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# Do career criminals exist in rural America?☆

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## Abstract

The criminal career paradigm had essentially ignored investigating offenders in rural areas. To fill this void, a retrospective, cross-sectional design sampled 331 former adult correctional clients from the case archives in a rural midwestern state. Self-report and official records indicated that rural criminal careers were characterized by relatively few arrests, short-lived criminal justice system involvements, and a paucity of violent crime. Although the sample demonstrated relatively benign criminality overall, the most chronic offenders, top 10 percent of the sample, were plagued by overlapping, contemporaneous problems such as alcoholism, substance abuse, mental health difficulties, early onset of antisocial behavior, low educational attainment, and revolving involvement in the criminal justice system. Like rural communities, which were characterized by exceedingly low crime rates, rural career offenders tended to be relatively harmless criminals especially compared to habitual offenders commonly found in the criminological literature.
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## Introduction

Criminologists tended to ignore criminological issues occurring in rural areas and instead focused their attention to urban and suburban areas and the offenders living there. An enormous corpus of research employing diverse sources of data and analytical methods demonstrated that crime rates were dramatically lower in rural locations compared to urban and suburban areas. Moreover, phenomena such as violent crime, delinquent gangs, and fear of crime were appreciably lower in rural areas and among rural citizens (Bachman, 1992; Clinard, 1944; Doerner & Speir, 1986; Fagan, Piper, & Moore, 1986; Gibbons, 1972; Laub, 1981, 1983; Miller, Hoiberg, & Ganey, 1982; Smith & Huff, 1982; Weisheit & Donnermeyer, 2000; Weisheit & Wells, 1999). In their comprehensive overview of the literature, Weisheit and Donnermeyer (2000) estimated that the rural crime rate was two to twenty-six times lower than the urban crime rate depending upon the offense. Since 1966, the city to rural violent crime rate fluctuated from 5:1 to nearly 10:1 and the commensurate property crime ratio ranged from 3:1 to nearly 5:1. Whereas urbanites and suburbanites were victimized at levels at or above their proportion of the population, rural residents who comprised 20 percent of the U.S. population experienced only 15 percent of all victimizations (Duhart, 2000). Indeed, Laub (1983) once calculated that if the entire nation had a crime rate similar to the rural areas, approximately 70 percent of serious and violent crime would not exist.

The paucity of scholarly investigations of rural crime arose primarily from the low incidence of crime in nonmetropolitan areas. Unfortunately, this led to an "urban bias" whereby scholars routinely shunted rural areas and rural offenders to focus on the more prevalent and seemingly more pressing crime issues in cities and suburbs. As other commentators noted (Osgood & Chambers, 2000; Weisheit & Donnermeyer, 2000; Weisheit & Wells, 1999),

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theory and research might be limited if they were applicable only to offenders residing in more densely populated, urban areas. The current study sought to examine an area that was virtually ignored by prior scholarship, rural criminal careers and career criminals.

## Literature review

### *Rural crime and punishment*

Geography, culture, and criminal justice system limitations were offered as explanations for the unusually low crime rates in rural areas. The remote geography and sheer social structure of rural communities rendered opportunities for crime scarce and therefore could neutralize delinquent intentions that rural criminals might have. Given the low population density in rural areas, there was often great physical distance between individuals. Indeed, neighborhoods were vast spreads of geographically isolated families. Such a landscape ostensibly precluded many opportunities to commit non-familial interpersonal violence and other crimes where criminal targets were scarce (Weisheit & Wells, 1999).

Weisheit and Donnermeyer (2000) suggested that the stark superstructure of rural communities meaningfully impacted the social interaction of its residents and produced a rural culture that offered additional buffers to crime. In addition to its low population base, rural areas tended to have highly stable populations and limited residential turnover or mobility. Hence, it was common for residents to be acquainted with most members of their community and for long periods of time resulting in high levels of social cohesion. These dense social networks increased informal social controls such that entire towns or cities were effectively "neighborhood watch" areas. With friends and acquaintances constantly watching, it was very difficult to engage in surreptitious criminal behavior. Structurally and culturally speaking, it was no wonder why crime was so low in rural areas. By contrast, cities were characterized by anonymous, primarily stranger-to-stranger contacts, poor social integration, great diversity and heterogeneity, and generally weak informal social control (Wikstrom, 1998). Coupled with its ubiquitous "hot spots," the social structure of non-rural areas seemingly enabled crime.

