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## SPECIAL REPORT

### Criminal Careers Behind Bars

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**In the criminal career literature, prison is usually viewed as an interruption of offending. Little research has applied the criminal career perspective to misconduct committed by prisoners. The current study used official data from a probability sample of 1,005 inmates from the southwestern United States to examine offending careers during incarceration. Descriptive and negative binomial regression analyses produced findings that suggest both similarities and dissimilarities between conventional and prison criminal careers. The incidence and prevalence of crime were inversely related to its seriousness but the magnitude of crime was higher in prison. One-third of inmates were never contacted for a prison violation and 74% were never contacted for a serious/violent violation. On the other hand, 40% of inmates were chronic or extreme career offenders *even while incarcerated*. A small cadre of inmates accounted for 100% of the murders, 75% of the rapes, 80% of the arsons, and 50% of the aggravated assaults occurring behind bars. Finally, prior criminality was the best predictor of prison offending, which is supportive of the importation model. While a significant number of inmates fully comply with prison rules, an even larger percentage of inmates continue to commit an array of crimes and rule violations despite the efforts of prison officials. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.**

Prison is a black box in criminal career research. Examinations of offending trajectories “on the outside” have generally not been applied to prisoners. Instead, prison is frequently seen as a temporary or permanent disruption of “active” (or “street-time”) criminal careers. As a result, researchers must wait until an offender is paroled or otherwise completes their prison sentence to investigate an active criminal career. At the same time, ample research has documented widespread inmate crime and misconduct, inmate–correctional officer discord, prison gang

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violence, and rioting in correctional facilities.<sup>1</sup> Thus, while criminologists are well aware that prisons are characterized by varying amounts of crime, researchers have generally refrained from using a criminal career perspective to investigate offending occurring in prison. The current study seeks to fill this void by assessing the official criminal careers of inmates. Preliminary answers to several important questions are sought. What are the incidence and prevalence of inmate misconduct? How frequently do inmates commit serious violations? What role do demographic and diagnostic measures have in explaining prison offending? How does prior criminal record relate to prison misconduct? Finally, are some inmates persistent offenders even while in prison?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Prison as Downtime in the Criminal Career

For obvious reasons, criminologists may have operated under the assumption that criminal careers are temporarily placed on hold while an individual offender is imprisoned. First, the coercive, total environment of prison, complete with nearly constant surveillance, greatly reduces opportunities to engage in criminal behavior (Blumstein, 1995; Hepburn, 1985; King, 1999). For instance, crimes such as auto theft or bank robbery are rendered impossible by the inaccessibility to certain criminal targets. Concomitantly, the sheer differences between free society and prison *per se* complicate extending the study of criminal careers behind bars since the very purpose of imprisonment is to punish offenders and preclude their ability to commit crime. As Hemmens and Marquart (2000, p. 297) suggest, "the prison experience has historically been meant to be unpleasant, and prisoners have been expected to suffer to some degree." Third and most practically, prisons may pose an accessibility problem for researchers. Only recently has the widespread dissemination of official data on inmate misconduct and other violations occurred. Traditionally, prison has been viewed as a period of downtime not only for the offender but also for the academician interested in data collection.

As a result, criminal career researchers have commonly viewed prison as a period of criminal inactivity. For example, Barnett and his colleagues (1987, p. 87) suggest that "periods when youths were not at risk of offending were excluded, notably periods spent in penal institutions and periods after death or emigration." Blumstein and Cohen (1979, p. 565) maintain that only those periods when an offender is criminally active (e.g., not incarcerated) should be considered in assessing criminal careers. Another approach is to acknowledge that criminal activity is likely still occurring, but that data limitations preclude its measurement. This is known as intermittency; "periods of criminal inactivity may *not* be the sign of the termination of a delinquent or criminal career" (D'Ungar, Land, McCall, & Nagin, 1998, p. 1606, original italics). It is common practice to frame prison as a stopping point in a criminal career (see e.g., Barnett, Blumstein, & Farrington, 1989, p. 378;

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<sup>1</sup>This discussion does not imply that criminologists have been blind to linkages between criminal careers and the policy implications of prison. To the contrary, the preeminent policy objective of criminal career research has been selective incapacitation (see Greenwood & Turner, 1987; Haapanen, 1990).

