

The Criminal Career

The Danish Longitudinal Study

How can the average “criminal career” be characterized and how common are career criminals? Does offending become more specialized and/or more serious as people get older? Do female careers in crime differ from those of males in substance or only in magnitude? Britta Kyvsgaard examines these questions through her longitudinal analysis of the life circumstances and criminal pursuits of 45,000 Danish offenders.

This book provides a remarkably broad assessment of the full spectrum of criminal career patterns applied across a wider cross section of population than was ever previously analyzed. The data, unparalleled in size and quality, allows powerful analyses of criminal behavior, even among relatively small demographic subgroups. Kyvsgaard is thus able to make solid assessments of offending patterns for males and females, juveniles and middle-aged adults, and employed and unemployed individuals. Furthermore, she examines the empirical evidence of the effects of deterrence and incapacitation. Her findings suggest rehabilitation as an alternative worthy of further research.

Denmark’s relative homogeneity in terms of race and class offers an interesting and valuable laboratory in which to examine the effects of social circumstances absent these distractions. The comparative framework of the book highlights the extent to which criminal career patterns transcend international borders.

Britta Kyvsgaard is Chief of Research at the Danish Ministry of Justice, chief editor of *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Kriminalvidenskab* (Scandinavian Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology), and a member of the Scandinavian Research Council for Criminology.

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Foreword and Acknowledgments

Small is beautiful – at least when it comes to studies concerning recorded information on a total population. In a small and rather well-organized country like Denmark, one can carry out extensive research on the life circumstances and experiences of an entire citizenry. This is made possible by the existence of Denmark's centralized person register, a computerized database housing a broad spectrum of information on the social circumstances of all inhabitants. Since data are collected and organized by a single national census unit, local or regional variations are no threat to their uniform character. Data concerning the residents of Denmark's biggest cities, as well as of the country's most rural provinces, are collected and recorded using identical methodologies. Danish register data are therefore generally considered to be of a rather high standard.

The crime register, just one of the centralized registers in Denmark, was computerized in 1979. The research project resulting in this book began thirteen years later.

Although previous studies of the criminal career were an extremely important source of inspiration, the quality and availability of the Danish registers were important motivating factors in the present undertaking. Having read many of the international studies on criminal careers, I became convinced that the uniformity of the Danish registers might help to answer questions compromised by the methodological limitations of previous research.

This research was originally sponsored by a grant from the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1991. The Danish Social Science Research Council later provided money for the continuation of the study. The first Danish version of the report, completed in 1996, resulted in the publication of a book, *Den Kriminelle Karriere* (The Criminal Career), in 1998.

Many colleagues and assistants contributed to the study. Ernst Schaumburg, Jacob Sonnichsen, and Katja Andreassen assisted in programming and computer runs, and the Danish statistician Svend Kreiner acted as adviser for statistical analyses. Academic colleagues from my former life at the University of Copenhagen, especially Professor Vagn Greve and Associate Professor Jørn Vestergaard, provided valuable advice during the research process. My husband, Per Ole Tråskman, professor in criminal law at the University of Lund, Sweden, offered important feedback on the manuscript drafts and encouraged my efforts at every step of the process.

I changed positions in 1997, from senior researcher at the University of Copenhagen to chief of the new Research Unit at the Danish Ministry of Justice, and the translation of the book thus took longer than expected. Constructive comments from two anonymous reviewers of the first English version, though prolonging the process, helped to make this second and final English version both more complete and more readable for a non-Scandinavian audience. Among other changes, their suggestions resulted in the addition of a totally new chapter on crime trends and criminal policy in Denmark, as well as a final chapter summarizing the findings and comparing the results of the current study to previous work in the field.

A Danish lawyer living in the United States, Malene Freese Jensen, Ph.D., did the first translation of the book from Danish to English. David W. M. Sorensen, a Ph.D. candidate from Rutgers University and a guest researcher at the University of Copenhagen, produced an exhaustive linguistic revision of that translation. More than this, Dave provided important comments and suggestions throughout the process of rewriting the book in English, as his own research endows him with a priceless knowledge of the literature on criminal careers. Dave was also extremely supportive and encouraging when my spirits concerning the rewriting process, and my enthusiasm in general, were low.

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