

Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report

Career Patterns in Crime

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This special report is the first in a series using available national data on crime to address issues of major public and policy concern.

Policies and proposals for reducing the Nation's serious crime problem are often based upon assumptions about offenders' behavior over long periods of time—assumptions, in other words, about their careers in crime. To illustrate, proposals for reducing crime through incapacitating dangerous offenders derive in part from assumptions about the volume of crime prevented by removing offenders from society during the most active period of their criminal careers. Therefore knowledge concerning criminal careers plays an important role in society's struggle against crime.

Prior research

Studies of criminal career patterns, even when not directed at specific policies or proposals, nevertheless are useful because they provide policymakers with vital information. These studies examine such questions as—

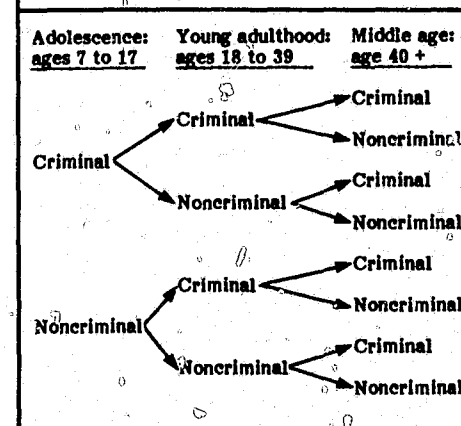
Sound criminal justice policies must be based on factual information about the criminal careers of repeat offenders. Too often, such information is not available to policymakers who consider various proposals for reducing the Nation's serious crime problem. The pressing need for verifiable data on criminal careers was the impetus for this study. The research in this report proceeds from the understanding that studies of criminal careers, even when not directed at particular policies or proposals, are useful in providing policymakers with relevant new information.

The subjects of the study are the middle-aged males (40 years and older) in State prisons throughout the country. Information on their criminal careers was available in a nationwide survey sponsored by the

Bureau of Justice Statistics. This group was studied because they were old enough to have established criminal careers spanning several decades (as indicated by their own accounts of their confinement histories). The study reveals that not all the men had long careers in crime. In fact, for nearly half of them, their first prison sentence began after age 40. The study describes the criminal careers of the men and, in doing so, offers insights into how the criminal justice system operates and raises some provocative questions about its effectiveness. The study should be not only useful to policymakers at all levels of government but also interesting to the public.

Steven R. Schlesinger
Director

Figure 1. Criminal and noncriminal careers*



*Source: Cline (1980).

At what ages do criminal careers typically begin and end?

What are the peak ages of criminality? At what stage of a criminal career does violence erupt?

How much of the crime problem is caused by offenders with long criminal careers?

Figure 1 depicts criminal and noncriminal careers. Seven criminal careers are identified according to the absence or presence of criminality during three of life's major stages: adolescence (7 to 17), young adulthood (18 to 39), and middle age (40 and over). The longest, most continuous criminal career is indicated by criminality in all three life stages. Offenders with this type of career might easily qualify for the label "career criminal" or "habitual offender." The noncriminal career in Figure 1 is indicated by the absence of criminality in all three life stages.

Most studies of criminal careers are

retrospective studies of officially known offenders, meaning that only known offenders (usually arrested persons or confined offenders) are selected for study and only their past criminal histories are examined. Most retrospective studies of officially known offenders rely on official records for information about criminal careers, but some obtain this information through survey interviews with offenders. The latter are referred to as "self-report" surveys and are particularly useful when they elicit from offenders information not only about the crimes for which they were arrested or convicted, but also the crimes that escaped official detection. Illustrative of retrospective studies of known offenders are the recently published Rand Corporation reports, *Selective Incapacitation* (Greenwood, 1982) and *Varieties of Criminal Behavior* (Chaiken and Chaiken, 1982). These studies used both official records and self-reports to document the prior criminal activity of 2,190 men who

were inmates of prisons and jails in three States in 1978. Emphasis was on learning about the volume of crime in which the men had been involved during the 1- to 2-year period just prior to their current prison term. Among other things, the study found that the men who were criminal in both adolescence and young adulthood were the most criminally active offenders during this 1- to 2-year period.

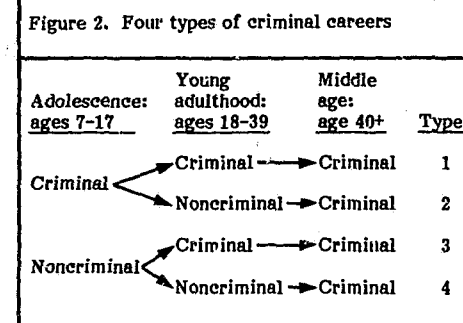
Prospective studies of officially known offenders, the next most common kind of study, begin with a sample of known offenders (usually arrested or confined persons) but instead of only reviewing their previous criminal careers, these studies track offenders forward in time, usually for a period of a few years. Typically, prospective studies of known offenders rely on official records for information about criminal careers but, like retrospective studies, these too may use self-report crime surveys to obtain a fuller picture of criminal careers. An example of a prospective study of known offenders is the FBI's follow-up study of 4,363 persons who in 1972 were released from prison on parole (Kelley, 1975). By 1974 nearly two-thirds had been re-arrested at least once. Young adult parolees had a re-arrest rate of 67%, while less than half of the middle-aged parolees were rearrested.

