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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

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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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## 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

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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.

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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



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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.

Charles F. Wellford  
University of Maryland

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