

Were Wolfgang's chronic offenders psychopaths? On the convergent validity between psychopathy and career criminality

Michael G. Vaughn^a, Matt DeLisi^{b,*}

^a School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, United States

^b Department of Sociology, Iowa State University, 203A East Hall, Ames, IA 50011-1070, United States

Abstract

Both the criminal career and psychopathy literatures have empirically shown that approximately 5 percent of the criminal population accounts for the preponderance of the incidence of crime; however, these areas of inquiry are largely independent. The current study sought to integrate these literatures using a state population of incarcerated delinquents ($n = 723$). Descriptive, regression, and ROC-AUC analyses produced significant evidence of the effects of personality and affective psychopathic traits on career criminality net the effects of demographic and mental health controls. Psychopathic traits nearly doubled the total explanatory power of the regression model for career criminality and correctly predicted career criminal membership with accuracies ranging from 70 to 88 percent. Implications of these findings and suggestions for increased integration of criminal career and psychopathy research are proffered.

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Introduction

The seminal work that established the contemporary understanding of career criminals was *Delinquency in a Birth Cohort* published by Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin in 1972. The study followed 9,945 males born in Philadelphia in 1945 and who lived in the city at least from ages ten to eighteen. They found that nearly two-thirds of the population never experienced a police contact and that 35 percent of the population had. Based on this, one can be comforted to know that most people in a population are law-abiding to the extent that the police never contact them for deviant behavior. For the minority of persons whom were actually contacted by police, the police contacts were rare occurrences occurring just once, twice, or three times. On the other hand, some youth experienced more frequent interaction with police. According to Wolfgang et al. (1972), persons with five or more police contacts were chronic or habitual offenders. Of the nearly 10,000 boys, only 627 members, just 6 percent of the population, qualified as habitual offenders. The chronic 6 percent, however, accounted for 52 percent of the delinquency in the entire cohort, 63 percent of all

index offenses, 71 percent of the murders, 73 percent of the rapes, 82 percent of the robberies, and 69 percent of the aggravated assaults. Herein was the quantifiable evidence that a small minority of high-rate offenders known as career criminals were guilty of perpetrating the majority of all criminal acts in a population.

A second and improved study examined a cohort of 13,160 males and 14,000 females born in Philadelphia in 1958 (Tracy, Wolfgang, & Figlio, 1990). Overall, the 1958 cohort committed crime at higher rates than the 1945 cohort and demonstrated greater involvement in the most serious forms of crime, but roughly the same proportion of persons, 33 percent, experienced arrest prior to adulthood. Approximately 7 percent of the population members were habitual offenders, and they accounted for 61 percent of all delinquency, 60 percent of the murders, 75 percent of the rapes, 73 percent of the robberies, and 65 percent of the aggravated assaults. Across research designs, analytical methods, and data sources selected from North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and Australia, criminologists have repeatedly affirmed the empirical regularity that a small subgroup of offenders, or career criminals, accounts for the bulk of delinquency occurring in a society (for reviews, see Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visher, 1986; DeLisi, 2005; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003; Weiner, 1989).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 515 294 8008; fax: +1 515 294 2303.

E-mail address: delisi@iastate.edu (M. DeLisi).

Curiously, the study of career criminals is largely independent of the study of psychopathy. Psychopathy is a clinical construct defined by a constellation of interpersonal, affective, lifestyle, and behavioral characteristics that manifest in multifarious antisocial behaviors. Psychopaths are grandiose, emotionally cold, manipulative, callous, arrogant, dominant, irresponsible, short-tempered persons who tend to violate social norms and victimize others without guilt or anxiety. They are human predators without conscience (Blair, Mitchell, & Blair, 2005; Cleckley, 1941; Hare, 1991, 1993; Patrick, 2006). Furthermore, there appears to be strong empirical overlap between the constructs of career criminality and psychopathy. Consider this observation from Hare (1999, p. 186), “One of the interesting findings to emerge from this research is that in spite of their small numbers—perhaps 1 percent of the general population—psychopaths make up a significant portion of our prison populations and are responsible for a markedly disproportionate amount of serious crime and social distress.” This is essentially the same conclusion reached by criminologists that study habitual offenders.

