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OFFENDING PATTERNS IN CRIMINAL CAREERS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF CONVICTED OFFENDERS

Summary

This paper examines selected patterns of offending within the criminal careers of convicted offenders, with a particular focus on specialization (in contrast to versatility) and escalation in offense seriousness. The study is grounded in the criminal career paradigm and life-course criminology, which emphasize the analysis of offending as a dynamic process unfolding over time. The analysis is based on official institutional data derived from correctional practice, using a standardized assessment instrument applied in the classification and evaluation of convicted offenders. Rather than reconstructing complete criminal careers, the study focuses on how selected patterns of offending are identified through institutional assessments of the relationship between current and prior offending. Adopting an exploratory approach, the paper aims to provide an initial empirical insight into the applicability of institutional data for examining key patterns of offending within criminal careers. In doing so, it contributes to the existing literature by addressing a relatively

underexplored empirical context and by highlighting both the analytical potential and methodological limitations of such data in the study of criminal careers.

Keywords: criminal career, offending patterns, specialization, versatility, escalation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding patterns of offending over time represents a central concern in contemporary criminology. Rather than focusing on isolated criminal acts, increasing attention has been directed toward the examination of offending as a dynamic process that unfolds across the life course. This shift has been largely shaped by the development of the criminal career paradigm, which emphasizes the importance of analyzing individual trajectories of criminal behavior and the ways in which they change over time (Blumstein et al., 1986; Piquero et al., 2003).

Within this paradigm, particular attention has been given to the identification and analysis of dimensions that characterize criminal careers, including frequency, duration, seriousness, and co-offending patterns. Examining these dimensions enables a better understanding of both inter-individual and intra-individual changes in criminal behavior over time (Piquero et al., 2003). In this study, the focus is placed on two offending patterns within criminal careers: specialization (in contrast to versatility) and escalation in offense seriousness. Both patterns capture important aspects of continuity and change within criminal careers.

Despite the extensive body of research on criminal careers, empirical findings on these dimensions remain mixed. While some studies suggest that offenders tend to exhibit versatility, others point to the presence of short-term or conditional specialization. Similarly, escalation has been identified in certain offending trajectories, but it is not considered a universal pattern. These inconsistencies are partly attributable to differences in data sources, measurement strategies, and methodological approaches used in criminal career research (Farrington et al., 2019; Piquero et al., 2003).

In this context, the use of institutional data represents both an opportunity and a challenge. On the one hand, such data provide access to systematically collected information on convicted offenders and their criminal histories. On the other hand, they are not primarily designed for detailed longitudinal reconstruction of criminal careers and often rely on simplified or aggregated indicators of offending patterns.

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to explore specialization (in contrast to versatility) and escalation in the offending patterns of convicted offenders, using data derived from correctional practice. The study adopts an exploratory approach and focuses on how these patterns are identified through institutional assessments, rather than through full reconstruction of criminal careers. In doing so, the paper provides an initial empirical insight into selected patterns of offending within an institutional context, while also highlighting the methodological considerations associated with the use of such data.

2. CRIMINAL CAREER PARADIGM AND OFFENDING PATTERNS

The criminal career paradigm provides the theoretical foundation for examining patterns of offending over time, including specialization and escalation. The following sections further examine key concepts and patterns of offending relevant to the present study.

2.1. Criminal Career Paradigm

The criminal career paradigm represents a major shift in criminological research, moving the focus from isolated criminal events to the longitudinal analysis of individual offending behavior. Rather than examining crime as a static phenomenon, this approach conceptualizes offending as a dynamic process that unfolds over time, enabling the analysis of patterns, continuity, and change within individual criminal trajectories (Blumstein et al., 1986; Piquero et al., 2003).

The development of this paradigm was motivated by the need to better understand the dynamics of criminal behavior at the individual level. Earlier criminological research largely relied on aggregate data, focusing on crime rates and distributions within populations, particularly through analyses such as the age-crime curve. While such approaches provided valuable insights, they offered limited understanding of how offending develops, persists, or changes within individuals (Jennings & Fox, 2019; Piquero et al., 2003). The criminal career paradigm addresses this limitation by introducing a longitudinal and individual-centered perspective, emphasizing the importance of tracking offending behavior over time.