Prospective studies of the general public represent a third kind of study. This kind of study is rare in the research literature. An example is a birth cohort study in which all the males born in 1945 who resided in the city of Philadelphia from at least their 10th to their 18th birthdays were identified and their criminal and noncriminal careers were investigated from adolescence into young adulthood. Among other things, this study (Wolfgang, 1978: 165) found that males who were criminal in adolescence were more likely to be criminal in young adulthood (44%) than were males who were noncriminal in adolescence (12%).¹

This study

Most past studies of criminal careers are studies of offenders in a single jurisdiction or, at most, a few jurisdictions. Past studies seldom investigated representative samples of offenders from across the Nation. This report examines the criminal careers of a nationwide sample of offenders in State prisons throughout the country. Information on them was available in a nationwide survey conducted in 1979 by the Census Bureau and sponsored by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the

¹A second Philadelphia birth cohort study (that of all the males and females born in 1958 who lived in Philadelphia from at least their 10th to their 18th birthdays) is currently underway but findings concerning continuities in criminal careers from adolescence to young adulthood are not yet available. Concerning adolescence only, the 1958 birth cohort was reported to be more violent than the 1945 birth cohort, with an overall violent offense rate three times higher and a robbery offense rate five times higher (see Wolfgang, 1981; Wolfgang and Tracy, 1982).



major Federal agency with responsibility for the collection of statistical data on crime. The completed survey included interviews with a random sample of 11,397 men and women, representing a total estimated at approximately 275,000 State prison inmates in 1979.²

These men and women reported to interviewers detailed information concerning various aspects of their lives. Of particular interest here are the inmates' detailed accounts of their criminal histories. Interviewers asked inmates about the crimes for which they were ever incarcerated (including the crimes for which they were currently incarcerated). Inmates' own accounts of their incarceration history therefore form the basis for this report.³ While the retrospective, self-report survey yielded valuable information on the inmates' criminal careers, it should be kept in mind that the interviews were mostly concerned with the serious crimes for which the inmates were currently or previously incarcerated, and so the crimes that did not result in incarceration were not recorded.

A principal aim of this study is to describe the criminal careers of a nationwide sample of offenders and, in particular, to distinguish offenders who lead crime-filled lives that spanned many years from offenders whose criminal careers were of a shorter duration. This objective was pursued by selecting from the sample of 11,397 only those inmates who were old enough to have had the time to establish a criminal career spanning a number of decades. For this reason, only inmates who were at least middle age (40 or older) when last admitted to prison were selected for study.

²The survey was conducted by personal interview during October and November 1979. Interviews took place in 215 State correctional facilities. For additional information on the survey, see Bureau of Justice Statistics (1982).

³In the most comprehensive report to date on the accuracy of inmates' self-reports (Marquis, 1981), self-reports of arrests and convictions (over a maximum 2-year period prior to their incarceration) were investigated by comparing them to official record information. It was found that prison inmates reported as many arrests and convictions as were contained in their records. The report therefore concluded that the inmates do not deny facts about their known criminal careers. The report's conclusion, while encouraging, is unfortunately not entirely applicable to this study. Self-reports of incarcerations over a lifetime, not arrests and convictions over a 2-year period, are the focus of this study.

Table 1. Number and percent distribution of middle-aged inmates by type of criminal career

Career type	Number of inmates (unweighted)	Estimated number of inmates (weighted)	% of inmates
1	116	3,419	14.0
2	10	299*	1.2*
3	318	9,316	38.2
4	383	11,362	46.6
Total	827	24,398	100.0

Note: Detail may not add to total shown because of rounding.

*Estimate based on 10 or fewer cases is statistically unreliable.

Criminal career paths leading to criminality in middle age (adopted from Figure 1) are presented in Figure 2. As with Figure 1, Figure 2 identifies career types according to the absence or presence of criminality during three of life's major stages: adolescence (7 through 17), young adulthood (18 through 39), and middle age (40 and over). Since the inmates in the study are at least middle-aged and all are offenders in prison, Figure 2 indicates that all are considered to be criminal in the middle-age period. Type 1 offenders were criminal in all three periods—adolescence, young adulthood, and middle age; Type 2, in all but young adulthood; Type 3, in all but adolescence; and Type 4, in middle age only.

The rest of the report describes (according to the typology presented in Figure 2, and on the basis of the 1979 survey) the criminal careers of men who entered prison in middle age.⁴ The 1979 inmate survey included 827 such men. Statistically weighted, the 827 men represent an estimated 24,398 inmates altogether.⁵ Unless otherwise stated, the

⁴The inmates studied in this report were selected as follows. The 1979 inmate survey included interviews with 11,397 male and female prison inmates. Males younger than 40 when last admitted to prison were eliminated from the sample as were all females. This left 845 males who were 40 or older when last admitted to prison. Of these 845, 827 (or 98%) could be grouped according to the typology presented in Figure 2. (Not all 845 could be grouped because of missing data.) Statistically weighted, the 827 represent an estimated 24,398 male inmates who were 40 or over when last admitted to prison. More than 90% of these men were between the ages of 40 and 59 (inclusive). Since fewer than 10% were beyond middle age (over age 59) when they last entered prison, the study sample and the study population are termed "middle age." Note that inmates who entered middle age sometime after they last entered prison would not have been included in the study. It is estimated that the study population represents about 76% of all the men aged 40 or over in State prisons at the time of the survey in 1979.

⁵The completed interviews were assigned appropriate numerical weights to assure that in the aggregate they would be representative of State prison inmates throughout the Nation. Based on a sample rather than a complete enumeration, the data are estimates subject to errors resulting from sampling variability and rounding.

Table 2. History of violent crimes by type of criminal career

Career type	Percent currently in prison for a violent crime	Percent currently or previously incarcerated for a violent crime	Number of violent crimes in incarceration history	Average number of violent crimes per inmate currently or previously incarcerated for a violent crime
1	46.6	69.1	4,572	1.93
2	51.1*	60.5*	216*	1.19*
3	54.1	68.7	10,784	1.68
4	56.4	67.6	8,318	1.08
Total	58.7	68.2	23,890	1.44

*Estimate based on 10 or fewer cases is statistically unreliable.

discussion and the tables that follow pertain to these 24,398 inmates.