Blumstein, Cohen, Das, & Moitra, 1988, p. 340; Dean, Brame, & Piquero, 1996, pp. 553–563; Farrington, 1992, p. 521; Osgood & Rowe, 1994, p. 531; Rhodes, 1989, p. 8. Smith & Smith, 1984, p. 133; Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972, pp. 252–253; Van Dine, Conrad, & Dinitz, 1979, p. 125).<sup>2</sup>

However, among the most active and dangerous criminal offenders, prison is not an exceptional event but instead a normal and episodic occurrence during a lengthy offending career. As such, there is little reason to believe that habitual criminals with extensive arrest and incarceration experience will suddenly “behave” while imprisoned (Broadhurst & Maller, 1991; DeLisi, 2001; Haapanen, 1990). Some inmates are so intractably violent and disruptive that they are deemed “too dangerous” for normal prison. According to Riveland (1999, p. 1), “prisons historically have had ‘jails within prisons.’ Simply because people are in the controlled environment of a prison does not stop them from being assaultive or violent, attempting to escape, inciting disturbances, preying on weaker inmates, or otherwise exhibiting disruptive behavior. Such people must be removed from the general population.” The existence of such incorrigible inmates has led to the proliferation of super-maximum prisons. Currently, over 20,000 inmates in the United States are housed in super-maximum prisons (King, 1999). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that many inmates continue their offending careers regardless of their incarceration status.

### Importation Factors

For the purposes of the current study, the large and disparate individual-level literature on inmate misconduct within correctional facilities is limited to areas of research that can be subsumed under the importation model of inmate behavior. The importation model of inmate behavior suggests that inmate conduct is the result of their pre-prison characteristics that are “imported” into the facility (Cao, Zhao, & Van Dine, 1997; Harer & Steffensmeier, 1996; Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Jacobs, 1976; Sykes, 1958). This perspective is in contrast to the deprivation model or process of “prisonization” which suggests that the coercive environment of the facility or “pains of imprisonment” produce inmate behavior (Clemmer, 1940; Paterline & Petersen, 1999; Poole & Regoli, 1983; Sykes, 1958). Unless otherwise indicated, prison misconduct, offending, and infractions are used interchangeably.

Just as in the general population, demographic correlates of crime have also been linked to deviance occurring in prison. In other words, those most prone to crime on the outside also disproportionately create disciplinary problems while incarcerated. This is particularly robust in terms of age. Younger inmates are disproportionately volatile, difficult to manage, violent, and prone to misconduct (Craddock, 1996;

<sup>2</sup>A notable exception to this is *500 Criminal Careers* by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (1930, pp. 158–159). They found that during their reformatory years, the delinquent sample committed 3235 violations of institutional rules. Many of these offenses ( $n=1055$ ) were serious violations concerning the use of violence against other inmates or officers. The Gluecks discovered that, as in the general population, individual offending occurring in prison was skewed: 52% of the inmates were very frequent offenders, 11% of the inmates were frequent offenders, and 34% of the inmates were occasional offenders. Similarly, Loeber and Snyder (1990) utilized a data set that was able to track juvenile offenders during periods of incarceration; however, they did not substantively address offenders’ misconduct while imprisoned.

Flanagan, 1980, 1983; Goetting & Howsen, 1986; Ireland, 2000; Jensen, 1977; Light, 1991; McShane & Williams, 1989; Petersilia, Honig, & Hubay, 1980; Simon, 1993; Wooldredge, 1991, 1994; Wooldredge, Griffin, & Pratt, 2001). This reality strains the relationship between correctional officers and the young inmates they must supervise. The results, according to Hemmens and Marquart (2000), are reciprocal interactions of distrust, surveillance, and misconduct between inmates and correctional officers. The age-prison misconduct relationship is not perfectly linear, however. Prison misconduct tends to increase until inmates are in their late twenties and then decline sharply afterward (MacKenzie, 1987). Although the desistance process occurs later in the prison setting, the same general trend characterizes criminal careers occurring outside of prison (D'Ungar et al., 1998; Farrington, 1997; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Evidence purporting racial and ethnic differences in prison violence is mixed. Some suggest that inmates experience prison similarly (Wright, 1989), and that racial differences in misconduct are slight (Crouch, 1985; Finn, 1995). However, other researchers found that racial and ethnic minorities, particularly blacks, disproportionately engage in prison infractions, misconduct, and violence (Craddock, 1996; Flanagan, 1983; Goetting & Howsen, 1986; Harer & Steffensmeier, 1996; Jacobs, 1979; Myers and Levy, 1978; Poole & Regoli, 1980a, 1983; Wooldredge, 1991; Wooldredge, Griffin, & Pratt, 2001). It is possible that these disparities are the outcome of biased correctional officer discretion, indeed some researchers have speculated as such (Marquart, 1986; Poole & Regoli, 1980a). For example, Hewitt, Poole, and Regoli (1984) used inmate self-reports, guard self-reports, and official records to examine the true prevalence of prison misconduct. They found that black and white inmates average the same number of incidents, regardless of type of infraction (Hewitt et al., 1984, p. 441). This would suggest that official records are more likely to produce disproportionate minority involvement in crime, again, a trend that parallels data collection outside prison (DeLisi & Regoli, 1999).

