Journal of Criminal Justice 42 (2014) 517–526

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Criminal Justice

Do the adult criminal careers of African Americans fit the "facts"?

Elaine Eggleston Doherty [a,*], Margaret E. Ensminger [b]

[a] Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Missouri – St. Louis, 324 Lucas Hall, One University Boulevard, St. Louis, MO 63121
[b] Department of Health, Behavior and Society, Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health, 624 N. Broadway, 7th Floor, Baltimore, MD 21205

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 6 October 2014

ABSTRACT

Purpose: A major gap in the criminal career research is our understanding of offending among African Americans, especially beyond early adulthood. In light of this gap, this study describes the criminal career patterns of a cohort of African American males and females.
Methods: This paper uses official criminal history data spanning ages 17 to 52 from the Woodlawn Study, a community cohort of 1,242 urban African American males and females. We use basic descriptive statistics as well as group-based modeling to provide a detailed description of the various dimensions of their adult criminal careers.
Results: We find cumulative prevalence rates similar to those for African Americans from national probability sample estimates, yet participation in offending extends farther into midlife than expected with a substantial proportion of the cohort still engaged in offending into their 30s.
Conclusions: The descriptive analyses contribute to the larger body of knowledge regarding the relationship between age and crime and the unfolding of the criminal career for African American males and females. The applicability of existing life course and developmental theories is discussed in light of the findings.

Introduction

In 1986, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) published a two volume report entitled "Criminal Careers and 'Career Criminals'" (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visher, 1986), which sparked some resurgence in research investigating the criminal career, defined as "the longitudinal sequence of crimes committed by an individual offender" (Blumstein et al., 1986, p. 12). Fueling this revitalization of criminal career research in the 1980s was the debate regarding the invariance of the age-crime curve (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983). Criminal career researchers argue that the age-crime curve varies substantially across time and social conditions (Farrington, 1986; Steffensmeier, Allan, Harer, & Streifel, 1989) and propose that the aggregate age-crime curve accommodates a variety of offending trajectories. One important implication of this notion is that the age-crime curve should be disaggregated so that participation in offending can be studied separately from frequency of offending.

The ability to study criminal careers in detail was facilitated in the 1980s by the fact that the subjects of several longitudinal research studies on crime and delinquency were reaching adulthood at that time.[1] These longitudinal studies, which follow the same individuals over a long period of time, were essential to investigate the various dimensions of the criminal career such as the prevalence (participation), incidence (frequency), and seriousness of offending, as well as recidivism, onset, termination, and career length, to name a few (Blumstein, Cohen, & Farrington, 1988). Since the 1986 NAS report, there have been considerable advances in our understanding of the criminal careers among white populations, males in particular. However, the core issue is that although our knowledge is growing with respect to participation, onset, and offending careers into *early* adulthood among African Americans and Hispanics (i.e., from adolescence to the late 20s) (e.g., Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, & White, 2008; Reingle, Jennings, & Maldonado-Molina, 2011; Tracy & Kempf-Leonard, 1996) and into later adulthood for Hispanics (Jennings, Zgoba, Piquero, & Reingle, 2013) we still know very little about the long-term criminal careers among African Americans.

For instance, the two longest criminological longitudinal studies, the Glueck follow-up study (see, e.g., Laub & Sampson, 2003) and the Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development (see, e.g., Farrington, Piquero, & Jennings, 2013), follow individuals into late adulthood shedding light on the adult criminal career into the 30s, 40s, and 50s, yet both focus on white males only. With respect to non-white populations, Jennings et al. (2013) recently reported on the offending trajectories of a cohort of Hispanic males from age 18 to 50. Yet, a major gap in the criminal career research that remains is our understanding of offending beyond early adulthood for African Americans. In a response to this gap, this study provides a systematic descriptive account of the criminal career patterns of an African American community cohort of males and females followed from age 17 to age 52.

The "facts" of adult criminal careers

In the 2003 issue of *Crime and Justice*, Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein conducted an extensive review of the criminal career research

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 314 516 5033; fax: +1 314 516 5048.
E-mail address: dohertye@umsl.edu (E.E. Doherty).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2014.09.006
0047-2352/

spanning close to 150 pages, which outlines the state of the evidence with respect to the dimensions of the criminal career, theoretical contributions, and methodological considerations (see also DeLisi & Piquero, 2011; Farrington, 2003). With respect to the criminal career dimensions, several "facts" have emerged. For instance, 1) prevalence tends to peak in late adolescence such that fewer individuals continue offending into adulthood; 2) yet among the smaller group who remain active offenders, the frequency of offending remains high and does not decline with age; 3) an earlier age of onset is related to a longer criminal career and an increased recidivism probability; and 4) the majority of offenders desist, although perhaps at different times throughout the life course. However, these "facts" have largely been based on white male populations.

Recently, several samples that follow African Americans into young adulthood have begun to inform our understanding of the criminal careers of this population. For instance, with respect to the age-crime curve, the Pittsburgh Youth Study, which includes 56% African Americans, finds evidence similar to those of other studies with respect to the age-crime curve; arrests for moderate and serious violence peak in adolescence and decline in the early 20s (Loeber et al., 2008). However, Elliott's (1994) analysis of serious violent offending among the National Youth Survey (NYS) sample shows that as this timeline extends into the thirties, the trends for black males decrease in the early twenties before beginning to increase again in the mid-twenties and continuing to increase into the early thirties (Elliott, 1994).

