

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84865-7 - Key Issues in Criminal Career Research: New Analyses of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development

Alex R. Piquero, David P. Farrington and Alfred Blumstein

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

C H A P T E R O N E

---

## 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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84865-7 - Key Issues in Criminal Career Research: New Analyses of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development

Alex R. Piquero, David P. Farrington and Alfred Blumstein

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84865-7 - Key Issues in Criminal Career Research: New Analyses of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development

Alex R. Piquero, David P. Farrington and Alfred Blumstein

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

3

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.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84865-7 - Key Issues in Criminal Career Research: New Analyses of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development

Alex R. Piquero, David P. Farrington and Alfred Blumstein

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84865-7 - Key Issues in Criminal Career Research: New Analyses of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development

Alex R. Piquero, David P. Farrington and Alfred Blumstein

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84865-7 - Key Issues in Criminal Career Research: New Analyses of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development

Alex R. Piquero, David P. Farrington and Alfred Blumstein

Excerpt

[More information](#)

longitudinal patterning of criminal activity. In Chapter 2, we provide a general overview of the main findings of criminal career research, developmental and life-course criminology. Here, our task is to bring readers up to date on the current state of criminal career research, in particular to highlight some of the contentious or underresearched issues examined herein. Then, in Chapters 4 through 11, we review the difficult DLC issues and provide evidence that bear on them. Following the approach of Moffitt and colleagues' (2001) *Sex Differences in Antisocial Behaviour*, we organize each chapter as if it were a research report. Each chapter presents a brief overview of the contentious issue, what the extant research shows, and how we contribute information on it. At the end of each chapter, we list conclusions and remaining questions. The conclusions are designed to provide readers with a brief summary of what has been learned with regard to that particular issue, while the unanswered questions acknowledge that this study cannot answer all questions fully but can help stimulate and focus future research. Then, in Chapter 12 we present a summary of the findings and outline priorities for a future research agenda. Additionally, we also outline a broad sketch for the next 40 years of follow-up of the CSDD. Although the questions posed and results obtained in the ensuing chapters are designed specifically for students of criminal activity over the life-course, we try to communicate such information to a general audience as well.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84865-7 - Key Issues in Criminal Career Research: New Analyses of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development

Alex R. Piquero, David P. Farrington and Alfred Blumstein

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

C H A P T E R T W O

---

## Overview of Criminal Careers

Researchers have long been interested in the patterning of criminal activity over the course of criminal careers (e.g., Greenberg, 1991; Rowe et al., 1990). Many years ago, Quetelet (1831) recognized that the propensity for crime varied with age. Using data on crimes committed against persons and property in France from 1826 to 1829, he found that crimes peaked in the late teens through the mid 20s. Since Quetelet's findings, many researchers have investigated the relationship between age and crime, across cultures and historical periods, and for a number of different crime types (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983). The relationship between age and crime has been one of the most studied issues within criminology (Farrington, 1986; Steffensmeier et al., 1989; Tittle and Grasmick, 1997).

The relationship between age and crime raises the question of the degree to which the *aggregate* pattern displayed in the age/crime curve (crime rising to a peak in the late teens and then declining more or less slowly depending on crime type) is similar to – or different from – the pattern of *individual* careers and what conclusions about individuals can be validly drawn from aggregate data. For example, how much does the observed peak of the aggregate age/crime curve reflect changes within individuals as opposed to changes in the composition of offenders? In other words, is the peak in the age/crime curve a function of active

Much of the information in this chapter is reproduced from Alex R. Piquero, David P. Farrington, and Alfred Blumstein, 2003, "The Criminal Career Paradigm." In Michael Tonry, ed., *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*, vol. 30. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Permission has been granted by the University of Chicago Press.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84865-7 - Key Issues in Criminal Career Research: New Analyses of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development

Alex R. Piquero, David P. Farrington and Alfred Blumstein

Excerpt

[More information](#)

offenders committing more crime, or is it a function of more individuals actively offending during those peak years and fewer during the later years?

Within individuals, to what extent is the slowing of offending past the peak age a function of deceleration in continued criminal activity or stopping by some people? Across individuals, how much of the age/crime curve can be attributed to the arrival/initiation and departure/termination of different people? How about the role of co-offending? How much of the continuation of offending by lone/solo offenders is attributable to their having criminal careers of long duration, with co-offenders having shorter careers? How much of the age/crime curve for any particular crime type is a consequence of individuals persisting in offending, but switching from less serious crime types early in the career to more serious crime types as they get older? What about the relationship between past and future offending? Is there an effect of causal factors or changes in causal factors (state dependence), unobserved individual differences (persistent heterogeneity), or some combination of the two?

These questions are central to theory, as well as policy, especially those policies that are geared toward incapacitative effects of criminal sanctions, and to changes in the criminal career (e.g., rehabilitation or criminalization patterns as a result of actions by the criminal justice system). For example, if crime commission and arrest rates differ significantly among offenders and over the career, the effect of time served on overall crime will depend on who is incarcerated and for how long (Petersilia 1980:325). Addressing these and related issues requires knowledge about individual criminal careers, their initiation, their termination, and the dynamic changes between these end points (Blumstein et al., 1986).