The relationship between an inmate's sex and their prison misconduct is multifaceted. On one hand, female inmates tend to be much less disruptive, violent, and prone to misconduct than male prisoners (Bottoms, 1999; Craddock, 1996; Goetting & Howsen, 1983; Sargent, 1984). Moreover, female perpetrated murder, aggravated assault (e.g., stabbing), hostage taking, and rioting are extraordinarily rare in prison (Harer & Langan, 2001). As Farr (2000, p. 6) suggests, "women pose far less risk than men in regard to institutional conduct and security issues." On the other hand, while female inmates may pose fewer risks to correctional officials, this does not necessarily mean that their imprisonment is a more facile experience. Corrections staff have characterized female inmates as more challenging, sensitive, and emotional than male inmates (Farr, 2000), conditions that are arguably the out-come of the long-term abuses that many female inmates have endured (McClellan, Farabee, & Crouch, 1997). From the perspective of correctional officers, female inmates may appear more needy, require more work on their part, and could be perceived as annoying. Partly for these reasons, female inmates are sometimes subject to stricter social control than male inmates (McClellan, 1994; McCorkle, 1995; Sargent, 1984). This may inflate official misconduct reports for women.

Gang-affiliated inmates pose such a problem for the maintenance of prison order that administrators in many states have been forced to develop anti-gang programs,

training, and policies. Members of gangs, or security threat groups, commit a variety of illegal acts while incarcerated (Fleisher & Decker, 2001; Fong & Vogel, 1995; Irwin, 1980; Morris, 1995; Sheldon, 1991). For instance, MacDonald (1999) found that former gang members are nearly 30% more likely to engage in violence in prison than inmates with no prior gang history. Similarly, prisoners with prior incarceration experience and lengthier criminal records tend to be more aggressive, prone to bullying other inmates, and are more likely to commit an array of infractions while incarcerated. Indeed, the positive relationship between pre-prison criminality and criminal justice experience and prison misconduct offers some of the strongest evidence for the importation model. Copious examples of this exist (Flanagan, 1983; Goetting & Howsen, 1986; Ireland, 2000; Light, 1991; Myers & Levy, 1978; Simon, 1993; Winfree, Mays, Crowley, & Peat, 1994; Wooldredge, 1991; Wooldredge et al., 2001). The influence of pre-prison criminality on prison misconduct is not mediated by gender, as the most problematic female inmates are also those with lengthy criminal records and a history of violence (Kruttschnitt & Krmpotich, 1990; McCorkle, 1995).

Scholars disagree about the relationship between sentence length and prison misconduct; some find a positive relationship (Craddock, 1996; Goetting & Howsen, 1986; Wooldredge et al., 2001) whereas others find a negative relationship (Flanagan, 1980; Wooldredge, 1991; Wright, 1991). This is probably because the relationship between sentence length, time served, and misconduct is far more complex than the aforementioned dichotomy. For example, criminologists have found that inmates are disproportionately cited for infractions early in their sentence or upon arrival at a new correctional facility (Cao et al., 1997). Once inmates learn the organizational culture and norms of a facility, and reciprocally, as guards become more familiar with inmates, misconduct declines. Indeed, Zamble (1992) has found that, once they adapt to prison, inmates, even those serving long-term sentences, function rather well and avoid engaging in misconduct.

Clear similarities exist between the criminal career and inmate misconduct literatures. In conventional society and in prison, crime and analogous behaviors are not equally distributed throughout the population. Some citizens and inmates are more consistently problematic, violent, criminal, and difficult to control. However, only two studies to this researcher's knowledge have made explicit the potential connection between criminal career and prison research. First, Finn (1993) tracked the prison misconduct careers of over 8,000 New York inmates who were identified as mentally retarded. She found that the most common offending trajectory is characterized by high levels of infractions during the early stage of confinement followed by a sharply declining involvement in prison deviance. Moreover, Finn (1993) found that mentally retarded inmates were not appreciably more dangerous inmates than non-retarded persons. Second, Craddock (1996) studied the prison misconduct careers of nearly 5,000 North Carolina inmates. Like prior researchers, Craddock (1996) found that age, race, and sex significantly impacted the likelihood of offending behind bars. Further, Craddock found that the prison misconduct distribution was positively skewed just as criminal career researchers have found in the general population. This means that a small cadre of individuals accounts for the bulk of offending in a population.

## Purpose of the Study

In sum, a criminal career approach to penology is in its infancy. This is surprising for two reasons. First, the career, human development, or life-course approach is one of the dominant areas within criminology (Blumstein, Cohen, & Farrington, 1988; Farrington, 1997). It is unclear why such a popular approach has not been applied to prisons. Second and more substantively, prisons are a central sociological issue with many important human, political, and economic costs. For these reasons, the current research seeks to build on the preliminary work of Finn and Craddock and apply the criminal career approach to prisons. Specifically, the current research goal is to empirically examine the incidence, prevalence, offender types, and correlates of criminal careers occurring behind bars.