In light of these studies into early adulthood, one multifaceted area of research that is needed is extensive descriptive data on the criminal career dimensions of African American males and females, especially those that extend into late adulthood (see DeLisi & Piquero, 2011; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003). Moreover, the foundation of several contemporary theories that explain offending over the life course has been restricted to certain populations for which we have data, largely neglecting key demographic categories and bringing their applicability into question. With respect to race and the criminal career, contemporary theoretical questions include 1) Do chronic or acute stressors common in the lives of many African Americans influence patterns of African American offending over the life course (e.g., Agnew, 1992)?; 2) Do African Americans have a unique lived experience requiring a race-specific theory to explain offending (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011)?; 3) Do African American desisters differ from their persisting peers with respect to adult life events and social bonds, as predicted by Sampson and Laub (1993)? 4) Are African Americans more likely to desist if they have multiple stakes in conformity, or the "respectability package," as suggested by Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002)? 5) How might the continued substance use of African Americans into midlife (see Doherty, Green, & Ensminger, 2008; French, Finkbiner, & Duhamel, 2002) impede the processes of desistance (Schroeder, Giordano, & Cernkovich, 2007)?

While there are notable studies that have begun to investigate these types of questions using samples that include African Americans (e.g., Doherty & Ensminger, 2013; Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2001; Giordano et al., 2002; Nielsen, 1999; Piquero, MacDonald, & Parker, 2002), we view these questions as "premature," in that they "cannot be approached until a more fundamental base of knowledge exists" (Lieberson, 1985, p. 9) regarding the criminal career patterns of African Americans. This is not to say that there have not been great strides in our understanding of criminal careers over the past 30 years; however, there has yet to be a detailed account of the criminal careers of African American males and females similar to the accounts of whites that expand across the majority of the life course. This basic gap in our knowledge base still exists due to the fact that, to date, there have been no developmental longitudinal studies of offending that focus specifically on African American males and females and extend into mid adulthood. This lack of detailed data is particularly troubling in light of the findings *suggesting* that African Americans persist in criminal offending longer than whites and therefore, may not follow the typical age-crime curve (Elliott, 1994).

This paper uses official criminal history data spanning ages 17 to 52 from the Woodlawn Study in order to provide a detailed description of the various dimensions of the criminal career for African Americans. The Woodlawn Study is a prospective developmental study of a community cohort of first grade, African American males and females from the Woodlawn neighborhood of Chicago (N = 1,242). Specifically, we ask a series of descriptive research questions: 1) What are the rates of participation and frequency among this cohort of African Americans? 2) What are the rates of serious offending (i.e., violence) among this cohort? 3) What are the criminal career trends with respect to onset, termination, and career length? 4) Is there an association between age of onset and recidivism? 5) What is the shape of the longitudinal patterning of individual-level offending over the life course for this African American cohort? In answering each of these questions, we also consider the importance of differentiating these dimensions by gender.

Data and methods

The Woodlawn Study

The Woodlawn Study is an epidemiological, prospective study focusing on a cohort of African American children and their families. In 1966, nearly all first grade children (N = 1,242; 636 females and 606 males) in Woodlawn, a neighborhood community on the South Side of Chicago, were included in the study (see Kellam, Branch, Agrawal, & Ensminger, 1975). At the start of the study in 1966, Woodlawn was overcrowded with 90,000 people living in an urban area built to house 45,000. While Woodlawn was a community of low to median incomes and high unemployment, it was somewhat economically heterogeneous, including working-class, middle-class, and welfare families due to residential segregation of African Americans at the time. By the 1970s, when the cohort was around 10 years old, the population of Woodlawn had decreased to 54,000 people, remained largely African American (97%), and had the 8th highest percentage of families living below the poverty line (27% as compared with 12% in Chicago). Moreover, at that time, Woodlawn had the highest rate of male juvenile delinquency (Council for Community Services in Metropolitan Chicago, 1975).[2]

In the 1966-67 school year, the cohort was in first grade in the nine public and three parochial schools in Woodlawn. At this time, teachers and mothers (or mother surrogates) reported on the children's social adaptational status, their mental health, and the family and classroom contexts. The cohort was again assessed in adolescence (approximately age 16), at age 32, and again at age 42 (see Doherty et al., 2008; Ensminger, 1990; Ensminger, Anthony, & McCord, 1997; Fothergill, Ensminger, Green, Robertson, & Juon, 2009; Green, Doherty, Stuart, & Ensminger, 2010; Kellam et al., 1975). Table 1 provides an overview of the cohort characteristics in adulthood with respect to several dimensions of life. In general, by the age 42 interview, this cohort had moved out of Woodlawn but 62% remained in the Chicago area, 40% lived in neighborhoods with a drug and/or gang presence, and one-quarter remained below the poverty threshold.

Official criminal record data

Collecting and coding the criminal records

Criminal records from the Chicago Police Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) were searched for the entire cohort in 1993 and spanned the age of majority (age 17 in Illinois) to age 32. In the 1990s, the criminal history information was coded combining arrests over the 17 to 32 age period. In order to capitalize on the annualized nature of the data, in 2008, with the support of a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, we coded the criminal history data for each age and crime type for ages 17 to 32 from the paper "rap" sheets.[3] In 2012, to supplement the existing data to age 32 (Elder & Taylor, 2009), we received a grant from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation to access