In 1983, a Panel on Research on Criminal Careers was convened by the National Academy of Sciences at the request of the U.S. National Institute of Justice and was charged with evaluating the feasibility of analyzing the course of criminal careers, assessing the usefulness of prediction instruments in reducing crime through incapacitation, and reviewing the contribution of research on criminal careers to the development of fundamental knowledge about crime and criminals. This report outlined a basic approach for asking questions regarding the longitudinal patterning of criminal activity over the life-course, that is, the criminal career paradigm (Blumstein et al., 1986).

Since publication of the report, numerous theoretical, empirical, and policy issues have surfaced regarding the longitudinal patterning of criminal careers. One concerned the relevance of criminal career research for criminology generally and for public policy specifically. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) leveled a series of critiques against the criminal career approach in which they claimed that attempts to identify career criminals



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84865-7 - Key Issues in Criminal Career Research: New Analyses of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development

Alex R. Piquero, David P. Farrington and Alfred Blumstein

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and other types of offenders prospectively were doomed to failure. Perhaps the most important issue they raised concerns causality. Although the criminal career paradigm necessitates a longitudinal focus in order to study the within-individual patterning of criminal activity, Gottfredson and Hirschi questioned whether longitudinal research designs could actually resolve questions of causal order. They also argued that, because correlations with offending were the same at all ages, cross-sectional designs were adequate for studying the causes of crime. They also argued that the correlates of onset, persistence, and desistance were the same.

This chapter summarizes the background and recent developments regarding the criminal career paradigm. The first section provides a brief review of this paradigm, as well as an overview of the empirical findings generated by criminal career research, with a concentration on the dimensions of criminal careers. The second section presents a discussion of selected policy implications, including the identification of career criminals and policies associated with sentence duration and time served. The final section outlines the challenges and responses to the criminal career paradigm, as well as the theories that were influenced by the criminal career paradigm.

### The Criminal Career Paradigm

At its most basic level, a criminal career is the “characterization of the longitudinal sequence of crimes committed by an individual offender” (Blumstein et al., 1986:12). This definition helps to focus researchers’ attention on entry into a career when or before the first crime is committed or recorded and dropout from the career when or after the last crime is committed or recorded. The criminal career paradigm recognizes that individuals start their criminal activity at some age, engage in crime at some individual crime rate, commit a mixture of crimes, and eventually stop. Hence, the criminal career approach emphasizes the need to investigate issues related to why and when people start offending (onset), why and how they continue offending (persistence), why and if offending becomes more frequent or serious (escalation) or specialized, and why and when people stop offending (desistance). The study of criminal careers does not imply that offenders necessarily derive their livelihood exclusively or even predominantly from crime; instead, the career concept is intended only as a means of structuring the longitudinal sequence of criminal events associated with an individual in a systematic way (Blumstein et al., 1982:5). In sum, the criminal career approach focuses on within-individual changes in criminal activity over time, and this then permits aggregating this information for groups of offenders.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84865-7 - Key Issues in Criminal Career Research: New Analyses of the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development

Alex R. Piquero, David P. Farrington and Alfred Blumstein

Excerpt

[More information](#)

### Dimensions of a Criminal Career

*Participation.* The criminal career approach partitions the aggregate crime rate into two primary components: “participation,” the distinction between those who commit crime and those who do not; and “frequency,” the rate of offending among active offenders, commonly denoted by the Greek letter lambda, or  $\lambda$  (Blumstein et al., 1986:12). Participation is measured by the fraction of a population ever committing at least one crime before some age or currently active during some particular observation period. In any period active offenders include both new offenders whose first offense occurs during the observation period and persisting offenders who began criminal activity in an earlier period and continue to be active during the observation period. Importantly, the longer the average duration of offending and as offenders are followed up to older ages, the greater the contribution of persisters to measured participation in successive observation periods.

Estimates of ever-participation in criminal activity vary across reporting method (of course, they tend to be much higher with self-reports than with official records, which are a filtered subset of self-reports), the types of crimes in which participation is being measured (there is broader participation in less serious criminal activity), the level of threshold of involvement (self-report, police contact, arrest, conviction), and the characteristics and representativeness of the sample (high school students, college students, general population, offender-based, etc.). In general, ever-participation estimates are fairly similar across data sets and consistent with most criminological findings.

There is a relatively high rate of participation among males in criminal activity (Elliott et al., 1987:502). Blumstein et al. (1986) reported that about 15 percent of urban males are arrested for an index offense by age 18, and about 25 to 45 percent of urban males are arrested for a nontraffic offense by age 18. Visher and Roth’s (1986) overview of several longitudinal studies employing police and court records indicates a lifetime prevalence estimate of 40 to 50 percent, with higher rates for blacks and lower rates for females. Stattin et al.’s (1989) longitudinal study of Swedish males and females revealed that by age 30, 38 percent of Swedish males and 9 percent of Swedish females were registered for a criminal offense. The cumulative prevalence of self-reported offenses is even more striking. For example, in the Cambridge study, Farrington (2003) found that 96 percent of the males reported committing at least 1 of 10 specified offenses (including burglary, theft, assault, vandalism, and drug abuse) up to age 32. Kelley et al. (1997) used self-reported data on serious violence from the three Causes and Correlates longitudinal studies and found that