## METHODS

### Sample

Data were derived from official inmate dossiers produced by the department of corrections in a large state located in the southwestern United States. An encyclopedic array of information was gathered for every inmate including demographic indicators, sentencing information, housing and inter-facility movements, escape and absconding history, employment history, and parole information. The department of corrections also produced a diagnostic profile of each inmate. This report attempted to quantify the public risk the inmate poses to the community and institution. Factors such as criminal record, current and prior crimes of violence or weaponry, incarceration history, community and prison gang involvement, and age constituted the risk assessment. Additionally, scores for educational attainment, substance abuse, vocational history, work skills, and residency were utilized to most appropriately classify inmates according to their needed level of supervision. Finally and most pertinent to the current study, the department of corrections compiled a comprehensive disciplinary report chronicling the violations committed while the offender was in custody.

In early 2001, a simple-random sample of 1,005 inmates was selected from the roster of over 20,000 inmates supervised by the state department of corrections. Of the inmates selected from the sampling frame, 83% ( $n = 831$ ) were male and 17% ( $n = 174$ ) were female. Forty six per cent ( $n = 460$ ) of prisoners were white and 55% ( $n = 545$ ) were nonwhite.<sup>3</sup> The average inmate age was 33.2 years with standard deviation of 11.2 years and range of 16–78 years. Eighty-nine per cent ( $n = 893$ ) of the inmates were serving determinate sentences. Among inmates with a determinate sentence, the average length of sentence was 4.7 years with standard deviation of 5.6 years and range of 0.25 to 70 years. Eleven per cent of the inmates ( $n = 112$ ) were serving life imprisonment or death sentences.

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<sup>3</sup>The population demographics were 92% male, 8% female; 45% white, 24% Hispanic, 15% African American, 5% Native American, and 1% Asian American.

## Independent Variables

Eleven independent variables encompassing demographic, criminal history, and diagnostic characteristics are used for multivariate analyses. The demographic variables are age (continuous coded), race (nonwhite = 0/white = 1), and sex (male = 0/female = 1). Sentence length is continuous coded from four months to 1,188 months (representing 99 years for the lifers and condemned offenders).<sup>4</sup> The remaining seven variables are operationalized by interval scales ranging from 1 = very low risk to 5 = very high risk. These are security threat group (gang) risk ( $M = 1.22$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ), violence history ( $M = 1.57$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ), confinement history ( $M = 1.72$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ), criminal history ( $M = 1.81$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ), offense severity ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ), time served ( $M = 2.46$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ), and institutional risk ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ).<sup>5</sup>

## Dependent Variables

Prison violations ( $M = 8.43$ ,  $SD = 15.12$ , range = 0–134), including all crimes and other forms of misconduct, constitute the dependent variables. In alphabetical order, these are accruing three or more violations, aggravated assault, altering one's physical appearance, arson, bartering, being in an unauthorized area, contraband possession or manufacturing, disobeying and disrespecting officer, engaging in sexual behavior, escape, failure to clean room, gambling, homicide, horseplay, hostage taking, hygiene violations, interference with staff, littering, lying, malingering, rape, refusal to work, rioting, simple assault, smuggling, tattooing, threatening staff, throwing objects, unlawful contact, and weapons possession. These offenses, particularly the minor violations, portray the types of misconduct occurring behind bars (Bottoms, 1999). Additionally, major misconduct ( $M = 0.98$ ,  $SD = 2.57$ , range = 0–26) includes the most serious offenses and is analogous to the Index offenses found in the *Uniform Crime Reports*. These are aggravated assault, arson, escape, extortion, homicide, hostage taking, rape, rioting, simple assault, threatening staff, and weapons possession.

<sup>4</sup>Coding schemes for sentence length become complicated with life imprisonment and condemned offenders. The length of 99 years or 1,188 months was selected to represent, in years, the magnitude of life and death sentences. In the first iteration of regression analysis, a dichotomous term for lifers and condemned offenders (no = 0/yes = 1) was included; however, this term was highly correlated ( $r = 0.82$ ) with the other sentence length measure and was subsequently omitted to avoid multicollinearity.

<sup>5</sup>Some methodological caveats are in order. First, prior researchers have found that prison misconduct is most likely to occur at the beginning of a sentence. As inmates age and adjust to the facility, misconduct declines. To examine this potential curvilinearity, squared terms for age, sentence length, and time served were included in preliminary equations. None of these substantively changed the outcomes of the model, thus they were omitted. Second, an admitted limitation of these data are the absence of institutional factors that could have been used in structural equation models (see Wooldredge et al., 2001). It is likely, indeed probable, that the environment of the prison facility (e.g., custody level, type of supervision (linear, podular, direct), crowding, tolerance levels of staff, etc.) impact the likelihood that inmates will be cited for assorted violations. A crude proxy for prison structure was the inmate's institutional risk score (1 = very low risk to 5 = very high risk). This diagnostic measure quantifies the degree of risk that the inmate poses to institutional safety, thus it partially but significantly determines the type of prison facility used for custody. Third, and relatedly, there was considerable inmate movement between and within various prison facilities. This also complicates the ability of researchers to assess multilevel prison effects.

