

The Criminal Career

The Danish Longitudinal Study

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface ITC New Baskerville 10/13 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Kyvsgaard, Britta.

The criminal career : the Danish longitudinal study / Britta Kyvsgaard.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in criminology)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-81515-0 (hc.)

1. Crime – Denmark – Longitudinal studies. 2. Criminals – Denmark – Longitudinal studies. I. Title. II. Cambridge studies in criminology (New York, N.Y.)

HV7023.5 .K963 2003

364.9489 – dc21 2002016555

ISBN 0 521 81515 0 hardback

Contents

| | |
|--|------------------|
| <i>List of Tables</i> | <i>page</i> xiii |
| <i>List of Figures</i> | xv |
| <i>Foreword and Acknowledgments</i> | xix |
| 1 The Career Concept in Criminological Research | 1 |
| <i>Summary</i> | 4 |
| I Objectives, Methodology, and Sample | |
| 2 Objectives | 7 |
| <i>Research Themes on the Criminal Career</i> | 8 |
| <i>Other Themes of the Study</i> | 8 |
| <i>Is a Danish Study Necessary?</i> | 9 |
| <i>Presentation and Limitations</i> | 10 |
| <i>Summary</i> | 11 |
| 3 Methodology and Validity | 12 |
| <i>From Committed Act to Reported and Registered Offense</i> | 14 |
| <i>From Registered Crime to Solved Crime</i> | 17 |
| <i>Summary</i> | 20 |
| 4 Data and Data Quality | 22 |
| <i>The Primary Sample</i> | 22 |
| <i>Register Research and Data Security</i> | 23 |
| <i>The Workforce Register</i> | 24 |
| <i>The Crime Statistics Register and Its Composition</i> | 25 |
| | vii |

| | | |
|-----------|--|-----|
| | <i>Crime Register Variables</i> | 26 |
| | <i>Quality Control</i> | 27 |
| | <i>Changes in the Study File</i> | 32 |
| | <i>The Final Sample</i> | 34 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 34 |
| 5 | The Longitudinal Design | 36 |
| | <i>The Delimitation of the Sample</i> | 37 |
| 6 | Crime Trends and Criminal Policy in Denmark | 42 |
| | <i>General Information</i> | 42 |
| | <i>What Is Criminalized</i> | 44 |
| | <i>The Crime Rate</i> | 45 |
| | <i>What Kinds of Sanctions Are Used</i> | 48 |
| | <i>Sanctioning Practice and Policy</i> | 49 |
| | <i>Stability and Change in the 1980s</i> | 51 |
| | <i>The Danish Crime Rate in a Comparative Perspective</i> | 53 |
| | <i>The Risk of Being Caught and Convicted in a Comparative Perspective</i> | 58 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 60 |
| II | The Criminal Career | |
| 7 | Prevalence | 65 |
| | <i>Prevalence and Age</i> | 66 |
| | <i>The Cumulative Prevalence</i> | 68 |
| | <i>Prevalence and Gender</i> | 70 |
| | <i>Cumulative Prevalence among Men and Women</i> | 74 |
| | <i>Prevalence and Socioeconomic Conditions</i> | 77 |
| | <i>Changes in the Prevalence of the Age Groups in the 1980s</i> | 80 |
| | <i>Changes in Male and Female Crime Prevalence in the 1980s</i> | 81 |
| | <i>Changes in the Offenders' Employment Conditions during the 1980s</i> | 83 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 85 |
| 8 | Individual Crime Frequencies | 88 |
| | <i>Measuring Individual Crime Frequencies</i> | 89 |
| | <i>The Uneven Crime Distribution</i> | 90 |
| | <i>Time between Offenses</i> | 94 |
| | <i>The Yearly Crime Frequency</i> | 95 |
| | <i>Crime Frequency and Age</i> | 98 |
| | <i>Trends in Annual Crime Frequencies</i> | 101 |
| | <i>Crime Frequency and Gender</i> | 103 |
| | <i>Crime Frequency and Employment Status</i> | 104 |