Though informal social controls tended to be strong in rural areas, formal social controls tended to be weaker than in urban and suburban areas. This was likely caused by several factors. First, rural citizens tended to be cautious and even suspicious of outside, governmental interventions and preferred to handle interpersonal disputes privately via some method of informal social control (Laub, 1981, 1983; Weisheit & Donnermeyer, 2000; Weisheit, Wells, & Falcone, 1995). Since the law was invoked with less frequency, rural criminal justice systems remained on the sidelines more often than in other areas. Second, rural law enforcement officers themselves were part and parcel of the larger rural culture and might, tacitly or explicitly, permit legal disputes to be handled extralegally. Indeed, Austin (1981) found that extralegal factors carried significant weight in rural criminal justice system outcomes. In this sense, the discretionary and decision-making processes of rural criminal justice system agents reflected a private, nonbureaucratic, nonenforcement ethos. Third, rural criminal justice systems were often resource limited. Small-sized departments with only a handful of patrol officers were used to serve the aforementioned large, sprawling geographic areas. Moreover, the resources available to rural courts and corrections could best be characterized as Spartan. These factors undoubtedly contributed to fewer official police contacts, arrests, and court filings (Sagarin, Donnermeyer, & Carter, 1982; Swanson, 1981; Weisheit, 1993; Weisheit et al., 1995). In fact, because of this organizational context, some suggested that rural areas were typified by subjective criminal justice system processing and more prone to biases against minority defendants (Austin, 1981; Hagan, 1977).

### *Prior investigations of rural offenders*

Against this structural backdrop, the research of individual criminals from rural areas produced mixed findings about their offending patterns and criminality. Marshall Clinard's (1944) seminal investigation of sixty Iowa Reformatory inmates produced findings that resonated with contemporary criminal career research. Specifically, Clinard (1944) found that rural inmates were manual laborers who led itinerant lifestyles. They tended to occupy the lowest socioeconomic strata, were often seen as a public nuisance, and, relatively speaking, led largely unsuccessful lives. Interpersonally, "farm offenders made little mention of persons in an intimate sense. . .people were considered as objects of value only in so far as such association might benefit them personally" (1944, p. 40). Moreover, Clinard noted that rural offenders exuded a general sense of irresponsibility and engaged in an array of crimes including forgery, burglary, larceny, and auto theft. This psychosocial profile and offending versatility were concordant with self-control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Clinard (1944) also found that rural offenders tended to have a delayed, not early onset of criminal behavior and appeared to be nominally rather than extensively adherent to or involved in a criminal lifestyle. These characteristics ran contrary to current theory that typified career criminality as a longitudinal, persistent developmental process (e.g., Moffitt, 1993).

Recent rural criminal career research was somewhat limited in specifying the offending patterns of rural offenders. For example, Horney, Osgood, and Marshall (1995) interviewed 658 convicted felons sentenced to the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services during a nine-month period in 1989–90. Among these high-rate offenders, they found that local life circumstances such as starting school, developing a romantic relationship, and

abstaining from drugs and alcohol reduced involvement in crime, even while controlling for criminal propensity and other factors. In this sense, Horney et al. (1995) provided evidence supporting a developmental perspective of informal social control (Sampson & Laub, 1993) and contrary to more general explanations of crime (e.g., Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). Unfortunately, it was unknown to what degree the sample contained rural offenders. As noted by the authors (Horney et al., 1995, p. 659), the sample was not representative of the general population. For example, 43 percent of the offenders were racial and ethnic minorities, suggesting that many of the offenders were from urban areas, such as Omaha, that had greater ethnic diversity in their population.

A different, but equally delimiting problem characterized the sample of rural offenders studied by Simons, Johnson, Conger, and Elder (1998). Their Iowa Youth and Families Project was a panel study of 451 White, two-parent families with an average income of nearly $30,000. With these data, Simons et al. (1998) used structural equation modeling to explore continuity and change in deviant behavior over the life course and found support for the developmental perspective. The problem was that with few violent, recidivistic offenders, the sample was quite benign in terms of its criminality. For example, theft of something worth more than $25 was considered a "serious" violation among the sample. It should be noted that the authors acknowledged that their sample simply did not contain serious offenders, thus precluding any meaningful investigation of career criminals (Simons et al., 1998, pp. 914–915, 923).