Within this framework, a criminal career is defined as the sequence of offenses committed by an individual, regardless of their type, frequency, or seriousness (Blumstein et al., 1986). This definition highlights the heterogeneity of criminal

careers, which may vary considerably in duration, intensity, and structure. Some individuals engage in short-term and sporadic offending, while others exhibit long-term and persistent patterns of criminal involvement.

A key contribution of the criminal career paradigm lies in its identification of multiple indicators and analytical aspects through which offending can be understood. These include prevalence, age of onset, frequency, persistence and desistance, as well as patterns of offending such as specialization and escalation (DeLisi & Piquero, 2011; Piquero et al., 2003). Together, these elements provide a framework for examining both stability and change in criminal behavior across the life course.

Importantly, the paradigm emphasizes that offending behavior reflects both continuity and transformation. The relationship between past and future offending suggests a degree of stability, as prior offending remains one of the strongest predictors of future criminal activity (Blokland & Nieuwebeerta, 2010; Farrington, 2007). At the same time, this continuity does not imply uniformity. Criminal careers are characterized by substantial heterogeneity, with individuals following diverse developmental trajectories shaped by a range of individual and contextual factors (Jennings & Fox, 2019; Piquero et al., 2003).

Within this perspective, the analysis of specific patterns of offending, such as specialization and escalation, represents an important step toward understanding how criminal behavior is structured and how it evolves over time. Focusing on these patterns allows for a more nuanced interpretation of offending trajectories, linking broader theoretical frameworks with empirical observations derived from both longitudinal and institutional data.

2.2. Specialization and Versatility in Offending

One of the central debates within the criminal career paradigm concerns whether offenders tend to specialize in particular types of crime or exhibit versatility by engaging in a wide range of offenses. Specialization is commonly defined as the repeated commission of similar types of offenses over time, whereas versatility (or generalization) refers to involvement in diverse forms of criminal behavior (Mazerolle & McPhedran, 2019).

These concepts are more appropriately understood as two ends of a continuum rather than as mutually exclusive categories (Mazerolle & McPhedran, 2019). Offenders may exhibit varying degrees of specialization at different stages of their criminal careers, and transitions between more specialized and more versatile patterns

are possible over time. In this sense, the distinction between specialization and versatility reflects variation in the structure of offending behavior rather than the existence of fundamentally different types of offenders.

Theoretical interpretations of specialization and versatility are closely linked to broader criminological debates. General theories of crime, such as self-control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), emphasize stable individual propensities and tend to predict versatile offending, as the same underlying traits may manifest across different types of crime depending on situational opportunities. In contrast, typological and developmental approaches suggest that different offending pathways or offender types may be associated with more specialized patterns of offending (Moffitt, 1993; Patterson & Yoerger, 1993). A related distinction concerns heterogeneity versus state dependence explanations of offending. While heterogeneity perspectives attribute repeated offending to stable individual characteristics, state-dependent approaches emphasize the role of prior offending in shaping future behavior through processes such as learning, reinforcement, and adaptation (Paternoster et al., 1997). From this perspective, specialization may emerge as offenders increasingly engage in behaviors that are perceived as effective or rewarding.

Empirical research on specialization has produced mixed and often inconsistent findings. Early studies frequently reported high levels of versatility in offending (Klein, 1984), and subsequent research has largely supported the conclusion that criminal careers are predominantly characterized by versatile patterns, often accompanied by limited or short-term specialization (DeLisi & Piquero, 2011; Piquero et al., 2003). At the same time, evidence suggests that some degree of specialization may emerge under specific conditions, particularly among certain groups of offenders or within specific offense types (Britt, 1996; Farrington et al., 1988).