| | | |
|----|--|-----|
| | <i>Changes in Crime Frequency</i> | 105 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 105 |
| 9 | Criminal Onset | 107 |
| | <i>Time of Onset</i> | 107 |
| | <i>Age at Onset and Gender</i> | 109 |
| | <i>Age at Onset and Social Conditions</i> | 111 |
| | <i>Time of Onset and Persistence in Crime</i> | 112 |
| | <i>Age at Onset and Crime Frequency</i> | 115 |
| | <i>Age at Onset and the Seriousness of Continued Crime</i> | 117 |
| | <i>Cause of Onset and of Persistence in Crime</i> | 119 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 120 |
| 10 | Recidivism and Duration of the Criminal Career | 122 |
| | <i>Measurement of Duration</i> | 122 |
| | <i>Single-Registration Offenders</i> | 124 |
| | <i>Recidivism</i> | 129 |
| | <i>Duration and Age</i> | 131 |
| | <i>Duration and Gender</i> | 134 |
| | <i>Duration and Employment Status</i> | 135 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 136 |
| 11 | Desistance from the Criminal Career | 138 |
| | <i>Measuring Desistance</i> | 138 |
| | <i>Desistance and Prior Record</i> | 139 |
| | <i>Age and Desistance</i> | 141 |
| | <i>Gender and Desistance</i> | 143 |
| | <i>Employment Status and Desistance</i> | 144 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 145 |
| 12 | Specialization or Versatility in the Types of Offenses | 147 |
| | <i>Measurement of Specialization</i> | 148 |
| | <i>Measuring Versatility</i> | 154 |
| | <i>Previous Research</i> | 155 |
| | <i>Specialization Measured by Number of Similar Offenses</i> | 158 |
| | <i>Specialization and Age</i> | 159 |
| | <i>Specialization and Gender</i> | 164 |
| | <i>Versatility</i> | 165 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 166 |
| 13 | Escalation in the Seriousness of Crime | 169 |
| | <i>Measurement of Escalation</i> | 170 |
| | <i>Previous Research</i> | 173 |

| | | |
|------------|---|-----|
| | <i>The Danish Study</i> | 174 |
| | <i>Escalation and the Type of Crime</i> | 178 |
| | <i>Escalation and Imposed Sanction</i> | 180 |
| | <i>Age and the Seriousness of Crime</i> | 181 |
| | <i>Gender and the Seriousness of Crime</i> | 182 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 183 |
| III | Sanctions and Deterrence | |
| 14 | The Incapacitative Effect of Sanctions | 187 |
| | <i>Measurement of the Incapacitative Effect</i> | 188 |
| | <i>Assumptions</i> | 189 |
| | <i>The Effects of Current and Past Uses of Imprisonment</i> | 190 |
| | <i>Collective Incapacitation</i> | 193 |
| | <i>Collective Incapacitation in the Current Study</i> | 194 |
| | <i>Selective Incapacitation</i> | 197 |
| | <i>Selective Incapacitation in the Current Study</i> | 199 |
| | <i>The Effect of De Facto Selective Incapacitation</i> | 202 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 203 |
| 15 | The Deterrent Effect of Sanctions | 206 |
| | <i>The Change in the Law</i> | 207 |
| | <i>The Sample</i> | 208 |
| | <i>Number of Recidivists</i> | 210 |
| | <i>The Extent and Celerity of Recidivism</i> | 211 |
| | <i>Seriousness of Recidivism</i> | 212 |
| | <i>Incapacitation</i> | 213 |
| | <i>Other Research on Specific Deterrence</i> | 213 |
| | <i>The General Deterrent Effect of Sanctions</i> | 216 |
| | <i>The Extralegal Effects of Sanctions</i> | 219 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 221 |
| 16 | Punishment, Treatment, and the Pendulum | 222 |
| | <i>The Renaissance of the Treatment Concept and Criminological Research</i> | 223 |
| | <i>Resistance against a Treatment Renaissance</i> | 225 |
| | <i>Pendulum or Balance</i> | 226 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 227 |
| IV | Discussion of Results | |
| 17 | The Contributions and Challenges of Criminal Career Research | 233 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| <i>The Criminal Career Concept</i> | 234 |
| <i>Relationships between Prevalence, Frequency, Duration, and Desistance</i> | 235 |
| <i>Individual Offending Frequency</i> | 237 |
| <i>Onset</i> | 239 |
| <i>Criminal Persistence and Desistance</i> | 240 |
| <i>Specialization</i> | 241 |
| <i>Escalation</i> | 243 |
| <i>Gender Differences</i> | 245 |
| <i>Social Status</i> | 246 |
| <i>Varieties of Criminal Careers</i> | 247 |
| <i>Methodological Issues</i> | 248 |
| <i>Incapacitation</i> | 249 |
| <i>Deterrence</i> | 251 |
| <i>Treatment and Intervention</i> | 252 |
| <i>Final Remarks</i> | 253 |
| | |
| <i>References</i> | 255 |
| <i>Index</i> | 273 |