Additional studies also examined rural offenders of diverse criminality, such as delinquents, arrestees, probationers, and prisoners. Rural delinquents tended to be "multiple problem youth" who suffered from an array of interpersonal, emotional, and educational deficits and required extensive treatment (Smith, Usinger-Lesquereux, & Evans, 1999). There appeared to be considerable continuity to these problems across the life course evidenced by the hardships that prison inmates from rural areas faced. Rural prisoners had checkered employment histories, low educational attainment, poor mental health, and extensive psychiatric and criminal justice system involvements (Logan, Walker, & Leukefeld, 2001; Powell, Holt, & Fondacaro, 1997). Others found that rural offenders tallied fewer arrests, were more likely to serve probationary versus prison sentences, and were engaged in generally less serious forms of crime (Ellsworth & Weisheit, 1997; Olson, Weisheit, & Ellsworth, 2001).

### *Criminal careers and career criminals*

Increasingly, life-course criminologists found that criminal offenders could crudely but effectively be differentiated into two archetypes (Farrington & Loeber, 2000). The first group containing the majority of offenders engaged in relatively low levels of crime, was not particularly dangerous, tended to limit deviance to adolescence, and was highly susceptible to the influence of peers and other socialization agents. The second group containing rare and often pathological offenders accounted for the majority of total crime. A prominent example of this approach was Terrie Moffitt's (1993) developmental taxonomy that described two archetypal offending trajectories. The adolescence-limited offender was a normative delinquent who dabbled in generally low-level forms of deviance during the teen years. The majority of persons in a population were this variety, and their delinquency was generally benign (Cernkovich & Giordano, 2001; Piquero & Brezina, 2001). Maturity, entering the job market or college, initiating serious primary relationships, and realizing the responsibilities that characterized adulthood were cited as reasons why adolescence-limited offenders tended to desist from delinquency upon adulthood.

Alternately, life-course persistent offenders demonstrate sustained and intense involvement in crime. They are a rare group typifying approximately 5 percent of males. According to Moffitt (1993), the cause of life-course persistent criminality is neuropsychological deficits affecting temperament, behavioral development, and cognitive functioning and ability. Maternal drug abuse, poor prenatal nutrition, and pre- or post-natal exposure to toxins may cause these deficits. There is considerable overlap between offenders with neuropsychological deficits and other serious risk factors such as psychopathy.

Unlike adolescence-limited offenders, life-course persistent offenders demonstrate antisocial behavior over a longer span of the life-course. Evidence of oppositional and other antisocial behaviors emerges during childhood progresses toward more overtly criminal behaviors during adolescence and adulthood and continues into the adult years. Life-course persistent offenders are thus likely to be arrested early in life, demonstrate versatility in committing an array of crimes, and be disproportionately likely to commit the most severe forms of violence. The empirical support for the developmental taxonomy is impressive and has been furnished by scholars employing diverse research designs and study groups from around the world (Cernkovich & Giordano, 2001; DeLisi, 2001a; Donker, Smeenk, van der Laan, & Verhulst, 2003; McCabe, Hough, Wood, & Yeh, 2001; Moffitt, Lynam, & Silva, 1994; Nagin, Farrington, & Moffitt, 1995; Piquero, 2001).

## Current focus

To date, the criminal career paradigm was largely neglected offenders from rural areas (Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003) and work that examined rural criminals yielded inconsistent findings. The current work attempted to further the empirical understanding of offending patterns using a sample of correctional clients whose lives and criminal careers occurred in rural settings and, more

specifically, compared habitual to non-habitual offenders within the study group. With a sharpened empirical understanding of rural offenders, this study could help access whether life-course theory and research was applicable to rural samples and was therefore general in scope.

## Data and methods

The data used for this study were a simple random sample of 331 adult correctional clients drawn from the offender archives of a department of correctional services unit in a rural midwestern state. Data collection occurred from June to December 2002. The geographic area contained thirty-two nonmetropolitan towns and municipalities with resident (nonstudent) populations ranging from 306 to approximately 25,000. Aside from the two county seats in this judicial district, the remaining thirty communities had populations between 306 and 1,328. Approximately 75 percent of persons from these areas resided on nonfarm tracts with the remaining 25 percent of persons residing on farms.