For decades, the career criminal/criminal career and psychopathy literatures have existed in relative isolation from each other as if these constructs were ships passing in the night. If both literatures indicate that approximately 5 percent of the population is responsible for the majority of antisocial acts, to what degree are the literatures converging on the same phenomenon? The current study sought to provide a preliminary answer to this question using a large population of adjudicated and institutionalized juvenile delinquents. By examining the predictive validity between psychopathy and career criminality, the current authors attempted to bolster the empirical and conceptual bridge between these literatures that together focus on society’s most violent and recalcitrant offenders. The following literature review focuses rather specifically on criminal career research that incorporated analyses or discussion of psychopathy and psychopathy research that examined the criminal careers of psychopaths.

Literature review

Psychopathy in criminal career research

“There has been a recurrent tendency for scholars to gravitate toward the concept of psychopathy to illuminate criminality that is so apparent at such an early age that it appears to be innate” (DeLisi, 2005, p. 81). In the early decades of the twentieth century, Glueck and Glueck (1930, 1943) found that psychopathy was a useful variable to differentiate delinquents from nondelinquents. They described psychopathic offenders as openly destructive, antisocial, asocial, and less amenable to therapeutic or educative efforts. Empirically, Glueck and Glueck (1943) found that the prevalence of psychopathy was almost two orders of magnitude greater among a delinquent sample than a matched, nondelinquent control group. Gough’s (1948) sociological theory of psychopathy summarized a set of characteristics that typified psychopathic offenders. These characteristics included insensitivity to social demands or others, shallow

emotionality, self-centeredness coupled with a complete lack of empathy, impulsive behavior, lack of stress or anxiety over social maladjustment, gross irresponsibility, and emotional poverty. In the course of their longitudinal study of offending careers, Robins and O’Neal (1958) advised that:

A relatively circumscribed segment of the population [is] distinguished by a life-long failure to conform to the social mores...it seems probable that criminal activities are more frequently only one expression of a grossly disturbed life pattern of which transiency, violence, and unstable family relations, as well as crime, are typical. Even as children, these boys engaged in antisocial behavior in most contexts, were thoroughly irresponsible, and showed neither concern for their actions nor remorse for the persons whom they affected. (p. 170)

Although some early investigators of criminal careers utilized the construct of psychopathy, it clearly was not central to the longitudinal study of criminal behavior. Attempts to create criminal typologies largely ignored psychopathy with the exception of Gibbons (1988) who devised the term “psychopathic assaultists” for a very specific type of offender. In fact, the use of personality factors, which is central to psychopathy research, was viewed as empirically weak and marginalized within the mainstream study of crime (Schuessler & Cressey, 1950; Tennenbaum, 1977; Waldo & Dinitz, 1967).

Within the last twenty years, a series of works (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Moffitt, 1993; Raine, 1993; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985) signaled a paradigm shift in criminology whereby a focus on individual-level factors, such as psychopathology, became increasingly important to the study of serious and violent criminal behavior. Interestingly, much research in this area utilized constructs that were nearly identical to psychopathy without actually referring to them as such. For instance, Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) general theory of crime advanced that low self-control was the indispensable predictor of crime and other antisocial behaviors. The construct describes individuals who are impulsive, self-centered, and insensitive to others, hot-tempered, irresponsible, and prone to risky, myopic endeavors. These individuals weakly attach to conventional adult responsibilities evidenced by strained family relations, unemployment, and failure at school. Empirically, low self-control has been linked to multifaceted forms of antisocial behavior, so much that it has emerged as one of the predominant individual-level variables in criminology (Pratt & Cullen, 2000). Although the constellation of traits that typifies low self-control is essentially an abbreviated description of the behavioral traits of psychopathy, criminologists have only recently investigated the overlap between the constructs (cf. Cauffman, Steinberg, & Piquero, 2005; DeLisi, 2003; Unnever, Cullen, & Pratt, 2003; Wiebe, 2003).

In 1986, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) created the Program on Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency that resulted in three prospective longitudinal studies, the Denver Youth Survey, Pittsburgh Youth Study, and Rochester Youth Development Study. The panel studies produced comparable findings about

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