



Adulthood-limited offending: How much is there to explain?

Fredrik Sivertsson

Department of Criminology, Stockholm University, Universitetsvägen 10A, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Criminal career
Developmental and life-course criminology
Adult-onset offending
Gender
Population studies
Growth curve

ABSTRACT

Purpose: The current study explores male and female adult-onset offending careers in a Swedish population-based longitudinal dataset comprising five successive birth cohorts which are followed prospectively on the basis of detailed conviction data to age 50.

Methods: Adult-onset offenders are compared to juvenile-onset offenders on a number of criminal career measures. Growth curve analysis is employed to visualize average trajectories for convictions during adulthood.

Results: The study found that 22% of convicted males and 38% of convicted females were convicted for the first time for offenses committed between ages 25 and 50. The adult-onset males contributed 19% of all male adulthood convictions and 16% of male violent convictions in adulthood. The adult-onset females contributed 47% of all female adulthood convictions and 48% of female violent convictions in adulthood. While the adolescent-onset trajectories displayed generally decreasing trends for offending in adulthood, adult-onset females displayed increasing trends in relation to trajectories of violence and drug/alcohol-related offending as they approached middle adulthood.

Conclusions: There is a need for developmental and life-course theories of crime to be explicit in explaining adult-onset offending, particularly in relation to gender disparities.

1. Introduction

There has recently been an increasing interest, and growing controversy, regarding adult-onset offending within the field of developmental and life-course criminology. There remain a number of ambiguities with regard to the magnitude and seriousness of adult-onset offending and, connected to this, there is a theoretical controversy concerning how much attention should be devoted to explanations focused on this category of offenders. In essence, this controversy has concerned whether developmental theories, such as Moffitt's (1993) dual taxonomy, are sufficient to account for adult-onset offending, or whether there is a need for theories whose focus is instead directed at more proximate explanations during adulthood (Sohoni, Paternoster, McGloin, & Bachman, 2014). A recent review has noted that "(a) lthough there is a clear relationship between offending extremity and precocious onset, there is nevertheless compelling evidence of serious, and at times severe offenders who did not begin their criminal careers until well into adulthood" (DeLisi & Piquero, 2011, p. 294). Some studies suggest that adult-onset criminal careers tend to be brief and non-serious (e.g. Moffitt, 2006), while others have found that the majority of those with the most severe criminal careers were first arrested in adulthood (e.g. Delisi, 2006).

As Beckley et al. (2016) have observed the ambiguities surrounding the magnitude of adult-onset offending are largely due to

methodological heterogeneity. In particular, the age cut-off used to mark the beginning of adulthood has recently been a matter of some debate. The lion's share of the onset literature has defined adult-onset as being first-time arrested or convicted at age 18 or later (Eggleston & Laub, 2002; Delisi, 2006; Delisi et al., 2018; Gomez-Smith & Piquero, 2005; Kratzer & Hodgins, 1999; Vere van Koppen, 2018). In a critique of the use of this cut-off, however, Moffitt (2006) has argued that "(a) lthough adult-onset crime begins at age eighteen in legal terms, in developmental terms for contemporary cohort samples, it begins sometime after age 25 [...] In our view, the existence of individuals whose official crime record begins after age eighteen does not constitute a threat to the taxonomy" (p. 286; see also Sohoni et al., 2014). This argument was mainly based on Arnett's (2000) life-course typology, which posits that age 18 through age 24 captures a prolonged period of adolescence, or "emerging adulthood", during which individuals are still loosely attached to adulthood markers such as stable employment and relationships. In addition, official onset may lag behind self-reported onset by a few years, which increases the risk for confusing adolescence-onset offending with adult-onset offending when using a legal definition of adulthood (Moffitt, 2006).

On the basis of a "social" cut-off age for measuring adulthood, it may be argued that the bulk of previous criminal career research has overestimated adult-onset offending. At the same time, very few studies have been able to examine criminal careers in a population-

E-mail address: fredrik.sivertsson@criminology.su.se.

representative cohort of individuals up to midlife, which may have led to an underestimation of adult-onset offending. In their review, Beckley et al. (2016) suggest that “studies beyond the CSDD and outside of the USA would help to address generalizability of descriptive data about adult-onset offending” (p. 67). They also note the lack of research on female adult-onset offending and suggest that “(l)arger population-based samples and offender-based samples will be needed to study the prevalence and correlates of adult-onset crime among women” (p. 79).

Building on the social age typology developed by Arnett (2000), the aim of the current study is to examine the adult criminal careers of males and females who were convicted for the first time for crimes committed at age 25 or later, and to compare these to the adult criminal careers of those who were convicted for the first time in adolescence (aged 15–17) and emerging adulthood (aged 18–24). I employ a Swedish dataset comprising five successive birth cohorts of males and females born between 1960 and 1964, which follows these cohorts prospectively through 2015, and which contains detailed information on convictions, such as the timing and type of offending. The data set also allows for controls for mortality and migration. The research questions examined are: 1) How large a proportion of convicted offenders were convicted for the first time for offenses they committed between age 25 and age 50? 2) How do criminal career measures such as the number of lifetime convictions and career length differ between adult-onset offenders and juvenile-onset¹ offenders? 3) Is there an association between age of onset and recidivism among adult-onset offenders? 4) How large a proportion of adulthood convictions, for different offense types, are accounted for by adult-onset offenders? 5) How does the average adult-onset offending trajectory differ from the average adulthood offending trajectories of juvenile-onset offenders? 6) How do the average violent-, property-, and drug/alcohol-related offending trajectories in adulthood differ between adult-onset offenders and juvenile-onset offenders? These research questions are systematically examined by gender.