The correctional unit contained probation and parole officers whom, unique to this jurisdiction, supervised clients during both the pre-trial and post-conviction phases of the judicial process. Upon arrest, all defendants were required to be interviewed by court officials to obtain biographical, educational, vocational, substance abuse, and criminal histories. This information was compiled to create an offender dossier that served as the pre-sentence investigation (PSI) report. The PSI is a tool for correctional officials to gauge the level of supervision needed to supervise the client, as well as assess his or her risks for recidivism, flight, and dangerousness. All self-reported criminal histories were supplemented with official criminal records acquired through the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database. Combining self-reported and official criminal records bolstered the concurrent validity of the data. This was an important consideration since self-report and official sources of data denoted many potential sources of measurement error, including criminal justice practitioner bias, offender duplicity, over- and under-reporting, memory limitations, difficult in recalling overlapping and extensive records, and the misinterpretation of incomplete or coded NCIC data (DeLisi, 2001b; Geerken, 1994; Johnson, Taylor, Golub, & Eterno, 2002; Weis, 1986).

To be sure, some additional caveats about the data were warranted. First, each offender in the sample was a single-state offender so the overwhelming majority of their offending careers were limited to the rural communities within the judicial district. The state where these data were collected contained seven metropolitan areas, the largest of which was just thirty miles from the county seat of the judicial district. Some of the arrest activity occurred in urban areas, consequently, the sample might not be representative of offenders whose entire lives and criminal careers occurred within rural communities and jurisdictions. Second, the data set did not contain a measure of "free" time when the defendant was not under the supervision of the criminal justice system. It was unknown to what degree the offending patterns herein were underestimated due to periods of incarceration or other criminal justice system control (Weis, 1986). A recurrent methodological problem in criminal career research centers on intermittency or the degree with which offending patterns unfold or desist because of arrest and imprisonment. In the absence of infraction data that measure criminal careers during incarceration (DeLisi, 2003), the use of self-reports can partially compensate for intermittency and account for periods of "free" time when defendants can actively offend. Third, investigators must balance problems with the selection biases inherent in correctional samples with the concern about the paucity of chronic offenders using community samples. Prior scholars (e.g., Cernkovich, Giordano, & Pugh, 1985) noted that serious, high-rate offenders were often missing from community probability samples, especially when selected from rural areas (Simons et al., 1998). A correctional sample was selected here to help ensure adequate variation in offender types; however, the results had limited generalizability. These methodological admonitions should be considered when interpreting the findings.

The analysis strategy included two components to serve the descriptive, largely preliminary purposes of this research. Descriptive statistics indicated the prevalence of demographic factors (e.g., age, race, sex), social statuses (e.g., educational attainment, income, residency), treatment background (e.g., alcohol, substance abuse, psychiatric), and criminal career parameters (e.g., onset, total arrests, juvenile and adult arrests, violent index arrests, probation sentences, jail sentences, prison sentences). Difference of means (t-tests) analysis compared the social and criminal histories of career offenders, defined as those at or above the ninetieth percentile of career arrests to non-career offenders.

## Results

As shown in Table 1, the modal rural offender was a twenty-eight-year old White male. Males comprised 86 percent and females comprised 14 percent of the sample. Whites composed nearly 90 percent of the sample, while the remaining 10 percent of offenders were racial and ethnic minorities. The offenders were poorly educated and relatively impoverished. The average annual income was $11,179 and 38 percent of the offenders were high school dropouts. Most offenders, 62 percent, were employed at the time of their most recent arrest and only 11 percent had reported ever being homeless. The sample members had rather extensive treatment histories for substance abuse and mental health problems. Specifically, 40 percent had prior alcohol treatment, 33 percent had prior drug treatment, and 23 percent had previously received psychiatric treatment.