Importantly, variation in empirical findings is strongly influenced by methodological factors. Differences in data sources, measurement strategies, levels of aggregation of offense categories, and analytical approaches can substantially affect the observed degree of specialization (Nieuwebeerta et al., 2011). In particular, the operationalization of specialization often relies on probabilistic models and transition-based measures, which capture patterns of offense repetition across time. As a result, conclusions regarding the extent of specialization remain sensitive to how the concept is defined and measured.

In this study, specialization is not assessed through a full reconstruction of offense sequences or probabilistic modeling, but through an institutional assessment

of whether the current offense forms part of an established pattern of offending behavior. This approach reflects the constraints of available data, while at the same time providing an exploratory insight into how continuity in offending is recognized within correctional practice.

2.3. Escalation in Offending

In addition to variation in offense types, the criminal career paradigm also addresses changes in the seriousness of offending over time. Escalation refers to an increase in the severity of offenses committed by an individual, while de-escalation denotes a reduction in offense seriousness (Jennings & Fox, 2019).

The study of escalation is closely linked to developmental and life-course theories of offending, which emphasize the dynamic nature of criminal behavior and the influence of changing individual and contextual factors. Within this framework, escalation may reflect processes such as learning, reduced inhibition, or increased involvement in criminal activities over time, while de-escalation may be associated with aging, the strengthening of social bonds, or changes in life circumstances (Farrington, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1995).

Empirical findings on escalation are mixed and context-dependent. Some studies suggest that individuals who engage in more serious forms of offending, particularly violent crime, are more likely to continue committing serious offenses, indicating a degree of continuity in offense seriousness (Farrington et al., 1996; Moffitt et al., 1989). These findings are often interpreted as evidence that escalation may occur within certain offending trajectories, especially among individuals with early onset and high levels of criminal involvement.

However, other research indicates that serious offending is relatively rare and often episodic, and that many offenders do not follow a clear or consistent pattern of escalation (Elliott, 1994; Zimring et al., 2007). In this sense, escalation should not be understood as a universal or linear process, but rather as one possible pattern within a broader range of criminal career trajectories.

Importantly, escalation does not necessarily imply specialization. Increases in offense seriousness may occur within otherwise versatile offending patterns, suggesting that escalation represents a distinct pattern of offending that captures qualitative changes in behavior rather than consistency in offense types. Examining escalation alongside specialization therefore provides a more comprehensive understanding of how offending evolves over time.

In the present study, escalation is assessed through an institutional evaluation of whether the current offense is more serious than previous offenses. While this approach does not allow for a standardized measurement of offense severity across the entire criminal career, it provides an exploratory insight into how changes in offense seriousness are recognized within correctional practice.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on the analysis of official institutional data on convicted offenders and examines selected patterns of offending within criminal careers. The analysis focuses on specialization (in contrast to versatility) and escalation in offense seriousness, drawing on data derived from a standardized assessment instrument applied within the correctional system. Official institutional data are widely used in contemporary criminological research, where administrative records represent a primary and well-established source for examining patterns of offending, particularly in relation to offense seriousness and criminal history.

The sample consists of 85 adult male offenders serving prison sentences longer than three years in a Penitentiary-Correctional Institution in Sremska Mitrovica (Serbia). All individuals included in the sample had at least one prior conviction, excluding the conviction for which they are currently serving a sentence. This enabled the examination of offending patterns beyond a single criminal event and provided a basis for interpreting continuity and change in offending behavior.

Data were collected through document analysis of official institutional records. The study relies on a standardized questionnaire used in the classification and assessment of convicted offenders, namely the Questionnaire for Convicted Offenders Serving Prison Sentences Longer Than Three Years, prescribed within the regulatory framework of the Rulebook on the Treatment, Treatment Program, Classification, and Reclassification of Convicted Persons (Pravilnik o tretmanu, programu postupanja, razvrstavanju i naknadnom razvrstavanju osuđenih lica, Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije, br. 66/2015). This instrument is routinely applied in correctional practice and is based on information obtained from offenders as well as available documentation, including prior convictions and case records.