The criminal careers of men who entered prison in middle age

Current imprisonment offenses

Table 1 shows how the different criminal careers are distributed across the 24,398 men who entered prison in middle age. As can be seen, 3,718 men, or 15.2% of the inmates, had at least one adolescent incarceration (Types 1 and 2 together in Table 1).⁶ Nearly 92% of the inmates with adolescent incarcerations continued their criminal careers into young adulthood. They are the Type 1 offenders. The remaining 8% are the Type 2 offenders. The Type 2 offenders were first incarcerated in adolescence but, unlike Type 1 offenders, they discontinued their involvement in crimes resulting in imprisonment upon entering young adulthood and only resumed their involvement in such crimes upon entering middle age. The rarity of the Type 2 criminal career might seem to suggest that most adolescent offenders continue their criminal careers into young adulthood. However, such an inference cannot be drawn from the retrospective data. It is logically possible that most persons who are confined in adolescence end their criminality in adolescence or young adulthood. In either case, they would not have become the subjects of this report. Because so few Type 2 offenders were found in the survey, this report hereafter will have very little to say about the Type 2 career. Perhaps surprisingly, the Type 4 career is the single most prevalent type.

The Type 4 career offender, it will be recalled, has no record of incarceration during either adolescence or young adulthood, yet the Type 4 career represents nearly half of all the inmates who entered prison in middle age. The question immediately arises: why do these offenders

⁶An estimated 3,718 inmates had 5,084 adolescent incarcerations altogether. Of these 3,718 inmates, 3,419, or 92% also had subsequent incarcerations in young adulthood, thus indicating that the vast majority of inmates who began committing serious crimes as juveniles continued their criminal careers into young adulthood.

with (apparently) the shortest criminal records represent such a large percentage of the middle-aged inmates? The answer has to do, at least in part, with how criminal justice systems operate in the United States. A criminal penalty is based on, and roughly proportional to, the gravity of the offense, and, after taking into account the gravity of the offense, the penalty is increased roughly in proportion to the criminal's prior record. This "retributive, social-debt theory of justice," as it has been called (Boland and Wilson, 1978), can help explain how inmates with the shortest records might constitute a sizeable portion of any cross-section of the prison

population. Type 4 offenders, as Table 2 shows, were the most likely (66.4%) to be serving time for the gravest offenses: the crimes of violence. Since they lack long prior records, the gravity of their offense alone could largely account for their present imprisonment. Type 1 offenders, by contrast, were the least likely (46.6%) to be serving time for a violent crime. But since they have the longest, most continuous criminal careers, the gravity of their offenses in combination with their long prior record could largely account for their imprisonment. In between those with the longest records and those with the shortest records are the Type 3 offenders, 54.1% of whom were currently in prison for a violent crime.

Table 3 permits a closer examination of the violent crimes for which Type 4 offenders were currently imprisoned. The most numerous violent crime categories in Table 3—murder, manslaughter, rape and sexual assault—show that, while Type 4 offenders are 47% of the inmates, they account for 64.7% of the murders, 54.7% of the manslaughters, and 57.9% of the rapes and sexual assaults. An apparent anomaly is the finding that Type 4 offenders are highly represented among inmates imprisoned for the public-order crimes. One explanation may be that these particular crimes were committed in connection with the more serious crimes of violence. Another may be that the

Table 3

In Career Patterns in Crime, Bureau of Justice Statistics Report No. NCJ-88672, June 1983, Table 3 as originally published had two typographical errors:

ERROR:	CORRECTION:
Career type 1	Career type 1
1.6%	11.6%
6.2	6.2
6.4	16.4

Below is the entire corrected Table 3:

Table 3. Number of offenses for which currently imprisoned, and percent distribution of offenses by type of criminal career

Offense	Number of offenses ¹	Career type (percent distribution)				Total
		1	2	3	4	
Violent	15,494	11.6%	1.0%*	35.7%	51.7%	100%
Murder	3,920	6.2	1.6*	27.6	64.7	100
Attempted murder	537	16.4	0.0*	45.4	38.2	100
Manslaughter	2,382	10.5	1.1*	33.7	54.7	100
Kidnaping	315	17.5	0.0*	27.1	55.4	100
Rape, sexual assault	1,892	11.8	0.0*	30.3	57.9	100
Lewd act with child	554	0.0	0.0*	25.5	74.5	100
Robbery	2,763	23.2	0.0*	46.6	30.3	100
Assault	2,959	9.0	2.2*	41.1	47.7	100
Extortion	57*	0.0	0.0*	47.4	52.6	100
Other violent	114*	24.3	0.0*	51.3	24.3	100
Property	7,410	23.9	2.4*	44.2	29.5	100
Burglary	2,542	32.9	1.2*	37.6	28.3	100
Forgery, fraud	1,721	13.3	1.7*	57.1	27.9	100
Larceny-theft	1,792	26.8	4.9*	40.1	28.2	100
Arson	279*	10.0	10.0*	30.1	50.1	100
Other property	1,076	18.4	0.0*	50.1	31.9	100
Drug	2,713	16.7	1.0*	54.8	27.6	100
Trafficking	1,369	16.4	0.0*	48.0	35.6	100
Possession	1,139	20.0	2.5*	60.2	17.4	100
Other drug	205	0.0	0.0*	69.8	30.7	100
Public order/other	3,776	10.6	0.7*	32.4	56.4	100
Weapons	934	13.0	2.9*	27.7	56.4	100
Traffic	1,233	4.5	0.0*	28.0	67.4	100
Other	1,609	13.8	0.0*	38.5	47.9	100

Note: Detail may not add to total because of rounding. Estimated values of less than 300 are based on too few cases to be statistically reliable.