The examination of adult-onset offending careers should be informative in relation to both crime prevention policies and developmental and life-course theories of offending. Although the discovery of early risk factors provides knowledge on the precursors of criminal behavior, the first conviction often presents the first opportunity for the criminal justice system to intervene (Svensson, 2002). Given that there is some relevant proportion of offenders who are convicted for the first time for offenses they committed in adulthood, it is therefore important to evaluate their risk for recidivism and how much they contribute to the total volume of adulthood crime. The importance for developmental and life-course theories of being able to account for officially recorded adult-onset offending should be related both to the magnitude of this phenomenon and to the seriousness of the remainder of their criminal careers (van Koppen, 2018). Particularly little is known about adult-onset offending among females, although there is an increasing interest within developmental and life-course criminology in studying gendered patterns of continuity and change in offending (Macmillan & McCarthy, 2014). Because many developmental theories, such as Moffitt's taxonomy, are gender-neutral (see Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001), the systematic examination of adult-onset offending careers within and across gender ought to bring an extra dimension to the controversy surrounding the adult-onset offender.

1.1. Adult-onset offending in theory

Any longitudinal study that follows individuals from the age of criminal responsibility up through some part of their adulthood will find that some proportion of these individuals are registered for offenses for the first time in relation to an offense committed in adulthood

¹ By juvenile-onset offenders are here meant those who were first-time convicted for crimes they committed prior to age 25 (see also Beckley et al., 2016).

(Eggleston & Laub, 2002; Beckley et al., 2016). The theoretical controversy relates to what this observation means. Sohoni et al. (2014) have suggested that developmental and life-course theories may be divided into symmetrical and asymmetrical theories. Broadly speaking, asymmetrical theories posit that adulthood offending captures continuity in antisocial behavior and that the fundamental causes of adult-onset offending may therefore be sought in early life. In contrast, symmetrical theories direct their attention at proximate factors preceding the criminal event relatively recently. The two most influential theories within developmental and life-course criminology are probably: Moffitt's (1993) dual taxonomy and Laub and Sampson's (2003) general age-graded theory of informal social control.

According to Moffitt, persistence in crime is accounted for by the theory of life-course persistent offending. The theory posits that persistence in crime is a feature that characterizes a small and distinct group of maladaptive individuals who begin their antisocial path early in life and continue well into adulthood. The main explanation for this stability in antisocial behavior is found in traits whose roots are found in early infancy or even prenatally, and which in interaction with an often criminogenic environment cause offending across the entire life span. An early criminal record captures continuity in an antisocial lifestyle that started long before the age of criminal responsibility.

While Moffitt's theory of life-course persistence has received a great deal of attention, much less attention has been given to the other part of the taxonomy, the theory of adolescence-limited offending (Moffitt, 2006). This theory sets out to explain why so many teenagers engage in normative delinquency during youth but then desist from crime in connection with the transition to adulthood. As adolescents age, the gap between biological and social maturity begins to close and adolescence-limited offenders gradually transition to adulthood status, which results in a decline both in the aggregate age-crime relationship and in the within-individual development of offending for this normative group of offenders during the juvenile phase of life. While the majority of serious and frequent adulthood offending should be accounted for by the theory of life-course persistent offending, Moffitt (2006) has argued that the main portion adult-onset offending could probably be accommodated by the adolescence-limited theory, because the criminal careers of adult-onset offenders are similar to those of adolescence-limited offenders in tending to be brief and non-serious (p. 287).

In contrast to Moffitt, Laub and Sampson (2003) posit that the same mechanisms of informal social control are at work for everyone, and that they also account for both stability and change in criminal offending. The age-graded notion suggests that social institutions have different roles over the life course: the school and parents produce informal social control during the juvenile years, whereas employment and marriage are important social institutions during adulthood. Although Laub and Sampson acknowledge that childhood vulnerability is related to subsequent offending, they have strongly opposed the “kinds of people” notion that offending in adulthood is a matter of selection due to childhood risk factors. In contrast, they argue that life events in adulthood may to a substantial degree be described as a random process, and that they have an effect on subsequent offending net of childhood risk factors. In a more general sense, Laub and Sampson therefore argue that the causes of crime should primarily not be sought in the distant past but rather closer in time to the criminal event.

To summarize, asymmetrical theories, here exemplified by Moffitt's dual taxonomy, do not account for the kind of “upward” change in offending behavior that is implied by the existence of adult-onset offenders. The explanations for adult-onset offending, as measured in criminal records, must therefore be sought in the ability of these individuals to persist in crime during adolescence and emerging adulthood while at the same time avoiding detection by the criminal justice system. In contrast, symmetrical theories suggest that positive change may occur for the most hardened offenders, and that vice versa, negative change may occur for individuals who lack a troubled past. The

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات