuller picture of criminal careers. An example of this latter kind of study is "Towards a Theory of Delinquency," by Wolfgang, Leonard, and Figlio (1972). This study compared prisoners with parolees. In 1972, about the 100 parolees who were rearrested.

The results presented in this paper are based on interviews with a random sample of 11,397 inmates in 1979. While the study was underway, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections began interviewing inmates in 1979 as part of a national study conducted by the National Institute of Justice. This survey was conducted by personal interview during October and November (1979). Interviewers were trained in criminal statistics, and they used the interview schedule designed by the National Institute of Justice. Each interview contained several questions designed to obtain information about the inmates’ past criminal careers.

The inmates in the study are at least middle-aged or middle-aged and all are incarcerated in Pennsylvania (Wolfgang, 1978: 165) found that males from at least their 20th to their 40th birthday were more likely to be in prison.

The study describes inmate’s criminal careers from adolescence (7 through 17), young adulthood (18 through 39), and middle age (40 and over). Since the inmates in the study are at least middle-aged and all are incarcerated in prison, it is concluded that all are incarcerated in the middle-age group. Type 1 offenders were incarcerated in the middle-age group.

The study identifies three types of offenders, each of which is associated with a particular stage in the inmate’s criminal career: adolescence (7 through 18), young adulthood (18 through 39), and middle age (40 and over). Since the inmates in the study are at least middle-aged and all are incarcerated in prison, it is concluded that all are incarcerated in the middle-age group. Type 1 offenders were incarcerated in the middle-age group.

The study identifies three types of offenders, each of which is associated with a particular stage in the inmate’s criminal career: adolescence (7 through 18), young adulthood (18 through 39), and middle age (40 and over). Since the inmates in the study are at least middle-aged and all are incarcerated in prison, it is concluded that all are incarcerated in the middle-age group. Type 1 offenders were incarcerated in the middle-age group.

The study identifies three types of offenders, each of which is associated with a particular stage in the inmate’s criminal career: adolescence (7 through 18), young adulthood (18 through 39), and middle age (40 and over). Since the inmates in the study are at least middle-aged and all are incarcerated in prison, it is concluded that all are incarcerated in the middle-age group. Type 1 offenders were incarcerated in the middle-age group.

The study identifies three types of offenders, each of which is associated with a particular stage in the inmate’s criminal career: adolescence (7 through 18), young adulthood (18 through 39), and middle age (40 and over). Since the inmates in the study are at least middle-aged and all are incarcerated in prison, it is concluded that all are incarcerated in the middle-age group. Type 1 offenders were incarcerated in the middle-age group.

The study identifies three types of offenders, each of which is associated with a particular stage in the inmate’s criminal career: adolescence (7 through 18), young adulthood (18 through 39), and middle age (40 and over). Since the inmates in the study are at least middle-aged and all are incarcerated in prison, it is concluded that all are incarcerated in the middle-age group. Type 1 offenders were incarcerated in the middle-age group.

The study identifies three types of offenders, each of which is associated with a particular stage in the inmate’s criminal career: adolescence (7 through 18), young adulthood (18 through 39), and middle age (40 and over). Since the inmates in the study are at least middle-aged and all are incarcerated in prison, it is concluded that all are incarcerated in the middle-age group. Type 1 offenders were incarcerated in the middle-age group.
In Crime: Patterns in Crime, Bureau of Justice Statistics Report No. NCJ-88672, June 1983, Table 3 as originally published had two typographical errors:

**ERROR:**
Career type 1 1.6% 6.2 6.4
**CORRECTION:**
Career type 1 11.6% 6.2 16.4

Below is the entire corrected Table 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offense</th>
<th>Number of offenses¹</th>
<th>Career type (percent distribution)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>15,494</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted murder</td>
<td>3,920</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manslaughter</td>
<td>527</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnapping</td>
<td>2,282</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape, sexual assault</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>77.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewd act with child</td>
<td>1,892</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>2,763</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>2,809</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extortion</td>
<td>57*</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other violent</td>
<td>111*</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property</td>
<td>7,610</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>5,042</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgery, fraud</td>
<td>1,731</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny-theft</td>
<td>1,792</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arson</td>
<td>478*</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other property</td>
<td>1,076</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug</td>
<td>2,713</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trafficking</td>
<td>1,669</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possession</td>
<td>1,159</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other drug</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public order/other</td>
<td>3,776</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapons</td>
<td>3,134</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic</td>
<td>1,233</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Detail may not add to total because of rounding. Estimated values of less than about 300 are based on too few cases to be statistically reliable.

¹The number of offenses is greater than the number of inmates because some inmates were imprisoned for more than one offense. Estimate based on 10 or fewer cases is statistically unreliable.
simple designations "public-order crimes" and "violent crimes" for ease of reference. In crime seriousness. Many of the crimes are considered to be "public order crimes" even if they are at least as serious as many of the "violent crimes" in terms of actual victim harm. The finding concerning public-order crimes should not obscure the fact that the majority of Type 4 offenders (66.4%, according to Table 2) were currently in prison for a violent crime.

