

# **Explaining Criminal careers: implications for justice policy**

**Macleod, J.F., Grove, P.G., and Farrington, D.P.**  
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**Book review by Sally Ramage, Editor,**  
**(*The Criminal Lawyer*, Bloomsbury Professional)**

This book titled, *Explaining criminal careers*, is ‘hot off the press’ and a welcome addition to the OUP series, ‘Clarendon studies in criminology’, the other titles being *Tough choices- risk, security and the criminalization of drug policy* (by Seddon, Williams and Ralphs); *Breaking rules- the social and situational dynamics of young people’s urban crime* (by Wikstrom, Oberwittler, Treiber and Hardie); *Discovery of hidden crime – self –report delinquency surveys in criminal policy context* (by Kivivuon); *Serious offenders – a historical study of habitual criminals* (by Godfrey, Cox and Farrall); *Penal abolitionism* (by Ruggiero); and *Life after imprisonment* (by Appleton).

The series of books, ‘Clarendon studies in criminology’, is held in the highest esteem and is edited ‘under the auspices’ of the Cambridge Institute of Criminology (a leading organisation presently undertaking some very interesting research on prisons and prisoners); and the Mannheim Centre for Criminology (which acts as a forum for LSE criminology, including undergraduate and postgraduate courses, funded research, and a large number of conferences, seminars and other public events).

The authors of *Explaining criminal careers* bring to play sound expertise in psychology, statistics and mathematical modelling and after examining the validity of existing criminal career theories, they propose a new theory to explain offending, conviction and reconviction. This compact little book of 9 chapters and 243 pages makes for a digestible examination on the topic. It is of use to the UK criminal justice system, especially as the UK has superior records for conviction events, even better than the United States’ similar records. The UK set up the Offenders’ Index in 1963, meaning that the UK’s prison records have a continuity of almost 50 years. Note that all the studies in this book exclude those convictions in the Magistrates’ Courts since

the studies used the Offenders Index data which does not include the various forms of anti-social behaviour, drunkenness, breach of the peace, minor assaults, motoring offences, and breach of trade regulations. (See chapter 5).

It is of utmost importance to this present UK government that the study observed that imprisonment does not appear to have any punishment effects on the prisoner that will prohibit him or her to behave in the criminal manner that landed that person in prison. Rather, 'time spent in prison serves merely to lengthen the criminal career by that amount of time'. This is shocking.

### **Offenders**

Present accepted theory is that there are two types of offenders- life-course persistent offenders and adolescent-limited offenders. Present prison population theories (eg Blumstein (1960); Blumstein and Larson (1969) ; Belkin, Blumstein and Glass (1971); Cassidy (1985); and Farrington et al (2009) reveal, for instance, the effects of changes in the number of offenders or in sentencing policies on the prison population. These studies all reveal that to evaluate the effectiveness of government's prison policies, there needs to be information about the patterns of individual offending during criminal careers and since it was discovered that an average criminal career is between 5 and 15 years, and that this increased from 5 years for 18 year old offenders to 10 years for 28 year old offenders; 10 years for 40 year old offenders and 5 years for 55 year old offenders. Moreover, offending rates differ in various jurisdictions. (See chapter 4).

### **Anti-social behaviour**

The United Kingdom has peculiar issues regarding anti-social behaviour and established theory states that over 50% of offenders were not convicted until they were over 19 years old, yet today; crime is commonly perceived as a phenomenon of youth. As per established theories, crime does in fact diminish as offenders grow older and more mature, yet the data shows that a quarter of first convictions occur in much older offenders, some almost 70 years old and this may be due to factors that

undermine their resolve not to reoffend- factors due to the cumulative effect of the criminal justice system.

### **Characteristics**

The most interesting feature of offenders- their characteristics- cannot be studied using data such as the Offenders Index. The authors therefore turned to the UK Home Office Offender Assessment System, a database which was developed in the UK by the National Probation Service (NPS) and the Prison Service of England and Wales- this became the National Offenders Management System (NOMS). Following the pilot study, the project was abandoned in recent years because it over-ran its budget by a considerable amount. There were extensive questionnaires to be completed. The authors also used information from the Police National Computer (PNC) database which included complete data only since 1995. (See chapter 6). From these partial pieces of information, the authors found that those highly likely to offend are impulsive and aggressive, some finding it difficult to control their temper; with poor problem-solving skills and unable to consider the consequences of their actions. This limited result gave support to established theories and helped to identify high and low risk offenders.

### **Cautions**

It was found that caution was not having the effect of reducing criminality. (See chapter 8). Yet the Youth Justice Board's report for 2011 stated that:

*'There were 7,507 penalty notices for disorder (PNDs) given to 16-17 year olds in 2010/11 and in 2010 there were 536 Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) given to young people. The number of PNDs given to young people has gone down by 30 per cent since 2009/10, and down 64 per cent since the peak in 2006/07'.*

## Conclusions

This book will cause concern to all in the criminal justice system who take a little time to read it. It is said that statistics cannot be trusted because they can illustrate whatever one wants illustrated. However, this is a myth. One needs to carefully study the book to see what it reveals. Recently UK police have declared that crime has been reduced. Whether crime in total has reduced or whether all crime in all offences has reduced or whether the rate of increase of crime has reduced, is unclear. Of course, the purpose for the Home Office is to reduce and prevent crime. (See website <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime/>). At the same time, it has been reported that the increase in surveillance via CCTV has not helped to reduce crime. (See Owen Boycott, 'CCTV boom has failed to slash crime, say Police', *Guardian*, 6.5.08), subsequent to which statement, New Scotland Yard created a new database of images which uses technology developed by the sports advertising industry to track and identify offenders.

The Labour government passed a massive amount of legislation, among which was the Criminal Justice Act 2003. The Youth Justice Board (YJB) was created to reduce young offenders. The YJB 2011 report stated that the number of young people in the Youth Justice System has continued to have reduced in 2010/11. Reductions were seen in the number entering the system for the first time, as well as reductions in those receiving disposals in and out of court, including those receiving custodial sentences. Yet the 2011 YJB report stated:

*'In 2009/10 there were 1,386,030 arrests of which 241,737 were of people aged 10-17. Thus, 10-17 year olds accounted for 17 per cent of all arrests but were 11 per cent of the population of England and Wales of offending age.'*

One wonders whether the criminal justice system is indeed 'joined up' as claimed. The Cambridge Institute of Criminology this year held a conference where it was learnt that there are intensive studies and research, costing millions of pounds, being carried out on prisoners who have been diagnosed as psychopaths. Psychopaths are not sent to hospitals for the criminally insane after they are convicted of their heinous and serious crimes. Yet it has recently been reported that the new Coalition government is planning to build several 'mini-Broadmoor' type hospitals/prisons for those who have been convicted of continuous anti-social behaviour offences and who have been diagnosed as psychopathic.

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