



Advancing knowledge about residual criminal careers: A follow-up to age 56 from the Cambridge study in delinquent development

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study investigates criminal career parameters that are associated with residual career length (RCL) and residual number of offenses (RNO) across various periods of the life course.

Methods: Drawing on official data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development up to age 56, distributions of RCL and RNO are examined for various criminal career features: age, conviction number, time since the last conviction, age of onset, co-offending, and offense type.

Results: The residual number of years and offenses remaining in criminal careers declines steadily with age. Residual criminal careers decline with increasing time since the last offense; RCL and RNO display the most substantial declines after 5 years have elapsed since the last offense. The average RCL is the same for nonviolent and violent offenses, and the average RNO is lower for the latter. Risk scores predicted RNO more strongly than RCL.

Conclusions: Given the historically unprecedented number of individuals with a criminal record, and the resulting stigma and blocked access to employment and housing opportunities, residual criminal career research has important implications for reintegration efforts. Not all criminal records are equal. Evidence suggests that not all features of prior criminal records may be predictive of future offending.

1. Introduction

Residual criminal careers remain the least explored dimension of criminal careers (Blumstein, 2005). Residual career length (RCL) refers to the remaining number of years in criminal careers until the last offense, and residual number of offenses (RNO) is defined as the remaining number of offenses in criminal careers (Kazemian & Farrington, 2006). Knowledge about residual criminal careers remains limited, despite its crucial importance to criminal justice and various social policies.

From a theoretical viewpoint, RCL reflects the age-crime distributions of active offenders. For decades, criminologists have debated the interpretation of the age-crime curve, namely whether declines in the aggregate curve are driven by changes in prevalence (participation) or incidence (frequency) rates, or both. Although relatively few individuals remain active in offending after age 30, it remains unclear whether the number of years remaining in the criminal careers of those who do remain active decline precipitously with age (Blumstein, Cohen, & Hsieh, 1982). Estimates of RCL and RNO at each age can help to identify periods of the life course during which active offenders are

most likely to cease offending, and periods when they are most likely to persist.

Research on residual criminal careers has particular relevance to three areas of decision-making: sentencing and incapacitation, parole and release, and social policies that impact the reintegration of individuals with a criminal record. First, at the sentencing stage, judges must decide whether the convicted individual is likely to pose a significant risk of future reoffending and if so, for how long? This assessment guides the decision to resort to incarceration, as well as the length of the prison sentence. While some sentencing guidelines may limit the discretionary power of judges, particularly in the American criminal justice system, in many cases judges have a great degree of discretion in their sentencing decisions.

Second, parole decisions also rely on assumptions about residual criminal careers, and discretionary release decisions are heavily influenced by assessments of the likelihood of future offending. In a perfect system, high-rate offenders would be incapacitated during periods of high-rate offending, and low-rate offenders would either be diverted to alternative sanctions, or serve limited time. Assuming that incapacitation and crime prevention are the main objectives of incarceration,

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there is little point in locking up individuals after they have ceased offending (Blumstein et al., 1982; Piquero, Brame, & Lynam, 2004).

Third, knowledge on residual criminal careers informs reentry practices, and enables us to better understand the value in imposing restrictions on individuals with a criminal record. For instance, many individuals with a criminal record are denied access to housing or employment based on the assumption that they are at risk of reoffending (National Research Council, 2014). However, we know that the existence of a criminal record alone is insufficient in predicting the level of risk posed by an individual. A host of factors must be considered in order to determine whether a criminal record constitutes an adequate predictor of the level of threat posed to the community. The most salient factors emerging from criminological research include age, time elapsed since the last conviction, the number of prior convictions, and the strength of the support network upon release (Kurlychek, Brame, & Bushway, 2006, 2007; National Research Council, 2014). While we may never be able to perfectly predict risk of future offending, we also know that not all criminal records equate with high risk of reoffending, and some more recent policies have reflected this observation. For instance, in the United States, Ban the Box policies have required employers to delay questions about an applicant's criminal record in efforts to eliminate blanket bans against all individuals with a criminal history.

The current study provides a follow-up to Kazemian and Farrington's (2006) analysis of residual criminal careers. One of the rare studies that has examined offending patterns past midlife (Laub & Sampson, 2003) has suggested that findings about life-course and offending trends may be different when the observation period extends beyond age 40. The extended follow-up in the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development enables us to investigate whether criminal career patterns remain the same past midlife, a question that can only be tested with a handful of datasets in the field of Criminology. In a follow-up to age 56, we draw on several criminal career indicators (age, conviction number, time since the last conviction, age of onset, co-offending, and offense type) to assess whether the distributions of RCL and RNO remain similar over a longer observation period.

