



# JUSTICE RESEARCH

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Greg Ridgeway • Acting Director, NIJ

Robert L. Listenbee • Administrator, OJJDP

## CRIMINAL CAREER PATTERNS

This bulletin discusses the criminal careers of offenders, specifically the links between offending patterns in adolescence and in adulthood. Many empirical studies have documented the prevalence (proportion of individuals who participate in crime at any given time) of offending in criminal careers. Most studies indicate that prevalence peaks in the teenage years (around ages 15-19) and then declines in the early 20s. Although most individuals self-report involvement in some form of delinquent or criminal behavior by early adulthood, official records from police contacts, arrests and convictions yield a much smaller prevalence estimate (about 20-40 percent depending on data source, follow-up period, and so forth). In self-reported crime, prevalence peaks in the early teens; according to official records, the peak occurs in later adolescence. These figures also vary by crime type, with minor crimes peaking earlier and serious crimes peaking later. In studies that provide information on offending across race and gender, the evidence tends to show that males and minorities (especially African-Americans) show an earlier and higher prevalence peak than females and whites.

The evidence on individual offending frequency (the number of crimes committed per offender per year) is more mixed than the findings emerging from

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*This publication summarizes Bulletin 2: Criminal Career Patterns by Alex R. Piquero, J. David Hawkins, Lila Kazemian, and David Petechuk, NCJ 242932, available at [NCJRS.gov](http://NCJRS.gov). Bulletin 2 is one in a series of bulletins prepared for Transitions From Juvenile to Adult: Papers From the Study Group on Transitions From Juvenile Delinquency to Adult Crime. The study group was led by David Farrington and Rolf Loeber under award number 2008-IJ-CX-K402; to learn more, visit [NIJ.gov](http://NIJ.gov), keyword "Transitions to Adulthood." This summary was written by Carrie Mulford, a social science analyst at NIJ. See full bulletin for source citations.*

prevalence estimates. Individual offending frequency appears to vary according to several characteristics, including sample composition, measures of offending and time periods observed. Annual individual offending frequency appears to peak in late adolescence, and only among a select few offenders does it remain stable for a relatively long time. Furthermore, individual offending frequencies appear to be higher for nonviolent than for violent offenses, but both decline over time.

A strong continuity has been found in criminal behavior from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Yet most children and adolescents who engage in delinquent behavior do not go on to engage in criminal behavior as adults, and even fewer individuals escape adolescence without engaging in delinquency only to begin criminal involvement during adulthood. Where persistence is defined as offending both during and after adolescence, research suggests that 30-60 percent of juvenile delinquents known to the police or juvenile courts persisted as adult offenders, with at least one arrest or conviction as an adult for an index or felony offense.

Knowledge of official juvenile delinquency status helps predict the prevalence of officially recorded crime in adulthood. Those arrested for the first time as adults were considerably more likely than their

delinquent counterparts to be arrested less frequently and were very likely to be arrested only once in adulthood. Those arrested only as adults had a very low frequency of officially recorded offenses in adulthood by age 26. These findings suggest a considerable degree of continuity in arrests between adolescence and adulthood. Additionally, the most frequent offenders tend to show the strongest and longest continuity in their offending behavior, whereas less frequent offenders are less likely to continue offending. In general, these findings hold across samples, demographic characteristics (race and gender), time periods and the length of observations.

The notion that there are “specialists in crime,” especially corporate offenders and sex offenders, has been a consistent source of debate. The analyses of specialization in criminal careers suggest that there is little specific concentration within offense types among most offenders. This overall conclusion holds with respect to different samples, measures of offending (including the incorrect presumption of specialization among sex offenders), and time periods. Research suggests that those offenders who show evidence of specialization appear to concentrate their offending within a larger category of offenses (e.g., property crimes) and appear to switch within these larger categories. There is limited evidence of a slight trend toward increasing specialization with age.

The study of criminal careers has the potential to provide useful information to practitioners and policymakers. Understanding the continuity of offending from adolescence to adulthood is critical because it is during the transition to adulthood when practitioners and lawmakers make decisions regarding the incarceration of young offenders — some of whom will curtail their offending naturally and some of whom will persist into adulthood. Understanding the trajectory of criminal careers is also useful information to those who make sentencing decisions. If the average criminal career is short, then shorter sentences may be more appropriate, whereas if the average criminal career is longer, then longer sentences may be in order. The few career-length studies that exist have found that criminal careers tend to be less than 10 years, which calls into question many long-term sentences that have characterized U.S. penal policy.

Practitioners and policymakers have a range of short- and long-term options when deciding what to do with current and future offenders. Criminal career data can provide useful information about patterns of criminal activity over time, allowing those who deal with delinquent and criminal offending and their consequences to make informed and competent decisions regarding incarceration and other forms of punishment given their limited resources.

**Points of view or opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of NIJ, OJJDP, or the U.S. Department of Justice.**

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