Tables

| | |
|---|----------------|
| 5.1 The distribution of crime by type of offense | <i>page</i> 39 |
| 5.2 Single-registration offenders by type of offense | 40 |
| 6.1 Conviction ratio by type of offense | 59 |
| 7.1 Age-specific cumulative prevalence, by type of crime | 70 |
| 7.2 Age-specific cumulative prevalence, by gender and type of offense | 75 |
| 9.1 The average number of offenses per offender, by age at onset and age at the time of the crime | 116 |
| 9.2 The most severe sentence during a period of 5 years after onset, by age at onset and type of sentence | 118 |
| 9.3 The average seriousness of all offenses, by age at onset and type of crime | 119 |
| 10.1 Single-registration offenders as a percentage of all offenders, by type of offense | 126 |
| 10.2 Recidivism by type of offense | 131 |
| 12.1 Number of transitions to the same category of offense, by time between offenses | 151 |
| 12.2 Forward Specialization Coefficients for transitions within the same category of offense, distributed by age | 161 |
| 12.3 Forward Specialization Coefficients for transitions within the same category of offense, distributed by order of offense | 163 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| 12.4 Forward Specialization Coefficients for transitions within the same category of offense, distributed by gender | 165 |
| 13.1 The seriousness of the present offense compared to the seriousness of the subsequent offense | 175 |
| 14.1 Costs and benefits of hypothetical collective increases in sanctions | 196 |
| 14.2 Costs and benefits of hypothetical selective increases in sanctions | 201 |
| 14.3 Recidivism rates for different groups of offenders | 203 |
| 15.1 Characteristics of the three groups compared | 209 |
| 15.2 Types of recidivism in the three groups | 212 |

Figures

| | | |
|------|--|----------------|
| 6.1 | The number of reported penal law offenses distributed by type of crime, 1979–91 | <i>page</i> 46 |
| 6.2 | The average number of prisoners, 1950–99 | 50 |
| 6.3 | Police-recorded murder rate per 1,000 population | 54 |
| 6.4 | Police-recorded rape rate per 1,000 female population | 55 |
| 6.5 | Police-recorded robbery rate per 1,000 population | 55 |
| 6.6 | Police-recorded assault rate per 1,000 population | 56 |
| 6.7 | Police-recorded burglary rate per 1,000 population | 57 |
| 6.8 | Police-recorded motor vehicle theft rate per 1,000 population | 58 |
| 7.1 | Age-specific prevalence rates in 1990, by type of crime | 67 |
| 7.2 | Age-specific prevalence rates in 1990, by gender | 72 |
| 7.3 | Age-specific traffic offending in 1990, by gender | 73 |
| 7.4 | Age-specific penal code offending in 1990, by gender | 73 |
| 7.5 | The prevalence of offending among 25- to 29-year old males, by employment position and type of crime | 78 |
| 7.6 | Age-specific prevalence of male traffic offending, by employment status | 79 |
| 7.7 | Age-specific prevalence of male penal code offending, by employment status | 80 |
| 7.8 | Age-specific trends in criminal legal dispositions per 100,000 sample members, 1980–90 | 81 |
| 7.9 | Age-specific prevalence of offending, 1980–90 | 82 |
| 7.10 | Age-specific prevalence of male offending, 1980–90 | 82 |
| 7.11 | Age-specific prevalence of female offending, 1980–90 | 83 |