Table 1
Coding and univariate statistics for study variables (n=331)

| Variable | Coding | Mean | SD | Range |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age | Continuous | 28.07 | 9.93 | 18–73 |
| Sex | (0=male/ 1=female) | .14 | .35 | 0–1 |
| Race | (0=minority/ 1=White) | 89.76 | .30 | 0–1 |
| Income | Continuous | 11,179 | 11,579 | 0–60,000 |
| Years of education | Continuous | 11.91 | 2.37 | 0–18 |
| High school dropout | (0=no/1=yes) | .38 | .49 | 0–1 |
| Homeless | (0=no/1=yes) | .11 | .31 | 0–1 |
| Onset | Continuous | 21.57 | 6.90 | 11–51 |
| Currently employed | (0=no/1=yes) | .62 | .49 | 0–1 |
| Total arrests | Count | 4.77 | 4.99 | 1–31 |
| Violent index arrests | Count | .42 | 1.16 | 0–10 |
| Juvenile arrests | Count | .64 | 1.74 | 0–14 |
| Adult arrests | Count | 4.17 | 4.34 | 1–31 |
| Probation | Count | 2.83 | 7.25 | 0–7 |
| Jail | Count | 3.77 | 4.71 | 0–25 |
| Prison | Count | .51 | 1.05 | 0–7 |
| Alcohol treatment | (0=no/1=yes) | .40 | .49 | 0–1 |
| Drug treatment | (0=no/1=yes) | .33 | .47 | 0–1 |
| Psychiatric treatment | (0=no/1=yes) | .23 | .42 | 0–1 |

Although some offenders did experience an early onset of antisocial behavior, the average offender was not first arrested until age twenty-one. Over their criminal careers, offenders averaged nearly five arrests, the standard definition of chronic offending (Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972). A closer examination of the arrest prevalence results (tables not included here, but can be provided upon request) suggested that the more high-rate offenders were accounting for the bulk of arrests (variance=24.94, skewness=2.17, kurtosis=8.43). Indeed, 32 percent of the defendants were arrested just once and 25 percent of the offenders experienced only two arrests. The most common arrest charges were operating a vehicle while intoxicated (OWI), theft, and public intoxication. Nearly 24 percent of the offenders totaled five or more arrests. Rural defendants were not particularly dangerous evidenced by their low involvement in the most serious forms of crime, violent index offenses. On average, rural offenders were not likely to be arrested for a violent index crime, indeed 77 percent of the sample never were. Delving further into the index offenses revealed an exceedingly low incidence of serious violence. For example, only three offenders were ever arrested for murder, homicide, or manslaughter, meaning that 99.1 percent of the sample committed lethal acts of criminal violence. Similarly, the “never-prevalence” for rape exceeded 96 percent, 98.2 percent for robbery, and 91.5 percent for aggravated assault. Put another way, nine of ten rural criminal offenders were never arrested for the most serious crimes.

Rural offenders experienced most of their arrests during adulthood, were sentenced to probation nearly three times, and served nearly four stints in jail and less than one commitment to prison. Substantial proportions of the offenders had very little criminal justice system involvement. For example, 76 percent of offenders had never been sentenced to probation during their criminal careers, 41 percent had never spent time in jail, and 78 percent had never been sentenced to prison.

Due to the disproportionate influence of the most active offenders, the second stage of analysis compared rural “career criminals,” persons in the ninetieth percentile for total arrests (n=33) to non-career offenders (n=298). As mentioned earlier, a growing body of empirical and theoretical research (e.g., Moffitt, 1993; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985) suggested that approximately 10 percent of criminals were pathological, “life-course-persistent” offenders who were distinctly different than the majority of the criminal population. Indeed, fairly dramatic differences between offender groups emerged for nearly all study variables. Habitual rural offenders tended to be older than their less chronic peers (t=4.56, p=.000) otherwise no demographic differences emerged. Whether habitual or non-habitual in their offending, rural criminals tended to be White males from lower social class backgrounds. Rural career offenders initiated their careers nearly four years earlier than less chronic offenders (t=2.77, p=.005), completed fewer years of school (t=4.03, p=.000) and were more likely to drop out (t=4.42, p=.000), were less likely to maintain employment (t=2.25, p=.025), and spent more time in alcohol (t=4.07, p=.000), drug (t=3.55, p=.000), and psychiatric treatment (t=1.76, p=.079). By definition, career criminals accumulated more total arrests (t=24.92, p=.000), juvenile arrests (t=8.74, p=.000), and adult arrests (t=15.95, p=.000). Curiously, career offenders were not significantly more involved in violent offending (t=1.49, p=.139) and serving probation sentences (t=0.35, p=.724) than non-habitual offenders, although career offenders served significantly more time in jail (t=6.68, p=.000) and prison (t=9.34, p=.000) than less recidivistic offenders. The comparison-of-means coefficients are shown in Table 2.