¹The number of offenses is greater than the number of inmates because some inmates were imprisoned for more than one offense.
*Estimate based on 10 or fewer cases is statistically unreliable.

Table 4. Selected criminal history characteristics by type of criminal career

Criminal history characteristic	Type of criminal career				Total population (24,398)
	1 (3,419)	2 (299)	3 (9,316)	4 (11,362)	
Juvenile probation	54.9%	70.6%	52.2%	33.9%	44.3%
Adult probation	55.8	70.6	53.5	36.2	46.0
Juvenile or adult probation	56.6	70.6	53.8	36.2	46.2
Prior confinement for drunkenness, vagrancy or traffic offenses	39.6	20.7	35.2	27.2	31.9
Confined in year before current offense	21.3	0.0	10.8	1.3	7.7

Note: Detail may not add to total because of rounding. Estimated values of less than about 300 are based on too few cases to be statistically reliable. Numbers in parentheses refer to population estimates on which table figures were calculated.

simple designation "public-order crimes" masks a considerable amount of diversity in crime seriousness. Many of the crimes categorized as "public-order crimes" may be at least as serious as many of the traditionally labeled "violent crimes" in terms of actual victim harm.⁷ The finding concerning public-order crimes should not obscure the fact that the majority of Type 4 offenders (66.4%, according to Table 2) were currently in prison for a violent crime.

The retributive, social-debt theory of justice provides an explanation of how justice is administered. The theory is descriptive, not prescriptive, and draws attention to the seriousness of the crimes for which offenders are punished as well as their past criminal records. Consistent with the theory, the most serious offenses (the violent crimes) receive the most stringent penalties almost without regard to the offender's prior record; the less serious offenses (the property crimes) receive the most stringent penalties when the offender has a prior record. Accordingly, Type 4 offenders are highly represented among the inmates found in prison for violence: they, of course, almost have to commit a violent crime in order to be imprisoned. Not surprisingly, the offenders with prior records (the Type 1, 2, and 3 offenders) are highly represented among the inmates found in prison for property crimes. The explanation is that they need not commit a violent crime in order to be imprisoned. Table 3 indicates

⁷This would not be the first instance of concerns being raised about using traditional legal labels for research purposes. Sellin and Wolfgang (1964), for example, studied known delinquencies in Philadelphia to learn how well these labels represented victim harm. To the credit of the crime classification procedures employed by the Philadelphia Police Department, the offenses classified by the police as aggravated assault were found to contain a larger percentage of cases resulting in medical attention (three-fourths) or hospitalization (one-fourth) than offenses classified as simple assault (one-fifth resulting in medical attention; 7% resulting in hospitalization). Whitt, however, Sellin and Wolfgang disregarded legal classifications and looked at all the cases involving any kind of bodily injury; they found that one-fifth were classified as offenses not generally recognized as involving physical harm.

that Type 1 offenders are 14% of the offenders but account for 23.2% of the robberies,⁸ 32.9% of the burglaries, 26.8% of the larceny-thefts, 18.4% of the other property offenses, 16.4% of the drug trafficking crimes, and 20% of the drug possession crimes. Type 3 offenders are 38% of the offenders but also account for a large share of the property and other crimes, including robbery, forgery and fraud, other property offenses, drug trafficking, and drug possession.

Prior criminal record

The nature and extent of an offender's prior record, according to the theory of retributive, social-debt justice, affects the likelihood that an offender will be sentenced to prison. This section examines the prior criminal records of the

⁸Robbery, of course, has both violent offense and property offense characteristics. Like murder, rape, and assault, robbery involves the use of force or threat of force or violence. Unlike these (usually expressive) violent crimes, material gain is typically the single most important motive for robbery, as it is for the property crimes such as burglary, larceny, and drug trafficking.

Table 5. Duration of confinement by type of criminal career

	Type of criminal career				Total population (24,398)
	1 (3,419)	2 (299)	3 (9,316)	4 (11,362)	
Mean age at first admission	14.8	13.8	26.5	48.0	25.0
Mean age at current admission	45.4	46.0	47.1	49.8	48.1
Average length of criminal career (years)	30.6	32.2	20.6	1.8	23.1
Average number years confined over career	10.7	3.0	6.2	.3	4.1
Percent of career spent in confinement	35.0%	9.3%	30.1%	16.7%	17.7%
Percent of lifetime in confinement	23.6%	6.5%	13.2%	.6%	8.5%

Note: Detail may not add to total shown because of rounding. Estimated values of less than about 300 are based on too few cases to be statistically reliable. Numbers in parentheses refer to population estimates on which table figures were calculated.

inmates in order to learn more about how social-debt justice operates.

As discussed earlier, Type 1 and Type 3 offenders accounted for a large share of the property and drug crimes for which the middle-aged inmates were imprisoned, and Type 4 offenders accounted for a large share of the violent crimes. It would be a mistake to think, however, that Type 1 and Type 3 offenders have less involvement in violent crimes than Type 4 offenders. The entire imprisonment record⁹ of the men (see "Percent currently or previously incarcerated for a violent crime," Table 2), shows that Type 1 and Type 3 offenders are just as likely to have served a prison term for a violent crime as Type 4 offenders. Thus, while Type 1 and Type 3 offenders need not commit a violent crime in middle age to be sent to prison in middle age, they, like Type 4 offenders, need to have committed a violent crime at some point in their criminal careers.¹⁰

The discussion thus far has been limited to the inmates' prior records of incarceration, not including incarcerations for drunkenness, vagrancy or traffic offenses. These records formed the basis for grouping the inmates according to their career type. By definition, Type 1, Type 2, and Type 3 offenders were all repeat offenders. About 10% of the Type

⁹Unless stated otherwise, references to imprisonment or incarceration histories do not apply to confinements for drunkenness, vagrancy or traffic offenses.