## **Estimation and Presentation of Data**

Data are presented in two ways. First, descriptive statistics indicate the incidence and prevalence of prison violations (Table 1) and an offender typology demonstrating offending skewness (Table 2). Second, major prison misconduct is regressed on the demographic, diagnostic, and criminal history covariates. Incidents of misconduct are count data bound by zero, assume only integer values, and are not normally distributed, conditions that suggest a Poisson distribution. However, Poisson regression is most appropriate for estimating relatively rare events. As event counts increase, the Poisson distribution is compromised, or becomes over-dispersed. Regression diagnostics indicated an initial poor fit due to over-dispersion (GFI  $\chi^2 = 1791.026$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Consequently, negative binomial regression is used to estimate counts of more frequent events (regression coefficients appear in Table 3).

## **FINDINGS**

### **Incidence of Prison Offending**

As indicated in Table 1, crime and other violations are not averted by incarceration and the incidence of crime varies considerably. The most serious offenses such as homicide, rape, and hostage taking are also the least common, whereas less threatening offenses such as disobeying an officer, drug use and possession, being in an unauthorized area, refusal to work, and theft are quite common. This inverse relationship between offense seriousness and offense incidence is also found in conventional society (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2000). Other serious, albeit non-lethal, offenses such as threatening staff, simple and aggravated assault, contraband possession, weapons possession, rioting, and disorderly conduct have a moderately high incidence.

Two additional points emerge from the incidence of prison offending. First, many official violations in a prison criminal career appear to be demonstrations of inmate unwillingness to abide by institutional rules. It is possible that these incidents of misconduct are examples of the interpersonal deficiencies that characterize criminal offenders (DeLisi, 2001; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). More probably, these incidents reflect the confrontational structure of inmate–staff relationships. Indeed, rancor with staff is very common according to the incidence of disobeying, disrespecting, threatening, lying, interfering, and throwing objects at prison officials. Furthermore, the collective incidence of lying, refusal to clean one's room, refusal to demonstrate appropriate hygiene, and malingering suggest that sullen or obstinate behavior is common among inmates. The second theme pertains to niche-oriented violations. Classic penal research (e.g., Sykes, 1958, pp. 84–108) suggests that inmates adapt to prison by adopting various roles within the tacit prison social structure. Thus, while inmates demonstrate considerable levels of languid activity, they also participate in what appear to be rather purposive tasks. Offenses such as drug and contraband possession, use, and trafficking, bartering, tattooing, exchanging sexual favors, fraud, extortion, gambling, and counterfeiting suggest involvement in an informal economy. Similarly, Edgar and O'Donnell (1998) found that these offenses characterize the social organization of inmate life.

## Prevalence of Prison Offending

Just as the total incidence of misconduct varies, so does the proportion of inmates participating in certain types of misconduct. Disobeying an officer is easily the most prevalent type of misconduct, with nearly 60% of inmates officially cited for its violation. Approximately one in five inmates receive a citation for drug violations, being in an unauthorized area, theft, and refusal to work. With the exceptions of simple assault (14%), threatening staff (12.5%), and weapons possession (slightly over 12%), most inmates are never officially contacted for very serious offenses. Indeed, the prevalence for aggravated assault (8.6%), rioting (5.4%), arson (2.1%), extortion (1.7%), escape (1.6%), rape (0.4%), homicide (0.3%), and hostage taking (0%) are low. Offenses that contribute to stereotypical prison lore are rare. For example, only 10% of inmates have ever been reprimanded for administering or receiving a prison tattoo. Just 3% of the inmates in the sample were contacted for engaging in sexual acts with other inmates, and just 1% of inmates were cited for inappropriate physical contact with prison staff. Finally, less than 1% of the inmates had ever raped or killed another inmate. A complete listing of incidence and prevalence statistics appears in Table 1.

## Offender Typology

One of the most important findings of the criminal career paradigm is the documentation of different types of offender. In their landmark birth cohort study of 9,945 boys born in Philadelphia in 1945, Wolfgang and his colleagues (1972) found that individuals varied in their criminal activity. Specifically, 6,470 boys (65%) were never contacted by police as juveniles, 1,613 boys (16%) were contacted only once, 1,235 boys (12%) were recidivists contacted from two to four times inclusive, and 627 boys (6%) were chronic offenders with five or more police contacts. This latter group has been particularly important because they account for startling levels (between 50 and 90%) of the most extreme forms of crime and delinquency. As indicated in Table 2, this trend also emerges for criminal misconduct occurring behind bars. One third of the inmates ( $n=334$ ) were “innocents,” that is they were never officially documented by corrections personnel for violating any offense. Moreover, 74% of inmates are *never* officially contacted for violating a major rule. Nearly 10% of the inmates ( $n=98$ ) committed only one violation during their prison criminal career, and 47% of the “once-only” violators accrued their infraction for disobeying an officer. Sixteen percent of the inmates ( $n=164$ ) were minor recidivists totaling between two and four violations. Finally, over 40% of the inmates ( $n=409$ ) qualified as chronic offenders using the Wolfgang conceptualization of five or more infractions in a career. Moreover, these inmates averaged nearly 8.5 infractions over their prison criminal career (range 0 to 134). This far exceeds the proportion of chronic or habitual offenders found in general population samples.