That 10 percent of offenders were pathological, habitual, or life-course persistent was an approximation. To assess whether the current findings were based on this somewhat arbitrary classification, alternate specifications with habitual status set at the ninety-second percentile (Table 3) and ninety-fifth percentile (Table 4) were examined.

Adjusting the criterion for habitual offender status had little effect on the demographic characteristics of the offender groups. Both habitual and non-habitual offenders were mostly White males from meager socioeconomic backgrounds. At the ninety-fifth percentile of offending, all of the defendants were males (t=6.60, p=.000). As the criminality threshold of the sample was increased, the years of completed education among habitual offenders decreased by about one year, a significant difference from non-habitual offenders. Dropout, homelessness, and unemployment were common among all offenders, although some of these differences between habitual and non-habitual offenders

Table 2
Difference of means t-tests for habitual (n=33) and non-habitual offenders (n=298) with habitual status set at the ninetieth percentile

| Variable | Habitual offender | Non-habitual offender | T-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 33.7 | 27.1 | 4.56*** |
| Sex | 88% Male | 86% Male | 0.27 |
| Race | 91% White | 89% White | 0.35 |
| Income | 10,109 | 11,366 | 0.47 |
| Years of education | 10.5 | 12.1 | 4.03*** |
| High school dropout | .67 | .33 | 4.42*** |
| Homeless | .29 | .08 | 3.41*** |
| Onset | 18.8 | 22.1 | 2.77*** |
| Currently employed | .47 | .64 | 2.25** |
| Total arrests | 16.4 | 3.3 | 24.92*** |
| Violent index arrests | .79 | .37 | 1.49 |
| Juvenile arrests | 2.86 | .37 | 8.74*** |
| Adult arrests | 11 | 2.97 | 15.95*** |
| Probation terms | 3.39 | 2.72 | 0.35 |
| Jail sentences | 8.24 | 2.87 | 6.68*** |
| Prison sentences | 1.61 | .26 | 9.34*** |
| Alcohol treatment | .68 | .35 | 4.07*** |
| Drug treatment | .56 | .29 | 3.55*** |
| Psychiatric treatment | .33 | .21 | 1.76* |

* p<.10.
** p<.05.
*** p<.01.

disappeared when the specification was set at the ninety-second percentile. The most glaring finding to emerge was the significant difference between habitual and non-habitual

Table 3
Difference of means t-tests for habitual (n=30) and non-habitual offenders (n=301) with habitual status set at the ninety-second percentile

| Variable | Habitual offender | Non-habitual offender | T-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 34.4 | 27.2 | 3.94*** |
| Sex | 93% Male | 86% Male | 1.04 |
| Race | 97% White | 89% White | 1.28 |
| Income | 10,522 | 11,355 | 0.78 |
| Years of education | 9.8 | 12.1 | 4.57*** |
| High school dropout | .61 | .59 | 3.97*** |
| Homeless | .73 | .46 | 0.65 |
| Onset | 18.5 | 22.1 | 2.57** |
| Currently employed | .64 | .7 | 1.47 |
| Total arrests | 17.1 | 3.44 | 24.2*** |
| Violent index arrests | 1.85 | .38 | 7.42*** |
| Juvenile arrests | 3.13 | .38 | 9.3*** |
| Adult arrests | 13.97 | 3.07 | 19.23*** |
| Probation terms | 4.50 | 2.74 | 1.65* |
| Jail sentences | 11.5 | 2.93 | 8.47*** |
| Prison sentences | 2.97 | .28 | 9.82*** |
| Alcohol treatment | 1.45 | .29 | 5.42*** |
| Drug treatment | 1.19 | .15 | 6.40*** |
| Psychiatric treatment | .58 | .51 | 0.43 |

* p<.10.
** p<.05.