¹⁰Table 2 also reports that Type 1 offenders committed the most violent crimes per person. This should not be surprising. By definition, Type 1 offenders were required to be repeat offenders and to have the longest criminal careers. Consequently, Type 1 offenders who committed a violent crime early in their criminal career had the most time to commit a subsequent violent crime. As a general rule, comparative statements pertaining to recidivism must be carefully made in full recognition of the logical consequences of placing the inmates into the four career types.

Table 6. Number of confinements in incarceration history by type of criminal career¹

	Type of criminal career				Total population (24,398)
	1 (3,419)	2 (299)	3 (9,316)	4 (11,362)	
Number of confinements	17,940	689	32,243	12,613	63,485
Percent of confinements	28.3	1.1	50.8	19.9	100
Average number of confinements per person	5.2	2.3	3.5	1.1	2.6

Note: Detail may not add to total shown because of rounding. Estimated values of less than about 300 are based on too few cases to be statistically reliable. ¹ includes current confinement

4 offenders were also repeat offenders.¹¹ As Table 4 indicates, several questions in the survey pertain to records of probation and of incarcerations for any crime. Not surprisingly, these records do not confirm that only about 10% of Type 4 offenders are repeat offenders: 36.2% of the Type 4 careers have a probation record; and, when prior confinements for drunkenness, vagrancy or traffic offenses are included in the definition of what constitutes a prior incarceration, 35.4% of the Type 4 offenders, not 10%, have a prior confinement record.¹²

Additional information on the incarceration histories of the men is presented in Tables 5 and 6. By definition, the longest, most continuous criminal career is the Type 1 career. Type 1 career offenders began committing crimes for which they were incarcerated at the average age of 15 (see Table 5) and continued committing crimes for which they were incarcerated until the average age of 45, when they were again incarcerated for a serious crime. There is no way of telling from the data when or if they (or any of the inmates) will end their involvement in serious crime. All that can be said at this point concerning the length of their careers is that, at the time of their last prison commitment, the typical Type 1 career had spanned 30 years. Type 3 offenders, who were first admitted to prison at the average age of approximately 26 (see Table 5) and were last admitted to prison at the average age of 47, had a criminal career spanning 20 years. By definition, the Type 4 career is the shortest. For the vast majority of Type 4 offenders, the current incarceration is their first. Among those with prior incarcerations, their criminal career had spanned only about 2 years.

¹¹Based on records of incarceration for any crime except drunkenness, vagrancy, or traffic offenses, the only way a Type 4 offender could be a repeat offender is if he had a prior incarceration and his prior incarceration(s) occurred after he entered middle age. By this definition, 9.7% of the Type 4 offenders were repeat offenders.

¹²The estimate of 35.4% represents the 27.2% with a prior confinement for drunkenness, vagrancy or traffic offenses (see Table 4) plus the inmates with a prior middle-age confinement for other offenses.

offenders with the shortest records, while the less serious crimes are characteristic of the offenders with the longest records, makes it difficult to know what to expect when overall average sentences are compared. If, contrary to the retributive, social-debt theory of justice, prior record makes little difference to sentencing judges, Type 4 offenders should be found to be serving the longest prison terms since they were convicted of the most serious crimes.

The total maximum sentences currently being served by the middle-aged inmates are described in Table 7 (below), which shows that Type 1 and Type 3 offenders are relatively alike in terms of their current sentences. This should not be too surprising since the two offender types are similar in terms of the kinds of crimes they committed. Moreover, since juvenile criminal histories were probably not taken into account by the sentencing judges, the two would have appeared similar with respect to their prior records.¹³ The largest differences are those between Type 4 offenders and the rest. No Type 4 offender is under a sentence of death. The offenders under a sentence of death (an estimated 55 altogether) are among the Type 1 and Type 3 offenders.¹⁴ Excluding life and

¹³For a recent review of research on criminal justice policies and practices pertaining to juvenile records in adult criminal proceedings, see Langan and Farrington (1983, in press).

¹⁴Survey estimates based on fewer than 10 cases are considered to be statistically unreliable. The estimate of 55 inmates under sentence of death, while based on only two cases, may nevertheless be fairly accurate. To check the estimate, *Capital Punishment 1979* (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1980), which provides nationwide information on prisoners under sentence of death, was consulted. Table 29 in *Capital Punishment 1979* reports that in 1979, 72 (out of 567) State prisoners under sentence of death were 40 years of age or older. The report does not state how many of the 72 were males at least age 40 when they entered prison under sentence of death, but the figure may be estimated in (Continued on page 6)

Over their 30-year career, the 3,419 Type 1 offenders collectively had amassed a record of 17,940 juvenile and adult incarcerations, or an average of a little over five incarcerations each (see Table 6). These five confinements represent nearly 11 years of confinement for each Type 1 offender, or about 35% of each Type 1 offender's 30-year criminal career. Viewed another way, the typical Type 1 offender had spent about a fourth of his lifetime in some form of confinement. The Type 3 career averaged three incarcerations each and 6 years of confinement over an average career span of 20 years, meaning that the typical Type 3 offender had spent about 30% of his criminal career and about 13% of his total lifetime in confinement.