Recently, the criteria used for qualification as a chronic offender have been criticized as too liberal and partially responsible for ineffective selective incapacitation policies. For example, DeLisi (2001) has identified the “extreme career criminal” as an offender with a minimum of 30 arrests. They are pathological

Table 1. Incidence and prevalence of prison crime

Violation	Incidence	% involvement
Disobeying officer	3,094	56.8
Drug use/possession	575	21.2
Being in unauthorized area	545	20.8
Refusal to work	460	19.0
Theft	312	20.0
Obstructing staff	283	16.0
Disrespecting staff	277	14.6
Threatening staff	253	12.5
Simple assault	234	14.2
Bartering	227	12.9
Property damage	216	10.7
Contraband possession	214	11.3
Weapon possession	214	12.2
Tattooing	165	10.3
Lying	165	10.2
Accruing 3+ violations	163	10.1
Aggravated assault	145	8.6
Disorderly conduct	88	6.1
Tampering	85	6.8
Sexual behavior	73	3.1
Fraud	65	3.7
Rioting	63	5.4
Throwing objects	63	3.8
Smuggling	51	3.3
Hygiene violations	45	2.9
Horseplay	31	2.3
Arson	29	2.1
Failure to clean room	28	1.1
Interfering with staff	24	1.5
Extortion	23	1.7
Gambling	21	1.6
Escape	19	1.6
Unlawful physical contact	14	1.1
Counterfeiting	12	1.0
Littering	12	1.1
Malingering	8	0.6
Altering appearance	7	0.7
Bribery	5	0.5
Rape	4	0.4
Homicide	3	0.3
Hostage taking	0	0

offenders who do not voluntarily terminate their criminal careers and are involved in dire violence such as murder, rape, and kidnapping. Applying DeLisi's measure, less than 8% of the current inmates ( $n = 77$ ) qualify as extreme career criminals while incarcerated. However, extreme offenders accounted for 100% of the homicides, 75% of the rapes, 80% of the arsons, and 50% of the aggravated assaults occurring in prison.

Table 2. Offender classification typology

Offender classification	Number of violations	Frequency	Percent
Innocents	0	334	33.2
Once-only offenders	1	98	9.8
Minor recidivists	2-4	164	16.3
Wolfgang chronic	5-29	332	33
DeLisi extreme chronic	30+	77	7.7

Table 3. Negative binomial regression model for major prison misconduct

Variable	Metric regression coefficient	<i>z</i> -score
Sex	0.291	1.39
Race	0.223	2.87***
Age	-0.018	2.35**
Gang history	1.09	2.80***
Sentence length	-0.013	2.63***
Time served	0.450	4.52***
Offense severity	0.004	0.03
Arrest history	0.256	2.43**
Violence/weapons history	0.243	2.47**
Prison history	0.665	6.32***
Institutional risk	0.178	1.26
Model $\chi^2$		158.91***
Pseudo $R^2$		0.096

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ .

### Negative Binomial Regression Model

As shown in Table 3, several demographic, diagnostic, and criminal history measures were significant predictors of criminal misconduct occurring behind bars. Younger inmates were significantly more likely than older inmates (estimate = -0.018,  $z = 2.35$ ) to engage in felonious behavior while imprisoned. Racial and ethnic minorities (estimate = 0.223,  $z = 2.87$ ) totaled more serious infractions than white inmates. A somewhat unexpected finding was the insignificant relationship between gender and prison violations (estimate = 0.291,  $z = 1.39$ ). Inmates involved in security threat groups or prison gangs (estimate = 1.09,  $z = 2.80$ ) totaled more serious violations than inmates not affiliated with a gang.

Other factors were inconsistently related to major offending behind bars. Generally, inmates serving shorter sentences were more serious violators than those serving lengthier determinate, life, or death sentences (estimate = -0.013,  $z = 2.63$ ). However, the actual amount of time served in prison was positively related to major disruptions (estimate = 0.450,  $z = 4.52$ ). Obviously, as inmates served more time in prison, they had more time to accumulate official citations for major infractions. The severity of offense for which the offender was incarcerated (estimate = 0.004,  $z = 0.03$ ) did not influence the commission of major forms of misconduct.