2. Past research on residual criminal careers

Various studies have offered estimates of total criminal career length (Blumstein et al., 1982; Farrington, Lambert, & West, 1998; Greenberg, 1975; Greene, 1977; Piquero et al., 2004; Shinnar & Shinnar, 1975; Spelman, 1994). However, few have focused on residual criminal career length or residual number of offenses in criminal careers (Blumstein, 2005; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003), despite their relevance for decision-making in the criminal justice system. Blumstein et al.'s (1982) study was one of the first systematic attempts to assess residual criminal career length.

Using data on arrests, Blumstein et al. (1982) estimated total and residual criminal career lengths for index offenses recorded during 1973 in Washington, D.C. They identified three important periods in the criminal career. During the first period (break-in), dropout rates (i.e., rates of desistance from crime) declined steadily and mean residual career lengths increased with age from 5 to 10 years. The stable period which followed was characterized by low dropout rates and stable mean residual career lengths, which peaked during this period (around age 30). The time remaining in criminal careers in this period was estimated at 10 years, regardless of the past length of criminal careers. The wear-out period occurred around age 40; during this last period, declining residual career lengths and greater drop-out rates were observed. In short, RCL first increased (up to age 30), remained relatively stable at a high level (between ages 30 and 40), and finally decreased after age 40. These results suggested that the age-RCL distribution differed from the age-crime curve.

Blumstein et al.'s (1982) results showed that the overall average duration of criminal careers was about 5 years (approximately 4 years for property offenders and 7 years for person offenders). The authors

found significant differences in residual lengths according to the type of offense, with person offenders having longer residual lengths. Property offenders were not as likely to persist in crime, but among those who did persist in their thirties, the average residual career length was approximately 10 years. Property offenders had their peak residual career length many years into their criminal careers, whereas person offenders (those convicted of murder and rape) "... begin at their maximum residual career length of 9.6 and 5.9 years, respectively, and remain there for about 25 years" (p. 58). Blumstein et al.'s (1982, p. 38) findings also suggested that offenders who remained active in their thirties were characterized by the longest residual length of criminal careers (about 10 years), thus being a "prime target group for incapacitation". Some of the limitations of this ground-breaking study were discussed in Kazemian and Farrington (2006).

Drawing on Blumstein et al.'s (1982) study, Kazemian and Farrington (2006) estimated residual career length and residual number of offenses for two generations of British males. Their analyses were based on official records only; information about convictions was available up to age 40 for the sons, and up to age 70 for the fathers. Comparisons between sons and fathers were carried out for the purpose of replication (i.e., to assess the consistency in findings across different samples) and to address the issue of "false desistance". False desistance refers to the erroneous assumption that individuals have ceased offending at the end of a given observation period. Fathers were followed up to an age when virtually all criminal careers had ended, which addressed the issue of truncated data.

Five key findings emerged from Kazemian and Farrington's (2006) analyses. First, most RCL distributions were characterized by a remarkable degree of linearity, and this was particularly true for relationships with age. The number of years and offenses remaining in criminal careers declined at a remarkably steady pace with age, and this was observed across both samples (sons and fathers). Second, distributions of RCL generally displayed a greater degree of linearity than those of RNO. Results from both samples suggested that RCL tends to decline more consistently than RNO, which suggests intermittent patterns in criminal careers and different paths to desistance from crime. Furthermore, the fathers' distributions of RNO did not decrease as consistently as for the sons, suggesting that the number of offenses remaining in criminal careers does not decline uniformly for all offenders across life, or with longer follow-up periods. Third, early onset was a significant predictor of RCL and RNO for sons, but not for fathers. This finding suggested an attenuating effect of the influence of early onset when the follow-up extends past mid-life (Sampson & Laub, 2003). Fourth, results relating to the relationship between offense type and RCL/RNO were inconsistent, and co-offending was not significantly associated with RCL and RNO. Fifth, risk scores were significantly but generally not highly predictive of RCL and especially not of RNO. The fact that risk scores have not traditionally been developed to predict RCL and RNO indicates the extent to which these variables have been neglected. There is a case for a new generation of risk scores designed to predict RCL and RNO. A replication study based on a sample of adjudicated French-Canadian males found largely similar results (Kazemian, Le Blanc, Farrington, & Pease, 2007).

While the body of research on residual criminal careers remains limited, a number of recent studies have examined factors associated with the risk of recidivism among individuals with a criminal record. Blumstein and Nakamura (2009, p. 328) investigated redemption, which they define as "the process of 'going straight' and being released from bearing the mark of crime". In operational terms, their notion of redemption refers to the point at which an individual with a criminal record poses a similar risk for reoffending as an individual with no prior criminal justice involvement.

Given the ubiquitous decline in aggregate offending rates that occurs as individuals get older (Farrington, 1986; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1993), the impact of age on future risks of offending cannot be overstated. Bushway and Piehl (2007) argued that

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