| | | |
|------|---|-----|
| 7.12 | Prevalence of traffic offending among 15- to 49-year-olds, by employment status, 1980–90 | 84 |
| 7.13 | Prevalence of penal code offending among 15- to 49-year-olds, by employment status, 1980–90 | 84 |
| 8.1 | The individual crime frequencies of offenders and their share of all offenses during the study period | 91 |
| 8.2 | The individual crime frequencies of penal code violators and their share of all penal code offenses during the study period | 92 |
| 8.3 | The actual and expected frequency of crime against the person in relation to individual crime frequency | 93 |
| 8.4 | The percentile distribution of individual crime frequencies (all offenses) per year | 96 |
| 8.5 | Average age-specific annual crime frequency, by type of crime | 99 |
| 8.6 | Average age-specific annual crime frequency per calendar year and per year in freedom | 100 |
| 8.7 | Trends in average crime frequency for very active offenders | 102 |
| 8.8 | Age-specific individual crime frequency, by gender | 103 |
| 8.9 | Age-specific individual crime frequency, by employment status | 104 |
| 9.1 | Age-specific rate of first-time offending in the onset sample, by type of crime | 109 |
| 9.2 | Age-specific rate of first-time offending (of any type), by gender | 110 |
| 9.3 | Age-specific rate of first-time penal code offending, by gender | 110 |
| 9.4 | Recidivism rate in the years after onset, by age at onset | 113 |
| 9.5 | Recidivism rate, by age at onset and age at time of recidivism | 114 |
| 9.6 | Age at desistance, by age at onset | 115 |
| 10.1 | Crime among single-registration offenders and repeat offenders, by seriousness | 127 |
| 10.2 | Age at the time of the crime for single-registration offenders and repeat offenders | 128 |
| 10.3 | Employment status of single-registration offenders and repeat offenders | 128 |
| 10.4 | Percentage of first offenders and recidivating offenders in the onset data, by age at the time of the crime | 130 |
| 10.5 | The duration of the residual career for all offenders and for repeat offenders, by age in 1980 | 132 |

| | | |
|------|--|-----|
| 10.6 | Years of duration and crime frequency for repeat offenders | 134 |
| 10.7 | The duration of the residual career for all offenders and for repeat offenders, by 1980 employment status | 136 |
| 11.1 | Persistence rate by number of prior dispositions | 140 |
| 11.2 | Age-specific desistance rates, distributed over the three desistance criteria | 141 |
| 11.3 | Desistance by gender, distributed over the three desistance criteria | 144 |
| 11.4 | Desistance rates by employment status, distributed over the three desistance criteria | 145 |
| 12.1 | Number of offenses within the same category for individuals who have committed at least nine offenses, distributed over number of categories | 149 |
| 12.2 | Cumulative percentage of offenders who have committed the same form of crime every time, related to the total number of offenses | 158 |
| 12.3 | The relation between total number of offenses and the number of different offenses | 166 |
| 13.1 | Average seriousness in relation to offense order | 174 |
| 13.2 | Average seriousness in relation to the total number of offenses committed by an individual | 176 |
| 13.3 | Average seriousness in relation to the total number of offenses and offense order | 177 |
| 13.4 | Number of traffic code offenses in relation to offense order and total number of offenses | 179 |
| 13.5 | Number of property offenses in relation to offense order and total number of offenses | 179 |
| 13.6 | Number of burglaries in relation to offense order and total number of offenses | 180 |
| 13.7 | Average seriousness in relation to number of offenses, by gender | 183 |
| 15.1 | Cumulative recidivism measured in the three groups after 6 months and 1, 2, and 5 years | 211 |
| 15.2 | Cumulative number of new offenses per person in the three groups | 211 |

The Career Concept in Criminological Research

THE TERM “CAREER,” which is of French origin, originally meant carriage road or racing track. Today it is primarily used to connote profession or occupation, especially that which carries the possibility of promotion. The term thus concerns either a profession or the progress in a person’s working or professional life.