Current sentence

Type 4 offenders were currently imprisoned characteristically for violent crimes (representing the most serious crimes) and Type 1 and 3 offenders for property crimes (including robbery) and drug crimes (together representing less serious crimes). The fact that the most serious crimes are characteristic of

Table 7. Median and percent distribution of current maximum sentences by type of criminal career

	Type of criminal career				Total population (23,162)
	1 (3,249)	2 (269)	3 (8,918)	4 (10,732)	
Maximum sentence length					
Less than 2 years	5.3	10.4	4.1	6.0	5.2
2 to 4.9 years	14.9	36.1	17.7	18.8	18.0
5 to 7.9 years	17.9	32.0	16.8	20.9	19.0
8 to 14.9 years	23.7	0.0	22.2	15.0	13.8
15 to 24.9 years	12.7	21.6	17.9	16.5	16.5
25 or more years	10.3	0.0	8.6	10.2	9.5
Life	14.4	0.0	12.3	12.6	12.6
Death	.8	0.0	.3	0.0	.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Median years	9.3	5.4	9.6	7.6	8.5

Note: Detail may not add to total because of rounding. Numbers in parentheses refer to population estimates on which table figures were calculated.

death sentences, Type 4 offenders are serving an average¹⁵ maximum sentence of 7.6 years compared to 9.3 years for Type 1 offenders and 9.6 years for Type 3 offenders. As can also be seen, proportionately more Type 4 offenders are serving a sentence of less than 8 years. It thus appears that Type 1 and Type 3 offenders pay a price for their past crimes that is reflected in the longer maximum sentences they receive.¹⁶ This is further illustrated by the fact that the percentage of Type 1 offenders (15.2%) and the percentage of Type 3 offenders (12.6%) that receive a maximum sentence of life imprisonment or death are very close to the percentage of Type 4 offenders (12.6%) that receive a life sentence.

Background characteristics of men who entered prison in middle age

The report thus far has been largely concerned with distinguishing among career types on the basis of age-related recidivism characteristics. Inherent in the career typology is that Type 1 offenders, for example, begin their criminal careers in adolescence and continue their involvement in crime through young adulthood and into middle age. Given their inherently long exposure period, it is not surprising that Type 1 offenders committed the most crime per offender, spent the most time in confinement, and accounted for a disproportionate share of all the terms of confinement served by the middle-aged offenders. In looking now briefly at differences among the offenders that are not inherent in the typology, the aim is not one to attempt some causal explanation of criminal careers but simply to obtain a broader picture of these men.

Tables 8 and 9 present selected background characteristics of the inmates. In looking at Tables 8 and 9, an image of Type 1, Type 3, and (to a lesser extent)

¹⁴ (Continued from page 5)

the following way. This study estimates that, of all males in prison who are age 40 or older, 76% were at least 40 when they entered prison (see note 4 above). Applying this percentage to the count of persons 40 or older who were under sentence of death in 1979 (and assuming they were all male), it is estimated that, of these 72 males, 55 were at least 40 when they entered prison under sentence of death (76% of 72 = 55). While the survey estimate and this estimate coincide, and while it may therefore be safe to assume that the figure of 55 is probably fairly accurate, it would not be safe to assume very much about how these 55 are distributed across the four types. Despite what the survey found, there may have been Type 2 and Type 4 inmates under sentence of death in 1979.

¹⁵The average used is the median.

¹⁶Almost all the inmates have a minimum sentence as well as a maximum sentence. When minimum sentences are examined, it is learned that Type 1 and Type 3 offenders also average longer minimum sentences than Type 4 offenders. Minimum sentences rather than maximum sentences may more accurately reflect the prison term an inmate will ultimately serve since parole release (the method of release for about 70% of all inmates) is most closely linked to minimum sentences. Whether minimum or maximum sentences are examined, the same conclusion is drawn: Type 1 and Type 3 offenders pay a price for their prior criminal record.

Table 8. Selected background characteristics by type of criminal career

Characteristic	Type of criminal career				Total population (24,398)
	1 (3,419)	2 (299)	3 (9,316)	4 (11,362)	
Percent:					
With family member who served time	47.4	40.5	28.7	17.5	26.3
With less than 9th grade education	43.6	71.2	36.4	42.7	40.9
Never married	21.6	20.0	19.2	10.2	15.4
Who had children (of those never married)	32.4	0.0	28.1	15.5	24.6
Unemployed prior to current offense	29.7	20.7	23.1	19.9	22.5
Who received welfare	8.5	0.0	4.1	3.5	4.4
Who received illegal income	10.4	9.4	7.0	1.3	4.9
With military service	35.9	20.3	56.1	50.7	50.3
With dishonorable, undesirable, or bad conduct discharge (of those with military service)	57.2	0.0	27.2	13.5	23.5

Note: Detail may not add to total shown because of rounding. Estimated values of less than about 300 are based on too few cases to be statistically reliable. Numbers in parentheses refer to population estimates on which table figures were calculated.

Type 4 offenders gradually emerges of a kind of person whose life has had repeated difficulties, not only with the law but also with such other areas of life as education, marriage, parenthood, military service, employment, and drug and alcohol use, in brief—

Family background: Overall, 26.3% of the inmates come from families that included at least one family member with an incarceration record. Type 1 offenders have the highest percentage, with nearly 50% having such a family background. Type 4 offenders are least likely (17.5%) to come from one of these families.

Educational attainment: 40.9% of all the inmates have less than a ninth grade education and only slight differences are observed between the offender types. Nevertheless, middle-aged inmates differ substantially from the general public, since only about 16% of all persons between the ages of 45 and 54 had less than a ninth grade education in 1979 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980).

