

## **CRIMINAL CAREERS**

### **An Educational Essay**

We must all work, or so society dictates, although in modern times it is perhaps not always that easy to get work in an area of your choice or indeed to work in any area at all. But so as to provide for ourselves and maybe a family we are expected to provide for our needs, by being in part self sufficient through the process of work. To a large extent we are influenced in our choice of work by our social background and by family influences on our occupational status. ( Shulenberg, Vondracek, and Crouter, 1984; Vondracek, Lener and Shulenberg, 1986). As we develop through the life process, so to does our occupational development (Osipow 1986). Schaire & Willis (1991) state that an individuals occupation can be reflected in the Socio-economic Status (SES) of the family. There is also a suggestion that children from a lower SES background tend to enter university and college with lower academic results than those from a higher SES even if they are of the same ability, (Karabel & Astin 1975).

The concept of criminal careers assumes that involvement in deviant behavior entails entry into a social role which develops over time, and which like conventional occupational roles is governed by social systems and rules determining career adoption and progress. The term criminal career implies an involvement in crime sufficiently intensive and extensive to constitute a way of life. Luckenbill and Best (1981) question this analogy with conventional occupational careers, since criminal careers are often short lived, are not always central to working life, and are not governed by accepted rules however it would appear that different components of criminal career activity such as initial involvement, frequency and termination may require different explanations.

The attention to juvenile delinquency in criminology reflects the proportionately greater involvement in crime of young people. Cross sectional data on arrests and convictions show that rates of offending are much higher among adolescents and young adults, and the age distribution curve consistently shows a steep rise from the age of 10 to a peak between 15 and 18, followed by a less steep decline after the age of 21. In 1988 the peak age for males cautioned or found guilty of an indictable offence in England and Wales was 18, for females the peak figure was 15. (Home Office 1989). In the USA the peak age for offending was recorded in 1989 as age 17 for male and female offenders. (US Department of Justice 1989).

The peak age of offending is not always uniform across different crimes, property crime in the USA shows a peak age of 17 for males and 16 for females while violent crimes peaked at 18 for males and 24 for females. Attempts to account for the age distribution in offending invoke both biological and social factors, such as changes in physical strength or behavioural experimentation at a time of emerging self identity, and an apparently spontaneous remission suggested by declining prevalence at early adulthood has led to particular attention in longitudinal research to the termination of criminal careers. This is

criticised by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990). They argue that the age distribution is invariant across time, culture, sex and race, but this reflects the distribution of crimes, not criminal propensity. They claim that longitudinal research will not show any more information about criminality than cross sectional research does. Farrington et al. (1986) argues against this, suggesting that the age distribution is not invariant across crimes or time periods, but that the distribution between criminal propensity and criminal acts deserves further consideration. Various longitudinal studies have been concerned with early identification of delinquency, the aim to develop predictive indicators to identify those at risk, as well as to establish possible chains of causation.

Those who become delinquent are more likely to have a prior history of conduct problems and poor educational performance during early school years, and family factors such as poverty, large family size and history of parental criminal behaviour can also be seen as possible predictors of delinquency. In a Philadelphia study (Tracey et al 1986) showed; of boys identified as delinquent by age 18, 46% were one time offenders, 35% were non chronic offenders while 5% were chronic offenders. In a British study 55% of males and 78% of females convicted up to age 28 were one time offenders, (Home Office 1987) It is important to note from these figures the difference between persistent and one time offenders. Very little developmental research has been done on violent criminal behaviour, another neglected area is that of the identification of stages (Kandal 1989) or “Stepping Stones” (Farrington 1986) to offending. Although a number of studies have identified sequences or stages of general offending behaviour. We would expect that offending occurs at a later stage in the sequence there is very little empirical evidence to support this.