Sociologically, the career concept has been used in organizational analyses of structures and changes, in studies related to individual career choices and strategies, and in works which combine the structural and subjective perspectives (Evetts, 1992).

Sociologist Everett C. Hughes is said to have introduced the career concept to the Chicago School (Kempf, 1987). For Hughes, the career is “the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the things which happen to him” (Hughes, 1937, pp. 409–10). The career thus becomes the subjective interpretation of one’s relation to and placement in society. Interpretations change over time just as a subject’s life does, and encompass not only paid work or professional activities, but all the endeavors a person is occupied with.

The term “career” was, however, used in criminological studies at the Chicago School before Hughes defined and described it as cited above. In 1930 and 1931 Clifford R. Shaw published, respectively, *The Jack-Roller* and *The Natural History of a Delinquent Career*, both of which used the term “career” to describe the criminal histories of single individuals derived from case studies. Shaw does not define the career term but uses it to describe both the actual *activities* in which his subject is engaged and the *developmental*

process that he observes in his subject's criminal pursuits. It is thus not the subject's interpretation of his position that is the focal point here, but rather an objective description of the subject's activity.

Use of the term "career" to describe a developmental process is even more apparent in Shaw's later work *Brothers in Crime* (1938). In this book he describes the steps in criminal careers via description and analyses of the life histories of five brothers. The book's cover illustration demonstrates the thesis of an escalating criminal career. It shows a staircase where each step represents a certain type of deviant behavior or crime, and where ascending steps suggest increasingly serious criminality. Shaw's use of the career concept can thus be said to have had a relation (albeit peculiar) to the term's definition as "advancement."

Edwin Sutherland's book, *The Professional Thief* (1937), compliments Shaw's work since it also concerns a life history. The book is actually written by a professional thief, since Sutherland has simply set up boundaries and themes and then let his subject write open-endedly about them. Although Sutherland has edited the book, it is the language of the subject that is used. The thief does not use the term "career," but his use of the term "professional" corresponds to it. Being a "professional thief" requires that one make a living by committing thefts and use all of one's (working) hours to do so. It further suggests that one plans in advance on the basis of learned techniques and skills. In this context there is little difference between a criminal career and a law-abiding profession.

Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck were the first to use the career concept in a quantitative criminological study. Their longitudinal investigation of institutionalized young offenders resulted in three major works: *500 Criminal Careers* (1930), a follow-up study, *Later Criminal Careers* (1937), and a final follow-up, *Criminal Careers in Retrospect* (1943). The Gluecks neglect to define the career term, but they seem to use it synonymously with "trajectory" or "life history." Thus, the Gluecks have used the Chicago School's traditional concept of the career as a "life history," but have done so via quantitative as opposed to qualitative methods. This, combined with the longitudinal technique, corresponds to what is found in the career studies dominating today.

The career term has not been used in criminological research in Denmark. The Danish criminologist Karl O. Christiansen performed analyses of individual criminal trajectories early in the 1940s, but used the more Danish term "kriminelle levnedsløb" (criminal life histories) (Christiansen, 1942). By this he meant those aspects of the individual's life that concern offenses and sanctions. Analyses of these matters focus on the

development of individual criminality (*ibid.*, p. 37). “Life histories” thus corresponds to the career term in the present criminological sense.¹