The retributive, social-debt theory of justice provides an explanation of how juveniles are administered. The theory is description, not prescriptive, and draws attention to the seriousness of the crimes for which offenders were convicted as well as their past criminal records. Consistent with this, the most serious offenses committed by Type 1 offenders (the violent crimes) receive the most stringent penalties almost without exception to the offender's prior record. That is, the most serious crimes receive the most stringent penalties when the theory is applied. Consequently, the offender's prior record is one of the criteria in the definition of what constitutes a prior record, the prior criminal records of the men is that, at the time of conviction, more than 90% of the Type 1 career offenders and Type 4 offenders had a prior confinement, not including incarcerations, or an average of a little over 2 years. The differences between the Type 4 offenders and the Type 1 career offenders are highly represented in the analysis of their careers is that, at the time of conviction, more than 90% of the Type 1 career offenders and Type 4 offenders had a prior confinement, not including incarcerations, or an average of a little over 2 years. The differences between the Type 4 offenders and the Type 1 career offenders are highly represented in the analysis of their careers. The fact that the most serious offenses committed by Type 1 offenders and Type 4 offenders were not repeat offenses. If a more serious offense was committed, the offender was convicted of a more serious offense. The offenders under a sentence of death, the 3,419 were convicted of more serious offenses. Moreover, since the capital offense in the State of Maryland is murder, the offenders under a sentence of death, the 3,419 were convicted of murder. The offenders under a sentence of death, the 3,419 were convicted of murder, the Type 1 offender had spent about a fourth of his career spent in confinement, the Type 3 offender had spent about three fourths of his career spent in confinement.

Table 6. Number of incarcerations in lifetime history by type of criminal career

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of criminal career</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type 1 offender</td>
<td>23,090</td>
<td>23,090</td>
<td>23,090</td>
<td>23,090</td>
<td>23,090</td>
<td>23,090</td>
<td>23,090</td>
<td>23,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type 3 offender</td>
<td>17,940</td>
<td>17,940</td>
<td>17,940</td>
<td>17,940</td>
<td>17,940</td>
<td>17,940</td>
<td>17,940</td>
<td>17,940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type 4 offender</td>
<td>17,940</td>
<td>17,940</td>
<td>17,940</td>
<td>17,940</td>
<td>17,940</td>
<td>17,940</td>
<td>17,940</td>
<td>17,940</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Detail may not add to total because of rounding. Estimated values of less than 300 are on the line to 300. For all the data concerning the age of the offenders at the time of their current sentences. This should not be too surprising since the two offender types are similar in terms of the kinds of crimes they committed. Moreover, since the juvenile criminal histories were probably not obtained from the records of the juvenile judges, the two would have appeared quite similar in terms of the crimes committed. The largest difference seen when the profiles of these two offender types for the age of their careers. The offenders under a sentence of death, the 3,419 were convicted of more serious offenses. The offenders under a sentence of death, the 3,419 were convicted of murder. The offenders under a sentence of death, the 3,419 were convicted of murder, the Type 1 offender had spent about a fourth of his career spent in confinement, the Type 3 offender had spent about three fourths of his career spent in confinement.

The Type 3 career averaged three incarcerations every 6 years and 6 months; over an average career span of 39 years, meaning that the Type 3 offender had spent about 30% of his career spent in confinement and about 12% of his total lifetime spent in confinement. The Type 3 offender had spent about 30% of his career spent in confinement and about 12% of his total lifetime spent in confinement.
Type 4 offenders are served the longest of the four types. Their average sentence is 12.4 years, with a range of 6.6 to 19.1 years. Type 1 offenders are served the shortest sentences, averaging 0.8 years with a range of 0.0 to 4.4 years. The sentence for Type 2 offenders is 3.7 years, while Type 3 offenders are served sentences of 7.6 years. It is widely held, therefore, that Type 1 offenders pay a price for their past crimes that is out of proportionate to their crime. However, it is also held that Type 4 offenders receive sentences that are too lenient. Whether or not the crime of the Type 4 offenders is a serious one is not relevant to the sentencing decision.
The attention to the serious problem of violence within the family, involving violence against children, spouses, other family members, and nonfamily victims, indicates a need to develop and implement programs to address this problem.

The National Institute of Justice.

Whether this report identifies few or many mandates for prison diversion programs will probably depend on one's view of what prisons should accomplish and what kinds of crimes ought to result in incarceration.

The subject of public safety suggests an aspect of all criminal justice systems that for too long has been neglected: the victims. As a group, the 5,496 middle-aged offenders studied in this report were responsible for substantial numbers of crimes and serious crimes. These crimes were not committed by a few middle-aged inmates. The President's Task Force on Violeons (1982:93) recently emphasized four characteristics in ways in which the criminal justice system might give greater recognition to the plight of crime victims. This study suggests an additional way. Given both the long criminal careers of Type 1 and Type 3 offenders and the criminal justice system's historical neglect of the crime victim, it is recommended that official criminal history records be revised to reflect accurately and completely the cumulative harm and injury done to victims by repeat offenders and that a cumulative record of victim harm become a routine part of the sentencing proceeding.

References


END