Nevertheless some studies have found a certain common denominator among types of offending behaviour and this would therefore suggest some developmental pattern or patterns involved in the path to offending behaviour. In order to work out why offending seems to slow down in early adulthood, and almost disappeared by age 32, it is necessary to look at all the possible risk factors that may lead to a criminal career. The risk factors have been identified in various longitudinal studies both in this country and in the USA. The factors Identified in The Cambridge Study (Farrington 1986) include impulsivity, intelligence, Family factors, socio-economic deprivation peer influence, school factors, community influences and situational factors. In the Cambridge study, boys selected by teachers as lacking in concentration or restless behaviour, those who are most daring and those who were impulsive, all tended to become juvenile offenders although with few going on into adult offending (Farrington 1992) Farrington (1993b) also identified daring at age 8-10 as an important predictor of anti-social tendencies at age 18, and of violence and spouse assault at age 32 (Farrington 1993a). It has also been found that poor concentration or restlessness at age 10 can be a predictor of adult social dysfunction at age 32 (Farrington 1993b) Many other studies have shown a link between the configuration of personality factors termed “Hyperactivity -impulsivity-attention deficit”, also known as HIA, (Loeber 1987), and offending. The key issue here is how far HIA is a predictor or indicator of future anti-social behaviour, and if HIA and conduct disorders reflect the same or different underlying constructs. It has also been suggested that HIA might be due to a low level of physiological or psychological arousal. Offenders

have a low level of arousal according to their low alpha (brain) waves on an EEG, or, according to autonomic nervous system indicators such as blood pressure or heart rate, or they show low levels of autonomic reactivity (Venables & Raine 1987). Loeber and Dishon (1983) looked at the possible predictors of male delinquency and concluded that poor parental management, offending by parents or siblings, low intelligence, poor educational achievement and separation from parent were all important predictors to future offending. Longitudinal and cross sectional surveys have consistently shown that children with lower than average intelligence are more likely to become offenders, this can also be linked to childhood anti-social behaviour (Rutter et al. 1970). In the Cambridge study one third of the boys who scored lower than 90 on a non-verbal intelligence test were subsequently convicted as juveniles, twice the amount of boys with so called normal IQ's. (Farrington 1986). It is possible that the link between low intelligence and offending is the lack of ability to handle abstract concepts, probably because of the poor ability to foresee the consequences of their offending and to empathise and understand the feelings of their victims. It can be seen that certain family backgrounds are less conducive than others to the development of abstract reasoning. Lower class, poorer parents tend to look at the present and do not often look or plan for the future, which can be seen as abstract. A lack of concern for the future can be linked to the concept of impulsivity (Wilson & Herrnstein 1985)

In trying to explain the development of offending a big problem is that many of the risk factors can overlap with each other, for example adolescents living in physically and socially disorganised neighbourhoods tend to also come from families with poor parental supervision and erratic discipline, and tend also to be of low intelligence and be highly impulsive. This means that we are unable to draw any real conclusions as to the development of offending (Lober & Dishon 1993).

Very little research has been done on those who enter crime in later life. In the Cambridge study, comparisons of latecomers with persistent offenders, those that desist and unconvicted men revealed that while the latecomers were likely to have been in the low IQ group as children, they were less likely to have experienced early family adversity or to have criminal parents, being closer to the unconvicted in this respect (West 1982). On the other hand, they were more likely than the unconvicted to have been troublesome at school, and had higher self report delinquency scores at age 14 and more anti-social attitudes at age 18. At age 32 they were similar to unconvicted men in terms of domestic and employment stability, but were more prone to heavy drinking and smoking, fighting and psychiatric problems (West & Farrington 1990). They therefore showed some of the characteristics of some of the persistent offenders, but appeared less committed to crime.

The prevalence of offending may increase to a peak between ages 14 and 20 because boys, especially lower class, low educational achievers, have high impulsivity, high desire for excitement, material goods, and social status between these ages, little chance of achieving these desires legally, and little to lose, as legal penalties are more lenient and their peers may approve of offending. In contrast, after age 20, desires become more realistic, there is more possibility of achieving these goals legally, plus the cost of offending is greater since legal penalties are harsher and their wives or girlfriends

disapprove of offending. So, are there any predictors to crime in any age group, research has shown that there may be some risk factors that can lead to juvenile delinquency, but the offending seems to desist by the early 30's. So, what causes crime in the later years, how can we detect it and what role does it play in adult development?.