For the purposes of this study, the analysis is based on selected items from the section of the questionnaire referring to the current criminal offense. These items capture the relationship between the current offense and prior offending and are used in institutional practice as part of the initial assessment of offenders.

The operationalization of specialization and escalation is grounded in the interpretation of these assessment items. Specialization is assessed through the evaluation of whether the current offense forms part of an established pattern of offending behavior. This classification is recorded as a categorical response and reflects a professional assessment of the relationship between the current offense and prior offending, based on available information on previous convictions, offense characteristics, and contextual factors.

A similar logic applies to the operationalization of escalation. The assessment of whether the current offense is more serious than previous offenses is based on a comparative evaluation of the current offense in relation to earlier criminal behavior, drawing on available information on prior offenses and their characteristics.

Although both indicators are recorded as dichotomous variables, they represent outcomes of a structured assessment process conducted within the institutional setting. Professionals in the reception department base their evaluations on descriptions of the current offense, available data on prior convictions, and documented case materials.

The analysis is based on descriptive statistics, focusing on the distribution of these indicators within the sample. In line with the exploratory nature of the study, the aim is to provide an initial empirical insight into selected patterns of offending within criminal careers in an institutional context.

Access to institutional data was granted by the relevant authorities, and all data were anonymized and used exclusively for research purposes in accordance with applicable ethical and legal standards.

The study focuses on selected indicators of specialization and escalation within the criminal careers of convicted offenders, based on institutional assessments of the relationship between current and prior offending.

With regard to specialization, the findings indicate that 73 offenders were assessed as exhibiting an established pattern of offending, while 12 offenders were not classified as having committed offenses as part of a consistent pattern. These results suggest that, within the observed sample, a majority of offenders were assessed as demonstrating continuity in their offending behavior in relation to prior convictions. This may indicate that, within an institutional context, offending behavior is more likely to be interpreted in terms of continuity rather than variability, reflecting both the structure of available data and the logic of assessment practices.

However, this finding should be interpreted with caution. Given the nature of the applied indicator, the observed pattern is more appropriately understood as

reflecting an institutional assessment of consistency in offending behavior rather than a direct measurement of specialization as defined in the criminal career literature. As previous research has consistently shown, offending is often characterized by versatility, with only limited or short-term specialization (DeLisi & Piquero, 2011; Piquero et al., 2003). Accordingly, the results do not provide sufficient grounds to conclude that offenders in this sample are predominantly specialized in a strict criminological sense.

In relation to escalation, 57 offenders were assessed as having committed an offense that is more serious than their previous offenses, whereas 28 offenders were not classified as exhibiting an increase in offense seriousness. This indicates that a substantial proportion of offenders were assessed as demonstrating an upward shift in offense severity, although escalation was not uniformly present across the sample.

These findings may be interpreted in light of existing research indicating that escalation can occur within certain offending trajectories, particularly among individuals with sustained involvement in criminal activity (Farrington et al., 1996; Moffitt et al., 1989). At the same time, the absence of escalation in a notable number of cases supports the view that escalation is not a universal or linear process, but rather one of several possible patterns within criminal careers (Zimring et al., 2007).

Taken together, the findings point to the coexistence of continuity and change in offending patterns. While a majority of offenders were assessed as demonstrating continuity in their offending behavior, changes in offense seriousness were not consistently observed across all cases. This pattern is consistent with the core assumptions of the criminal career paradigm, which emphasize heterogeneity in offending trajectories and the influence of both stable and dynamic factors over the life course (Jennings & Fox, 2019; Piquero et al., 2003).

At the same time, the interpretation of these findings is strongly conditioned by methodological considerations. The indicators used in this study are derived from institutional assessments and represent condensed professional judgments rather than standardized measures of criminal career constructs. Although these assessments are informed by available data on current and prior offending, they inevitably involve a degree of professional judgment and are constrained by the scope and quality of institutional records.