Marital status: Overall, 15.4% of the inmates reported never having been married. Type 1 and Type 3 offenders were the most likely never to have been married (21.6% and 19.2% respectively). Inmates, regardless of type, again appear to differ substantially from the general public. As an indication, a 1975 survey of the general public found that 5.1% of all males aged 41 to 50 were never married (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980).

Parenthood: Table 8 reports that, among those who were never married, nearly 25% had children. Type 1 and Type 3 offenders are the most likely to have fathered children outside of marriage (32.4% and 28.1%, respectively, of those who were never married).

Employment: Type 1 offenders were the most likely (30%) to have been unemployed in the month preceding the commission of their imprisonment offense. Overall, 22.5% of the inmates

were unemployed at the time of their imprisonment offense. The unemployment rate in 1979 for men aged 45 to 54 was 8.6% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980), and so the inmates again are found to differ from the general public.

Income: In the year preceding the arrest that led to their current imprisonment, Type 1 offenders appear to be the ones most likely (8.5%) to have been receiving welfare funds. Type 1 and Type 3 offenders are the most likely ones (10.4% and 7% respectively) to have been receiving illegal income in the year before the arrest leading to their current confinement.

Military service: Again, the middle-aged criminals are found to differ from the general public. In 1979, more than 61% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980) of all males aged 45 to 49 had prior military service. By contrast, 50.3% of the inmates had prior service. The relatively low participation rates for Type 1 offenders (35.9%) might be due to their adolescent and young adult criminal records, which sometimes disqualify persons from military service. Among those who did serve in the military, many appeared to have become involved in serious difficulties. As can be seen, nearly 60% of the Type 1 offenders who were veterans received a dishonorable, undesirable, or bad-conduct discharge.

How does this compare to the general public? From the period 1965 to 1980, only about 3% of all separations from military service were through undesirable, dishonorable, or bad-conduct discharges (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981).

Drug use (Table 9): Type 1 and Type 3 offenders evidence similar drug-use patterns. Together they account for 85% of the heroin users and 79% of the marijuana and hashish users. Type 4 offenders reported substantially less involvement with drugs.

Alcohol use (Table 9): Most of the

men, regardless of career type, have a serious problem with alcohol. Overall, nearly two-thirds were in an alcohol abuse treatment program at some point in their lifetime. In addition, about half had been drinking at the time of their current offense and about one-third had been drunk at that time. Whether or to what extent their use of alcohol contributed to their criminality cannot be determined from the survey data. The findings reported here at least raise the suspicion that alcohol use by these middle-aged men is somehow implicated in their criminal careers.

Policy implications

This final section of the report briefly discusses policy implications of the findings. Owing to the limited knowledge concerning criminal careers, it must be recognized that the policy implications rest to an unfortunately large extent on untested ideas and assumptions.

The report's most surprising finding was that inmates with the shortest records—the Type 4's, imprisoned only in middle age—constitute the single most prevalent type of middle-aged inmate. To account for it, the theory of retributive, social-debt justice was invoked. The distribution of crimes and penalties across the offender types was found to be consistent with the idea that retribution and social debt both exercise powerful determining influences over who is sent to prison, for what and for how long.

The theory of retributive, social-debt justice, however, probably does not tell the whole story. It seems doubtful that the middle-aged inmates with the shortest records could constitute nearly half of all the middle-aged inmates unless a great many middle-aged men with criminal records ended their criminal careers by age 40.¹⁷ Research completed by Blumstein seems to confirm this: most persons who begin their criminal career at age 18, for example, drop out of crime by the time they reach age 30 (Blumstein, et al. 1982:72). The reasons people end their criminal careers may be just as important for crime control purposes as the reasons for beginning criminal careers. In an investigation nearly completed, Dr. Neal Shover learned from interviews with some middle-aged men who were incarcerated offenders in young adulthood but were no longer criminally active, that a principal

¹⁷The distribution of crimes and punishments is probably also consistent with other theoretical explanations of justice besides the retributive, social-debt theory. Selective incapacitation, for example, might account for the fact that Type 1 and Type 3 offenders averaged longer prison terms than Type 4 offenders.

¹⁸Although many thousands of men reach middle age with a past criminal record of confinement in a juvenile or adult institution, it is nevertheless true that a male's lifetime chances of ever being confined are very low. One study (Greenfeld, 1981: Table V) estimates that only about 2 or 3% of all males enter middle age with a confinement record in their past.

Table 9. Selected drug and alcohol use characteristics by type of criminal career

Characteristic	Type of criminal career				Total population (24,398)
	1 (3,419)	2 (299)	3 (9,316)	4 (11,362)	
Ever used heroin	23.6%	19.6%	24.1%	5.2%	15.2%
Ever used marijuana or hashish	47.4	41.6	38.9	19.8	31.2
Ever used amphetamines, barbiturates, LSD, PCP, or other drugs	26.9	19.3	19.1	6.7	14.4
At time of current offense:					
Under the influence of drugs	17.8	19.7	14.2	5.4	10.7
Under influence of heroin	8.6	9.4	8.4	2.1	5.5
Had been drinking	55.6	51.8	49.3	48.8	50.0
Was drunk	50.0	51.8	36.3	35.0	37.2
Ever in an alcohol abuse treatment program	72.2	69.9	63.3	62.8	64.4

Note: Detail may not add to total shown because of rounding. Estimated values of less than about 300 are based on too few cases to be statistically reliable. Numbers in parentheses refer to population estimates on which table figures were calculated.

reason for dropping out of crime was the criminal justice system.¹⁹ The whole criminal justice process—of repeatedly being arrested, appearing in court and then having to adjust to prison, of dealing with the police, prosecutors, judges, correctional officers, and younger inmates—eventually came to be seen by these men as a tiring ordeal. Obviously, the criminal justice system does not wear down all offenders in this way: the Type 1 and Type 3 offenders in this study might be evidence of that. The fact that Type 1 and Type 3 offenders do not constitute more of the middle-aged inmates than they do may nevertheless be the gradual result of the system's "wearing down" of offenders. This possibility stands as a challenge to those who believe that the criminal justice system has no effect on the crime problem.

Many of the background characteristics examined in this report and found to distinguish the different career types (e.g., educational attainment, military service conduct, alcohol use) had to do with noncriminal behavior that comes to the attention of public agencies and is frequently recorded in agency records (e.g., school records, military service records). The potential value of such records to criminal justice officials has recently been explored by two Rand Corporation researchers. On the basis of their study to determine the utility of official criminal records for identifying the most serious offenders, they concluded that "official records provide a very limited and usually misleading picture of the seriousness of any given offender's criminal behavior" (Chaiken and Chaiken, 1982:24). They further concluded on the basis of their research that the information contained in the records of non-

¹⁹Dr. Shover's research is being supported through a grant (#80-JJ-CX-0047) awarded by the National Institute of Justice. Findings reported here are based on a seminar presented by Dr. Shover during his term as an Institute Visiting Fellow.

criminal justice agencies "could give prosecutors, judges, and other criminal justice officials a clearer sense of seriousness than the nature of the current conviction crime or officially recorded prior offenses" (Chaiken and Chaiken, 1982:24). They (1982:24) recommended that a study be undertaken to determine the feasibility of collecting such information and its potential for identifying the most dangerous offenders.

It will be recalled that a very substantial proportion of middle-aged men in prison in 1979 were Type 4 offenders who had committed a violent crime.²⁰ It is likely (though the survey does not deal with the issue) that many of the Type 4 violent offenders were engaged in domestic violence. Thus, if the criminal justice system could somehow prevent domestic violence, substantially fewer victims of such crimes might result, with a consequent decrease in the number of middle-aged men sent to prison. The findings from a study funded by the Police Foundation suggest that opportunities may exist for police intervention to prevent domestic violence (Police Foundation, 1977). This study of domestic assaults and homicides in Kansas City found that "in the two years preceding the domestic assault or homicide, the police had been at the address of the incident for disturbance calls at least once in about 85% of the cases, and at least five times in about 50% of the cases" (Police Foundation, 1977:9). These findings do not indicate how the police might take advantage of opportunities to prevent domestic violence, but they do offer encouragement that further study of the problem may produce practical benefits. In this regard, the recently announced recommendation of the President's Task Force on Victims of Crime appears to be worth serious consideration:

²⁰Type 4 offenders incarcerated for a violent crime represent an estimated 31% of all the inmates who entered prison in middle age.

The President should establish a Task Force to study the serious problem of violence within the family, including violence against children, spouse abuse, and abuse of the elderly, and to review and evaluate national, state, and local efforts to address this problem.

(President's Task Force on Victims, 1982:49)

Whether this report identifies few or many candidates for prison diversion programs will probably depend on one's view of what prisons should accomplish and what kinds of crime ought to result in imprisonment. There are concerned people who believe that prisons should be reserved for violent criminals and that far too many offenders are being sent to prison for property offenses and other nonviolent crimes. A finding of this study was that about 40% of the inmates were serving time for property and other nonviolent crimes. But it should be recalled that these were often inmates who had a prior record of violence. Thus, violent offenders in prison are more numerous than their current commitment offense labels indicate.²¹

One of the study's most striking findings was that two out of every three of these middle-aged men have a problem with alcohol serious enough to have led to their participation in an alcohol abuse treatment program at some point in their lifetime. It may be that these men drink continually and that the fact that 50% were drinking at the time of their commitment offense does not have much significance. In the absence of additional information, a firm conclusion cannot be drawn. Prior research does, however, indicate that many inmates with alcohol problems are not participating in prison-operated programs. Petersilia and Honig (1980: Fig. S.1) found that while about 30% of the prison inmates in three States were found to have a "high need for alcohol rehabilitation," only about a third of those were in treatment while confined. So long as a plausible basis exists for believing that alcoholism in some offenders poses a threat to the public safety, and so long as it is reasonable to assume that alcohol abuse treatment programs might possibly help by rehabilitating offenders who might otherwise continue to

²¹Specifically, 58.7% of the middle-aged inmates were currently in prison for a violent crime; 68.2% were currently or previously in prison for a violent crime.

drink and drive or drink and assault, the continued availability of alcohol treatment programs in prisons will likely remain as a possible policy implication deriving from studies of incarcerated offenders.

The subject of public safety suggests an aspect of all criminal careers that for too long has been neglected: the victims. As a group, the 24,398 middle-aged offenders studied in this report were responsible for substantial numbers of crime victims over their criminal careers. Regarding taking lives alone, 7,477 deaths are collectively attributed to the men,²² and that translates to one human life for every three middle-aged inmates. The President's Task Force on Victims of Crime (1982:56-85) recently announced 44 recommendations on ways in which the criminal justice system might give greater recognition to the plight of crime victims. This study suggests an additional way. Given both the long criminal careers of Type 1 and Type 3 offenders and the criminal justice system's historical neglect of the crime victim, it is recommended that official criminal history records be revised to reflect accurately and completely the cumulative harm and injury done to victims by repeat offenders and that a cumulative record of victim harm become a routine part of the sentencing proceeding.

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²²More precisely, an examination of current and prior incarcerations for murder, homicide or manslaughter yielded the following results:
633 Type 1 offenders incarcerated for 819 deaths;
83 Type 2 offenders for 88 deaths;
2,202 Type 3 offenders for 2,641 deaths; and
3,867 Type 4 offenders for 3,929 deaths.

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