The effects of pre-prison characteristics on subsequent prison misconduct strongly supported an importation argument. Inmates who had more extensive arrest histories (estimate = 0.256,  $z = 2.43$ ) with greater history of the use of violence and weapons (estimate = 0.243,  $z = 2.47$ ) and had served prior prison sentences (estimate = 0.665,  $z = 6.32$ ) were the most problematic inmates. The degree of institutional risk, the current proxy for custodial level of the facility, was not significantly related to prison misconduct (estimate = 0.178,  $z = 1.26$ ). In other words, interpersonal violence on the "outside" was predictive of interpersonal violence and related violations committed while imprisoned. Easily the strongest predictor of a prison criminal career was confinement history whereby offenders with multiple prior stints in prison committed more prison crime than first-time prisoners.

## DISCUSSION

Rather than viewing prison as a stalling point of an otherwise active criminal career, these findings suggest that criminal careers continue while inmates are incarcerated. Both parallels and contrasts emerged between offending patterns in conventional society and the current look at criminal careers behind bars. As in conventional society, the incidence and prevalence of crime are inversely related to its seriousness. Contrary to the folklore promulgated by the mass media (e.g., the television series *OZ*), crimes such as homicide and rape are rare, not ubiquitous, occurrences in prison. However, it should not be concluded that prison is a safe place. The projected rate of crime per 100,000 persons is much higher in the prison sample than in the general U.S. population. For the inmates, the rates are murder 11.1, male–male rape 14.8, aggravated assault 537.1, arson 107.4, and theft 1155.6. In the general population, the rates are murder 5.7, male–female rape 10.9, aggravated assault 185.1, arson 6.3, and theft 462.2 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2000). Thus, serious offenses such as rioting, aggravated and simple assaults, weapons possession, drug possession and trafficking, and threatening correctional officers are frighteningly common. Furthermore, a disparate assortment of other offenses such as disobeying an officer, theft, refusing to work, damaging property, bartering, and possessing contraband are endemic to the prison environment. This portrait of prison life is concordant with prior research (Edgar & O'Donnell, 1998; Hewitt et al., 1984; Irwin, 1980; Morris, 1995).

Just as archetypal offender types variously victimize conventional society (Blumstein & Cohen, 1979; Dean et al., 1996; DeLisi, 2001; D'Ungar et al., 1998; Farrington, 1997, 1998), some inmates are certainly more troublesome for the maintenance of order in prison than others. One in three inmates are *never* contacted for rules violations, and nearly 10% of inmates receive just one citation for misbehavior. Sixteen percent of inmates are contacted for only a handful (two to four offenses) of violations. Moreover, 74% of inmates are *never* officially contacted for violating a major rule. This suggests that many inmates are lawful and pliant during their incarceration.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the remaining prisoners. Sharp differences exist between the current research and the extant literature in terms of the proportion of chronic or habitual offenders. For example, in conventional society the proportion of chronic offenders is less than 10% (Glueck & Glueck, 1930; Greenwood & Turner, 1987; Tillman, 1987; Tracy, Wolfgang, & Figlio, 1990; Wolfgang et al., 1972). Conversely, more than one-third of the inmates in the current sample are high-rate offenders *during their time in prison*. Furthermore, over 7% of the offenders qualify as extreme career criminals with over 30 crimes and violations while incarcerated (DeLisi, 2001). Far from using their incarceration as a period of “downtime,” these offenders engage in a multitude of offenses. The “career criminal convicts” in the current study, those at the right-hand tail of the offending distribution, engage in disturbingly high levels of criminal misconduct and violations while imprisoned. Maximum values of various offenses include 60 acts of disobeying an officer, 17 counts of drug possession, 38 acts of property damage, and 10 counts of aggravated assault.

Younger inmates and racial and ethnic minorities commit more official major violations than older inmates and whites. These findings are consistent with prior

research (Bottoms, 1999; Cao et al., 1997; Craddock, 1996; Harer & Steffensmeier, 1996; Lindquist, 1980; Simon, 1993; Wooldredge, 1991). Unexpectedly, gender was not related to major prison violations. For example, Hemmens and Marquart (2000) have examined the relationship between the ascribed characteristics of inmates and their perceptions of prison staff. They found that inmates with the highest levels of misconduct (e.g., youth and minorities) perceived that corrections' officers treated them unfairly, especially compared with older and white inmates. The same logic may apply to gender. Perhaps corrections officers construe prisons as a male phenomenon in which certain types of behavior (e.g., fighting, disobedience, lethargy, and defiance) are fully expected. Conversely, these same behaviors emanating from female inmates are viewed as antithetical to stereotypically female gender roles. Indeed, McClellan (1994) found that many offenses are ignored when committed by male inmates but scrupulously enforced when committed by female inmates. This is perhaps one reason why the literature is so mixed regarding the effect of gender on prison misconduct (cf. Cao et al., 1997; Goetting & Howsen, 1983; Hewitt et al., 1984; Lindquist, 1980; McClellan, 1994).