With the Interactionists’ adoption of the career term it changes its meaning from a narrow focus on activity to a description of the identity or role change, which can be associated with being labeled as a deviant. It was Edwin Lemert who first described the transition from primary to secondary deviance, and the changes entailed in personal identity and role (Lemert, 1951, pp. 75 ff.). Howard S. Becker, who had done previous studies of occupational careers in the tradition of Hughes, applied the career concept to deviance (Becker, 1966). He believes that the process and movement suggested by the term “career” is also relevant to describing a deviant career, since the latter is developed or formed as a result of a number of occurrences and influences (Becker, 1966, pp. 24 ff.). The Interactions perspective also relates changes in the person’s identity to changes in the person’s social position. The career is used to describe this process, whereby an individual understands his or her new (deviant) role (see, for example, Archard, 1979). Finally, we must mention Irving Goffman, who instead of deviant careers talks about “moral careers” (Goffman, 1961). The moral career describes the psychic course of development, which signifies the individual’s personality, identity, and perception of the self and others. The term is thus used with approximately the same meaning as deviant career, although the psychic change is more strongly emphasized.

The new wave of criminal career studies based on longitudinal designs and quantitative data began in the United States around 1980. Alfred Blumstein and Jacqueline Cohen’s analysis of individual crime frequencies is commonly cited as the beginning of the modern era of criminal career research (Blumstein and Cohen, 1979). Wolfgang’s Philadelphia cohort study (Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin, 1972), which came earlier, used similar quantitative methods and a longitudinal design, but Wolfgang neglected the career concept.

In their 1979 publication, Blumstein and Cohen argue that additional research is much needed in the area of criminal career research: “Despite an enormous volume of research into the causes and prevention of crime, very little is known about the progress of the individual criminal career” (Blumstein and Cohen, 1979, p. 561). They point out that knowledge concerning individual crime frequencies and age-dependent changes in those

¹ However, in the textbook Karl O. Christiansen later wrote together with Stephan Hurwitz, they used the term “criminal career” though not as used here but to connote “advancement” or “professionalism” (Hurwitz and Christiansen, 1983; here according to the Danish version 1971, p. 459).

frequencies (the subjects of their article) is particularly lacking, and that such knowledge is essential for the development of an efficient crime policy, particularly in the area of incapacitation.

In a later report, written together with Paul Hsieh, Blumstein and Cohen describe the “career” as a trajectory of the individual’s criminal activity from the first to the last offense (Blumstein, Cohen, and Hsieh, 1982). At the same time they emphasize that the use of the career term does *not* suggest that offenders are assumed to live off their crimes. “This characterization of an individual’s activity as a ‘career’ is not meant to imply that offenders derive their livelihood exclusively or even predominantly from crime. The concept of the ‘criminal career’ is intended only as a means of structuring the longitudinal sequence of criminal events associated with an individual in a systematic way” (Blumstein, Cohen, and Hsieh, 1982, pp. 5–7).

Blumstein and Cohen came to dominate the National Academy of Sciences’ panel on criminal careers, which was formed by request of the National Institute of Justice (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, and Visher, 1986). Their final report defines the criminal career in the same manner as mentioned above, as a trajectory study of the individual’s criminal activities. Further, it is argued that criminal career studies should focus on four measures of primary importance: participation (or prevalence), individual crime frequencies (or lambda), the duration of the career, and patterns in offense seriousness.

Summary

In criminological research, the career concept is primarily used to describe a trajectory. This research concerns circumstances surrounding individual trajectories, which start with the first criminal act and end with the last.

Recent American research emphatically emphasizes that the term career is not synonymous with livelihood or profession. However, some conceptual characteristics of criminal career research correspond to aspects of occupational careers. For example, criminal career research examines whether specialization occurs, that is, a tendency to repeat the same type of crime, and suggests that skills necessary to commit more refined and successful offenses will develop through repetition. Here is an obvious parallel to ordinary occupational careers. A similar parallel is found in changes in crime seriousness over time. Escalation in the criminal career corresponds to advancement in an occupational career: One climbs in rank or in seriousness. The analogy between occupational careers and criminal careers is probably unavoidable since both concern the development of skills and techniques, and abide by the fundamental assumption that “practice makes perfect.”