

Growing Focus on Criminal Careers

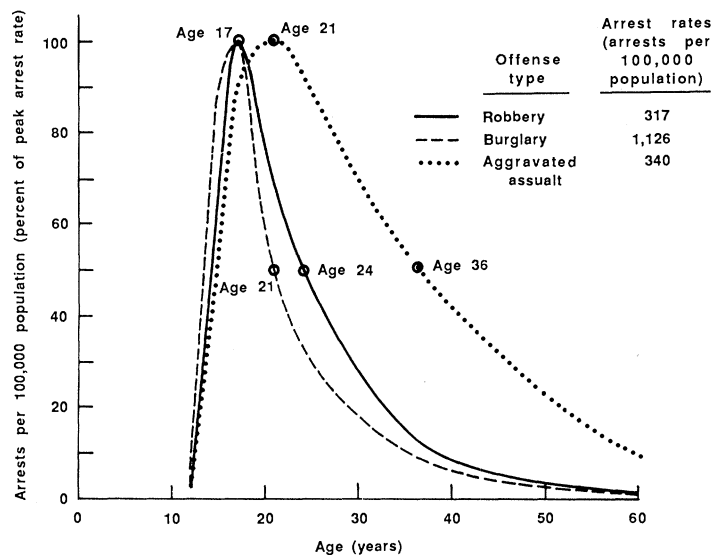
Researchers urge more attention to individual patterns in both research on and disposition of felons, particularly chronic offenders

THE concept of "career criminals" may be emerging as one of the more useful paradigms that crime research has produced. The intractable repeat offender is a type that has always posed the most difficult challenges in the criminal justice system, but until the past decade there have been few systematic attempts to study individual criminal careers or to define the salient characteristics and behavior patterns of inveterate malefactors.

The National Research Council has now produced a 418-page volume summing up

School, the proportion of those incarcerated—300 per 100,000—is matched among developed societies only by South Africa and the Soviet Union. There are 218.2 robberies per 1000 people a year in the United States, compared with 33.4 in West Germany and 2.1 in Japan. Although crime rates have declined somewhat since their 1980 peak, another surge can be expected in a decade when the current baby boomlet now entering first grade achieves adolescence.

Young urban males are the chief offend-



Crime and youth: Age-specific arrest rates show the ages at which burglary, robbery, and aggravated assault decline to half their peak rates. [Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1984]

what is known about *Criminal Careers and "Career Criminals,"* the product of 2 years' work by a panel headed by Alfred Blumstein of Carnegie-Mellon University. One of the most definite findings is that the early onset of criminal behavior, just as of many diseases, is one of the strongest predictors of severity. Another is that high-frequency criminal activity is extensively bound up with heavy drug and alcohol use.

The United States has got a special problem with crime, as speakers reiterated at a 2-day conference on the report held at the National Academy of Sciences. According to John Kaplan of Stanford University Law

ers, particularly young black urban males, who commit violent crimes five times as frequently as whites. According to Jacqueline Cohen of Carnegie-Mellon University, 25% to 45% of urban males are arrested by the age of 18, and 50% of all offenders have records by that age. The number of youths participating in criminal activity shoots up in adolescence, peaking at age 17. It then falls off dramatically, to 50% of the peak rate by age 23.

What criminal career research has shown is that a small proportion of offenders are responsible for the majority of crimes. Most youthful dalliances with crime last no longer

than a year. The average criminal career is short—5 to 10 years—but often devastating. The average robber commits about four robberies a year, but data from Cohen showed that 5% of them commit between 180 and 400 a year.

Drug abuse continues to be underreported and its link with crime underestimated. Drug use is not necessarily a direct precipitant of crime, but it tends to develop in individuals at the same time criminal activity begins. Daily heroin users commit an average of 27 robberies a year, and 52% of all felonies are committed by multiple drug users, Cohen reported. About 65% of a group of felons tested in New York City and Washington, D.C., were found to be on drugs.

Although those engaged in law enforcement have always been aware of a special problem population, patterns have not been systematically analyzed because most criminal research has been cross-sectional. Now, there is widespread agreement that enough knowledge has been gained to move to the next step—large (and very costly) prospective longitudinal studies tracking the development of individual criminals.*

The Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is moving ahead on this front with the announcement that it will fund three new studies—at the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Colorado, and the State University of New York at Albany. A variety of cohorts, starting with 6-year-olds, will be subjected to periodic measurements over 5 years (ideally extended up to 15 years). Although the studies are separate, investigators have met to agree on a common core set of measurements. The combined samples will add up to about 6000. Urban minority groups will be disproportionately represented, as will children who are already manifesting types of behavior problems that tend to be precursors of criminal careers. Delbert Elliott of the University of Colorado says that in addition to the usual demographic and social variables, his project will test children for elements such as social bonding, conformity, and moral development.

Research rarely has a direct beneficial effect on the crime rate. A noteworthy exception has been a recent study of domestic violence in Minneapolis, in which it was found that prompt arrest of wife-batterers has lowered the incidence of such episodes. Elliot says this has prompted two-thirds of

*The MacArthur Foundation has been supporting a crime study group that has just produced a book expanding on this approach, *Understanding and Controlling Crime: Toward a New Research Strategy* by D. P. Farrington, L. E. Ohlin, and J. Q. Wilson (Springer-Verlag, New York, 1986).

the country's police departments to adopt a mandatory arrest policy. Another striking, although longer term, payoff has been found from research in Ypsilanti, Michigan, on Headstart programs. Although the programs were not shown to have a significant impact on school performance, they led to reduced rates of social dysfunction including unemployment, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and crime.