Table 4
Difference of means t-tests for habitual (n=19) and non-habitual offenders (n=312) with habitual status set at the ninety-fifth percentile

| Variable | Habitual offender | Non-habitual offender | T-value |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | 36.1 | 27.4 | 3.63*** |
| Sex | 100% Male | 86% Male | 6.60*** |
| Race | 100% White | 90% White | 0.56 |
| Income | 10,261 | 11,348 | 0.48 |
| Years of education | 9.42 | 12.06 | 5.08*** |
| High school dropout | .39 | .60 | 4.06*** |
| Homeless | .83 | .56 | 2.00** |
| Onset | 19.29 | 21.81 | 1.23* |
| Currently employed | .53 | .70 | 2.01* |
| Total arrests | 20.29 | 3.86 | 15.06*** |
| Violent index arrests | 1.93 | .433 | 5.76*** |
| Juvenile arrests | 3.53 | .47 | 7.65*** |
| Adult arrests | 16.76 | 3.39 | 17.11*** |
| Probation terms | 4.33 | 2.80 | 1.34 |
| Jail sentences | 14.18 | 3.16 | 6.08*** |
| Prison sentences | 1.88 | .37 | 6.20*** |
| Alcohol treatment | 1.77 | .31 | 5.62*** |
| Drug treatment | 1.15 | .19 | 4.56*** |
| Psychiatric treatment | .60 | .51 | 0.38 |

* p<.10.

offenders for violent index arrests. At the ninetieth percentile, no differences existed. When considering offenders at the ninety-second percentile, habitual criminals netted significantly more arrests than non-habitual criminals for the most serious forms of violence ($t=7.42$, $p=.000$). The trend continued when considering offenders at the ninety-fifth percentile of offending ($t=5.76$, $p=.000$).

## Discussion

A litany of studies from across the U.S. and other countries produced an isomorphic profile of a high-rate, dangerous, and persistent criminal often colloquially referred to as a career criminal. Prototypically, the career criminal was a problem-prone male who early in childhood demonstrated antisocial behavior and engaged in multiple forms of delinquency, crime, and deviance across his life-course. Part and parcel with his pathology was a profound failure to attach and commit to conventional social institutions such as family, school, and work. Consequently, the career criminal was likely to quit school, strain familial relationships, be unemployed, abuse drugs and alcohol, and recurrently come into contact with the criminal justice system (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visher, 1986; DeLisi, 2001a, 2001b; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Horney et al., 1995; Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1998; Mazerolle, Brame, Paternoster, Piquero, & Dean, 2000; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985; Wolfgang et al., 1972).

Some of this profile was applicable to the rural offenders examined here. Rural offenders were White males whose lives were characterized by low socioeconomic status; a handful of arrests, convictions, probationary sentences, and periods spent in jail; and attendant treatment for substance abuse and mental health problems. Dichotomization of the sample into career and non-career offenders suggested that the most chronic offenders were significantly disadvantaged in many ways compared to less frequent offenders. Overall, they led somewhat meager, largely unsuccessful lives, a conclusion that was concordant with prior studies (Clinard, 1944; Ellsworth & Weisheit, 1997; Olson et al., 2001; Simons et al., 1998).

Sharp differences in offending behavior emerged between the current sample and those that constituted the extant literature, however. First, the offenders demonstrated an alarmingly low involvement in the most serious forms of criminal violence, such as the violent index offenses. Almost none of the former correctional clients ever committed a homicide, rape, or robbery. Furthermore, less than 9 percent of the offenders were ever arrested for aggravated assault, the least serious of the violent index crimes. In one way, this was somewhat surprising since prior empirical research (e.g., DeLisi, 2001b; Piquero, 2000a) and theory (e.g., Moffitt, 1993) expressed that early onset, chronic offenders also tended to disproportionately engage in the most serious forms of crime. What types of crimes did the rural offenders commit? The most prevalent arrest charges were operating a vehicle while intoxicated (OWI), public intoxication, and theft. Other than OWI, this mix of low-level property and nuisance offenses was similar to the offending mix described sixty years ago by Clinard (1944). From this perspective, the paltry number of arrests for violent crimes coupled with the mélange of minor offenses suggested that habitual criminals were simply frequent offenders. Indeed, a variety of prior investigators similarly found that among habitual offenders, violent and nonviolent criminals had similar backgrounds and much in common (Capaldi & Patterson, 1996; Farrington, 1989, 1991; Piquero, 2000b).

The current study might have unearthed the reason for the discrepant findings surrounding the history of violence among habitual offenders. The criterion used to delineate habitual or career offenders from others was crucial. When considering those at or above the ninetieth percentile, no significant differences existed for violent index offending between habitual and non-habitual offenders. Conversely, habitual offenders were more violent than their less chronic peers when the specification was set at the ninety-second and ninety-fifth percentiles. Thus, the slight statistical differences between the ninetieth, ninety-second, and ninety-fifth percentiles yielded substantively important information toward identifying the most chronic and violent types of offenders.

