

Delisi, M. (2005). *Career Criminals in Society*.
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“In a way, the crime problem in a society is the career criminal problem because about 5% of the offenders account for more than half of the total crime and delinquency affecting the population” (p. 173). This is the major premise of Matt Delisi’s *Criminal Careers in Society*, which attacks the issue of persistent, dangerous criminals from a self-identified conservative ideological perspective. That is, Delisi presents the book as a conservative counterweight to much of academic criminology, which he characterizes as liberal-leaning at least its implications, and often in its explicit stances.

His focus is particularly on those offenders who exhibit strong tendencies toward anti-social and violent behavior from childhood or adolescence onward. Since these offenders create so much havoc, “social control efforts should almost entirely focus on them” (p. 6). Delisi first describes, with illustrative narratives and sample criminal records as examples, the dynamics and parameters of the kind of criminal careers he is talking about. In two later chapters, he categorizes relevant theories on criminal careers into developmental theories (e.g., social bonding/control theory, social learning/differential association theory, Moffitt’s developmental theory, and others) and propensity theories (J. Q. Wilson’s discussions of crime and human nature, Gottfredson and Hirschi’s self-control theory), noting the strengths and drawbacks of each in empirically addressing career criminals. Next, Delisi discusses “the politics of career criminals,” and this chapter contains the polemical and policy heart of the book. Here and in the concluding chapter, his main argument is that for a variety of reasons, the “disorganized and lenient” (p. 136) criminal justice system does a generally poor job of dealing with career criminals, and society does a poor job of investing in prevention of the processes by which criminal careers develop, and of identifying and incapacitating career criminals. He is not an uncritical enthusiast of selective incapacitation strategies, however, noting that the prediction of criminal careers is very difficult, and current criminological tools are not up to the task. However, he notes that society cannot afford to wait around for criminology to achieve the ability to prospectively identify career criminals with great accuracy, if that is even humanly possible. Delisi also calls for much greater efforts to incapacitate career criminals through longer (perhaps lifetime) periods of incarceration for proven violent career criminals, and muses about the possible efficacy of more widespread use of the death penalty for such offenders. Such a strategy, he argues, would necessitate the state taking over the function of the well-known Innocence Project, using DNA evidence routinely to guard against wrongful execution.

In my view, this is the most evidence-based, theoretically sophisticated, and least arrogant conservative statement on criminology that one is going to find. Despite the conservative rhetoric, what Delisi ends up doing is attempting to find a middle ground between his two categorizations of theory (developmental and propensity), and indirectly, Left and Right. He argues that conservative policy makers and criminal justice officials should embrace and invest in specific efforts to prevent the processes by which career criminals develop in the first place (he emphasizes primarily child and adolescent development processes). In turn,

liberal-leaning academics should recognize the human costs and harm done by career criminals, accept the notion from propensity theories that some criminals have always been “bad” and remain irredeemable, and stop implicitly apologizing for or sympathizing with them.

This book is sure to provoke a variety of reactions on an ideological level, but I will confine my criticisms to a few empirical matters. First, the book recognizes but pays insufficient attention to macro level and “communities and crime” studies. Macro research on violence in particular shows that much violence occurs at the hands of offenders who do not fit the mal-adjusted career criminal view presented here, and that violence is linked to culture, structure, and community organization. Furthermore, social structure and culture are inextricably tied to crime prevention. Individual and family processes such as child development, socialization, and supervision do not occur in a vacuum. Intervening with parents/mothers and children, as Delisi recommends, will be of limited use if surrounding communities and institutions are disorganized, lack conventional social and cultural capital, and foster criminal social and cultural capital.

Second, the notion that criminals, even career criminals, exhibit little specialization is treated as a given, but has recently been disputed. There is evidence of specialization in at least broad types of crime, such as violence versus property and/or illicit market crime (e.g., Sullivan, McGloin, Pratt, & Piquero, 2006). Such research has largely been published since Delisi’s book came out, but nonetheless it undercuts some of the claims of propensity theories, and at least suggests a distinction between career property offenders and career violent offenders.

The charge that the criminal justice system is too lenient will strike some as puzzling in the face of the fact of the well-documented and dramatic surge in incarceration rates for the past 20 years, and the costs of imprisonment that are straining state budgets nationwide. What Delisi seems to be getting at is that the system is too lenient and inconsistent with *repeat violent offenders* (which is to say all career criminals, because Delisi rejects the notion of specialization in offending). If so, and if we are to invest in large-scale efforts to identify and incapacitate career criminals (particularly violent ones), something will have to give. If we are to target for incapacitation of the offender who is a danger to the community, then does that imply that we have to do something else with the offenders who are not so much dangerous, but are nuisances, opportunists, and those engaged in illegal markets (e.g., drugs, gambling)?

I personally find terms like liberal and conservative to be clumsy and unhelpful abstractions, at least for the work that mainstream criminologists do. I also prefer that science not be mixed with ideology of any stripe, but I recognize that is probably unrealistic. Delisi is right that there are many published polemics about crime explicitly espousing left perspectives and castigating conservative ideas. For those looking for an intelligent conservative perspective on criminology for supplementary classroom use or scholarly discussion, look no further than this book.

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Reference

- Sullivan, C., McGloin, J. M., Pratt, T., & Piquero, A. (2006). Rethinking the “Norm” of offender generality. *Criminology*, 44, 199-233.