The immediate application of knowledge about career criminals is elusive. A major change, called for by James Stewart, head of the Justice Department's National Institute of Justice, would be to allow the courts easier access to an adult offender's juvenile records. These are ordinarily sealed and often disposed of when an individual reaches adulthood.

The career criminal concept affords more guidance but also more complexity to the problems of prediction about future criminal behavior. There is much debate now, for example, on maximum desirable sentences and the extent to which high risk—as opposed to the nature of the crime at hand—should determine sentence length. There are traditionally two philosophical approaches to sentencing: the “just deserts” approach (make the punishment fit the crime), and the utilitarian approach (based on deterrence). The career criminal paradigm suggests a third approach that depends on reasonably accurate prediction of risk, based on the criminal's record and circumstances (such as drug abuse and employment history) as well as on the severity of the offense at hand.

The data on drugs and crime are being taken very seriously by this drug-conscious administration. Stewart pointed out at the conference that self-reports of drug use are extremely unreliable and recommended that all those arrested be given drug tests as a “diagnostic” measure. He also said that when abstinence from drugs is made a condition of bail, offenses during pretrial release are reduced. He called for a “national drug index” to track trends in drug use around the country.

As the conference participants noted, crime research has too often borne little relation to practice. But the career criminal concept seems to offer a practical model relatively invulnerable to the winds of political ideology. The NRC report says a broad get-tough approach might reduce crime by 5% to 10%, but at the cost of doubling the prison population. In contrast, longer sentences for career criminals could, under optimal conditions, result in the same reduction of crime with only a 10% to 20% increase in prison populations. ■

CONSTANCE HOLDEN

NIH Asked to Tighten Gene Therapy Rules

But a group studying the proposal recommends against changes, saying sound policies are already in place

WHEN the National Institutes of Health's Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC) meets later this month, it will be asked to expressly prohibit certain kinds of human gene therapy experimentation that has already been declared off limits. Specifically, the RAC will be asked to ban for the indefinite future any tests of gene therapy “not aimed solely at the relief of a life-threatening or severely disabling condition,” and to forbid gene therapy that “could alter germline cells.”

Existing policy documents drafted by the RAC's subcommittee on human gene therapy already state that neither form of experimentation would meet with NIH approval at present, but the Boston-based Committee for Responsible Genetics (CRG) has proposed additional regulatory language anyway, arguing that the “restrictive provisions” it favors should be spelled out in legally binding form and not be left solely as a statement of policy in documents that are merely advisory. CRG, an activist group that includes many scientists who have long opposed recombinant DNA research, asks not only that the experimentation be prohibited but also that the RAC refuse to even review such experimentation should a proposal be forthcoming. At an open meeting last month at which a number of important policy issues were reexamined, the subcommittee voted to recommend that the RAC reject the CRG proposal.

The first experimental test of human gene therapy is on the horizon. It is possible that the first protocol will be submitted to the National Institutes of Health for approval within the next few months; it may turn out to be longer in coming. But it is certain that medical researchers are close to being ready for a pioneering study and, in anticipation, an elaborate system of reviews has been put in place.

Policy makers, ethicists, researchers, and others have been debating the social and technical facets of human gene therapy for several years. Congress has held hearings; the congressional Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) has conducted a thorough, wide-ranging study (*Science*, 1 February 1985, p. 493); the RAC and its gene thera-

py subcommittee have examined the issues in open meetings. Both the RAC and the subcommittee contain members who represent the public.

Before the first experimental attempt at human gene therapy can legally begin, it will have to be cleared at the local level by the research center's Institutional Biosafety Committee, which looks at procedures for the safe handling of recombinant organisms, and by the Institutional Review Board, which concerns itself with the protection of the patient and such matters as informed consent. At the national level, the experiment will be reviewed in open session by the gene therapy subcommittee, which has spelled out a host of technical and ethical considerations in a document called “Points to Consider,” which is, itself, constantly being reviewed. The experimental therapy protocol will have to be described in lay language and published in the *Federal Register* so any member of the public can comment. The full NIH Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee must approve the protocol. And, finally, it must be approved by the director of NIH.

But the Committee for Responsible Genetics does not have confidence in this elaborate series of safeguards. Thus, it proposed that the RAC refuse to even consider those aspects of research of which the CRG does not approve. As discussion at the subcommittee meeting revealed, the CRG actually raised two issues: one speaks directly to the substance of research that will be permitted or prohibited; the other, equally important if a bit more arcane, is a procedural question that speaks to the role NIH committees should play in the ongoing public debate.

First, the substantive issues. The CRG has proposed adding the following language to the NIH's official Guidelines for Research Involving Recombinant DNA molecules: “The RAC will not review and the NIH will not approve any human genetic therapy (i) that is not aimed solely at the relief of a life-threatening or severely disabling condition, or (ii) that could alter germline cells. Furthermore, the RAC will not review and the NIH will not approve any in vitro recombinant DNA experiments that alter human