Furthermore, the study relies on a relatively small and specific sample of convicted offenders, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The absence of detailed longitudinal data and the use of simplified indicators also constrain the

analytical precision of the study, particularly in relation to complex patterns such as specialization and escalation.

In this context, the findings should be understood as exploratory and indicative rather than conclusive. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates that institutional data, even when limited, can provide valuable initial insights into offending patterns and may serve as a basis for more comprehensive analyses using more refined measures and richer data sources.

4. CONCLUSION

This study provides an exploratory insight into selected patterns of offending within the criminal careers of convicted offenders, with a focus on specialization (in contrast to versatility) and escalation in offense seriousness. Drawing on institutional data and a standardized assessment instrument, the analysis examined how these patterns are reflected within a specific correctional population.

The findings suggest that offending patterns within the observed sample are characterized by both continuity and variability. A majority of offenders were assessed as demonstrating a consistent pattern of offending, while escalation in offense seriousness was identified in a substantial proportion of cases, although not uniformly across the sample. These findings are broadly consistent with the assumptions of the criminal career paradigm, which emphasize both stability and change in individual offending trajectories, as well as heterogeneity across offenders. At the same time, they point to the importance of considering how institutional contexts shape the identification and interpretation of offending patterns.

However, the interpretation of these findings is subject to several limitations. The study is based on a relatively small and specific sample of convicted offenders, which limits the generalizability of the results. In addition, the use of official institutional data as the primary source of information introduces inherent constraints, as such data reflect only recorded offenses and may not capture the full scope of individual criminal activity. A further limitation concerns the operationalization of key variables. Specialization and escalation were examined through selected indicators derived from a standardized assessment instrument, which represent condensed professional judgments based on the relationship between current and prior offending. While these indicators are grounded in institutional practice and available data, they do not constitute fully standardized or analytically precise measures as defined in the broader criminal career literature.

These limitations reflect the exploratory nature of the study. Rather than providing definitive conclusions, the analysis offers an initial empirical insight into the use of institutional data for examining patterns of offending. At the same time, it highlights the analytical potential of such data, which, when used more systematically, could support more detailed and methodologically robust analyses.

In this sense, the present study represents a preliminary step within a broader research effort aimed at a more comprehensive examination of criminal careers. Future research should seek to utilize a wider range of available data, incorporate additional variables, and apply more refined analytical approaches in order to more accurately capture the complexity of offending patterns over the life course.

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ОБРАСЦИ КРИМИНАЛНОГ ПОНАШАЊА У КРИМИНАЛНОЈ КАРИЈЕРИ: ЕКСПЛОРАТОРНА СТУДИЈА КОД ОСУЂЕНИХ ЛИЦА

Сажетак

Рад се бави испитивањем одабраних образаца криминалног понашања у оквиру криминалне каријере осуђених лица, са посебним фокусом на специјализацију (на супрот генерализацији) и ескалацију у озбиљности кривичних дела. Истраживање је засновано на парадигми криминалне каријере и развојној криминологији животног тока, које наглашавају посматрање криминалног понашања као динамичког процеса који се одвија током времена. Анализа се заснива на подацима из званичне евиденције казнено-поправних завода, прикупљеним у оквиру пенитенцијарне праксе, уз коришћење стандардизованог инструмента за процену и класификацију осуђених лица. Уместо реконструкције целокупних криминалних каријера, рад је усмерен на начин на који се одабрани обрасци криминалног понашања препознају и процењују у оквиру институционалних процена односа између актуелног и претходног криминалног понашања. Полазећи од експлоративног приступа, циљ рада је да пружи иницијални емпиријски увид у могућности примене институционалних података у проучавању кључних образаца криминалног понашања у оквиру криминалних каријера. Тиме се доприноси постојећој литератури кроз осветљавање релативно недовољно истраженог емпиријског контекста, као и кроз указивање на аналитички потенцијал и методолошка ограничења оваквих података у истраживањима криминалне каријере.

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Кључне речи: криминална каријера, обрасци криминалног понашања, специјализација, генерализација, ескалација.