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TESTING CRIMINAL CAREER THEORIES IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

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Testing Criminal Career Theories in British and American Longitudinal Studies

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Abstract: Most criminological theories aim to explain and predict only the total prevalence of offending. They are not truly scientific since they do not yield exact quantitative predictions of key criminal career features such as the prevalence and frequency of offending of a cohort at different ages (the age–crime curve). The main aim of this Element is to make progress towards more scientific criminal career theories. A simple theory is described based on measures of *risk* (the probability of reoffending after each crime) and *rate* (the frequency of offending by offenders). Three categories of offenders are identified: *high-risk/high-rate (HH)*, *high-risk/low-rate (HL)*, and *low-risk/low-rate (LL)*. It is demonstrated that this theory accurately predicts key criminal career features – the age–crime curve, the probability of recidivism, and time intervals between offences – in three data sets: the Offenders Index (OI) (national English cohort data), the British Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD), and the American Pittsburgh Youth Study (PYS). The theory is then extended in the CSDD and PYS by identifying early risk factors that predict the three categories of offenders. Criminological theorists are encouraged to try to replicate and build on our research in order to develop scientific theories that yield quantitative predictions of key criminal career features.

Keywords: criminological theories, criminal careers, types of offenders, risk factors, mathematical models

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