Second, the chronicity with which these career offenders were arrested was paltry when considering other offender samples found elsewhere in the literature. For example, DeLisi's (2001b) investigation of extreme offenders used a *minimum* arrest criterion of thirty career arrests and offenders commonly amassed more than one hundred arrests during their career. Comparatively, only one of 331 offenders in the current sample would qualify for such extreme offender status. Just as rural youth samples contained relatively few truly high-rate, dangerous offenders (Simons et al., 1998), offender samples from rural jurisdictions could also be characterized as criminally benign since rural career offenders were relatively harmless defendants.

Three additional insights can place the rural offender and rural offending generally in its local contexts. First, as mentioned earlier, rural criminal justice systems tend to be resource-poor and less vigilant in producing arrests. It is possible that criminal recidivists operating in rural areas are more able to evade arrest than offenders from more densely populated areas. This does not necessarily mean that rural inhabitants are abstaining from crime, however. For instance, Herz and Murray (2003) recently conducted a pilot study of rural offenders as part of the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring Program, or ADAM. They found that between 30 and 45 percent of rural arrestees reported alcohol intoxication upon arrest and 25 to 38 percent reported intoxication for another drug, most commonly methamphetamine or cocaine, upon arrest. These data indicated that considerable antisocial behavior was occurring among rural defendants. Moreover, methamphetamine, which was the fasting growing drug threat and the most prevalent synthetic drug in the U.S., had increasingly become problematic in rural areas (Swetlow, 2003).

How can worsening crime and drug problems avoid detection in rural areas? Herz and Murray (2003) and Swetlow (2003) speculated that the setting and social structure of rural communities might enable criminal opportunities that were difficult for authorities to detect. Some features of rural life, such as the use of anhydrous ammonia (a methamphetamine precursor) for fertilizer and the sheer number of remote, inaccessible locations to manufacture or grow drugs, assist the criminal offender's ability to avoid detection. For these reasons, police officers in rural areas face physical barriers that complicate a more swift enforcement of the law.

Second, and alternately, it is possible that stricter sentencing guidelines account for the relatively low prevalence of serious violent crime among rural offenders. For example, the state where these offenders reside has a veracious life imprisonment penalty, meaning that offenders will never be released from prison short of an executive pardon. Moreover, offenders convicted of other serious felonies such as rape and robbery must serve at least 85 percent of rather lengthy prison terms of twenty-five or fifty years. It could be the case that the most dangerous career offenders in rural settings such as these are spending the bulk of their life incapacitated in prison, whereas habitual offenders from other states enter and exit prison in a revolving door fashion.

Third, there appears to be a reductionist relationship between the low crime rates that characterize rural communities and the circumscribed offending patterns of rural offenders. Contrary to the first point made above, perhaps the structure of rural communities effectively diminishes the opportunities for offenders to recurrently violate the law. For instance, Wikstrom and Loeber (2000, p. 1114) described "protective communities" as ecological settings characterized by low levels of temptation and provocation and high levels of (informal) social controls. Rural places seem to be the quintessential protective communities because the citizenry is homogenous and residents are largely familiar with one another; friendship and acquaintance networks are extensive, meaningful, and serve as effective sources of informal social control; and there are few "hot spots" for individuals to be tempted or provoked to engage in crime. Unfortunately, the current study did not contain structural variables that could have been used to conduct multilevel analyses of the effects of rural community structure on offending behavior. Nevertheless, it seemed reasonable that the scarce opportunity structures and dense informal controls of rural life constrained the ability of rural recidivists to continually commit crime.

## Conclusion

The criminal career paradigm produced compelling evidence that a small group of career criminals existed in many societies and that these offenders were quantitatively and even qualitatively distinct from non-career offenders. By and large, however, researchers avoided studying criminal careers in rural locales. The current study posed the question: Do career criminals exist in rural America? The answer was a guarded yes. Self-report and official records indicated that rural criminal careers were characterized by relatively few arrests, short-lived criminal justice system involvements, and a paucity of violent crime. Although the sample demonstrated relatively benign criminality overall, the most chronic offenders, defined as the top 10 percent of the sample, were plagued by overlapping, contemporaneous problems such as alcoholism, substance abuse, mental health difficulties, early onset of antisocial behavior, low educational attainment, and revolving involvement in the criminal justice system.

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