Do the current analyses reflect actual inmate conduct, or are they really measuring correctional officer behavior? Critics of the current research will be rightly concerned about the use of official data. Official accounts, particularly in a coercive atmosphere such as prison, are rooted in correctional officer discretion. This discretion is, in turn, contingent on the relationship dynamics existing between staff and prisoners. Poole and Regoli (1980b, p. 224) have suggested "disciplinary reports are thus a function of both inmate behavior and guards' reactions to that behavior. Because these outcomes depend to a large degree on the definition of the situation, the guard may be said not only to interpret the rules but to make them as well." For this and other reasons pertaining to the limits of official data (see Hewitt et al., 1984; Light, 1990; Poole & Regoli, 1980a, b, c), the external validity of these findings should be interpreted cautiously.<sup>6</sup>

While official data have admitted liabilities pertaining to discrimination against certain types of inmate (e.g., minorities), the significance of the diagnostic/criminal history measures generally supports their accuracy. The meaningful positive effects of arrest history, prior use of violence, and, most robustly, confinement history on prison misconduct lend credence to the idea that a small cadre of offenders are caught committing the most offenses whether free or incarcerated. They are most certainly the "violent few" described by criminal career researchers (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visher, 1986; DeLisi, 2001; Haapanen, 1990; Moffitt, 1993; Tillman, 1987; Toch & Adams, 1986; Tracy et al., 1990; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Van Dine et al., 1979; Wolfgang et al., 1972). Adjoining the relevance to the criminal career literature, these findings also lend support to the importation model of inmate behavior. By and large, offenders who were most volatile and dangerous before prison were the most problematic inmates while behind bars (Cao et al., 1997; Harer & Steffensmeier, 1996; MacDonald, 1990; Paterline & Petersen, 1999; Poole & Regoli, 1983).

<sup>6</sup>Self-reported inmate infractions are not immune from measurement error (Hewitt et al., 1984; Van Voorhis, 1994; Wooldredge, 1991). For example, inmates may exaggerate their misconduct to help create a stronger self-image or they may minimize their involvement in offenses that could potentially cause embarrassment or shame (e.g., engaging in various sexual behaviors). It is also likely that inmates fear reprisal from staff for divulging the truth about the extent of their offending while incarcerated.

## Implications for Future Research

In two main ways, future research could build upon the current study and improve the understanding of criminal careers occurring behind bars. First, a research design employing official, self-reported, and even victimization accounts of misconduct will help determine the true incidence, prevalence, and individual variation found in prison careers. Obviously, this entails a variety of costs. Studies that have employed multiple sources of data have much smaller sample sizes of  $n = 182$  (Poole & Regoli, 1980a) and  $n = 391$  (Hewitt et al., 1984) respondents respectively. While the current study utilizes only one data source, the sample ( $n = 1,005$ ) is sufficiently large to assess demographic and diagnostic differences in rule-breaking. To date, there is no data set to this author's knowledge that contains both multiple data sources and a large, diverse sample.

Second, the current author echoes the sentiments of Harer and Langan (2001) regarding the potential promise of models showing the interaction of prison environment, individual characteristics, and prison offending. The current study could not attempt multilevel analysis for three reasons. First, and most importantly, the data collection did not include information on the correctional facilities. It is unknown how various structural factors such as overcrowding influenced inmate behavior. Second, inmate transfers were relatively common, making it quite difficult to monitor the inmate's movements. This mobility suggests that a stay in a particular facility can be short lived, thereby reducing the importance of structural factors. The third point is borrowed from Harer and Langan (2001, p. 534) who suggest that "inmate classification systems play a major role in determining the nature of prison environments . . . the prison environment is to a large degree predetermined by the classification system, in inmate population composition, architecture, custody, and programs." Thus, although structural factors are undoubtedly important, prison classification systems seek to house homogeneous inmates into the same facility. Theoretically, inmates who pose similar risks should respond similarly to the physical conditions of the prison.

Prior research has found that punitive or custodial facilities increase infractory behavior among inmates (Feld, 1981; McCorkle, Miethe, & Drass, 1995; Poole & Regoli, 1983). This needs to be explored further. Fortunately, Wooldredge and his colleagues (2001) have recently conducted multilevel analyses of prison misconduct. Like the current study, they found that young inmates, minorities, and offenders with an extensive prior criminal record are the most disruptive for prison officials. They also advocate further data collection in this field.

## CONCLUSION

With a correctional population of over two million people in the United States, the social and sociological relevance of prisons is not likely to wane. This behooves sociologists and the lay public to understand what exactly transpires in prisons. Given the enormous costs of incarceration, it is also critical that prison systems house offenders who are most deserving of this sanction. The criminal career approach has been vital to the understanding of trajectories of criminal behavior. This approach can also be helpful in further understanding inmate behavior.

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