Book Reviews

Understanding Criminal Careers*
Keith Soothill, Claire Fitzpatrick and Brian Francis

The focus of this book is on criminal careers – which, for the authors, are ‘fundamental to criminological study’ (p. xiii). It deals with important issues that are central – or suggested as needing to be more central – to the understanding of criminal behaviour. At the same time as taking a broad view of criminal careers the authors skilfully present relevant and interesting specific research material and references in sufficient depth to illustrate their points.

The concept of a criminal career is explained and defined in the opening chapter with reference to longitudinal research, including work from David Farrington and others familiar to those who work directly with offenders. The authors identify the focus of criminal careers research at an individual level as a limitation, a theme they return to throughout the book.

In Chapter 2 the authors set out their position of dealing simultaneously with theoretical and methodological issues. This position is explained in straightforward language which suggests that one’s view of the world (theory) influences the approach one takes (method) to explore issues. This gives the book its practical structure in referring to both policy implications and influences on work with offenders resulting directly from research findings. Two competing theoretical viewpoints are presented, with associated research studies and findings, and the authors support the relevance of longitudinal studies in this area of research.

1Reviewed by Kieran Hill, Probation Officer, PBNI Policy and Planning department. Email: Kieran.hill@pbni.gsi.gov.uk
Key longitudinal studies and findings are outlined in Chapter 3. The authors refer to three key studies in detail but also include a helpful list of the top 10 longitudinal studies worldwide. Returning to the importance of theory, the challenge is presented for theories to have supporting evidence and for data to be presented along with explanations. Many of the researchers mentioned in this chapter will be familiar to those from a criminal justice background, but the presentation of the research is fresh and current, and issues raised are relevant to policy and practice decisions as to how society deals with offenders and crime.

The next two chapters explore the concepts of onset, persistence and desistance, the ‘foundation stones’ of criminal careers research. The authors pinpoint the need for clear definitions of the terms used, and deal with some of the complexities involved in interpreting and comparing findings from different studies. The work of Maruna and others in terms of viewing desistance as a process is presented in a clear and interesting way. The chapter also refers to interventions that were ineffective and to the possibility that interventions may have different outcomes at different points of a criminal career. Again the authors seek to push the boundaries of research by referring to the need to explore desistance at different parallel levels – individual, situational and community – and to ensure that offenders see that stopping offending is an option.

Chapter 6 examines the concept of specialisation, and whether it is possible to demonstrate its existence in the research findings. The sometimes competing theoretical approaches are discussed with reference to important research. This is a complex topic and the authors do well to extract relevant material for discussion. Two areas – sex offending and violent offences – are given specific attention. The importance of the debate and discussion is highlighted in terms of policy and practice implications in that if specialisation exists, then knowledge of previous offending can be helpful to predict future similar offending.

Chapter 7 covers the extremely relevant and important topics of dangerousness, prediction and risk and the relevance of criminal careers research in terms of helping to assess risk and dangerousness. This raises a range of issues, some of which are complex. The authors consider research to shed light on assessing risk of general offending and of serious and dangerous offending and reoffending. In the world of risk assessment the consequences when something goes wrong can be very serious. The
use of actuarial measurements to assess risk as compared to, and combined with, clinical judgement is a central issue for those who make assessments and decisions in relation to serious and dangerous offenders. The chapter is very detailed and some of the research findings and discussion are more relevant to those with a research interest. However, it is important to have knowledge about research underpinning the assessment of risk, prediction and dangerousness.

The penultimate chapter turns attention to the need for a wider focus of criminal careers research to include those in the population that have not been convicted of any crime. The authors refer to the idea that every one of us, whether we offend or not, have a chance of committing an offence. Questions such as when does an offender becomes a ‘non-offender’ are addressed, which in turn have important policy implications in relation to the relevance of a previous offending record to obtaining employment.

Throughout the previous chapters limitations have been identified and the authors have already mentioned a move to more complex models and research designs in certain areas of study. In the last chapter of the book they suggest further ‘bold’ ways in which criminal careers research can be progressed and widened, including possible genetic aspects to certain offending as well as age, period and cohort effects that could be factored into future research modelling. Returning again to the idea that much of the work in criminal careers research is focused at the individual level, the authors argue for a larger sociological involvement in research tackling societal and cultural dimensions of crime.

In summary, the book is very well written and extremely informative. It raises many important questions that are relevant not only to researchers but to a wider range of professionals operating within the criminal justice system and beyond. While some of the findings are presented in detail, and are perhaps more relevant to researchers, the book makes a valuable contribution to understanding criminal careers. If one’s world-view influences one’s decision-making, then this book does help to inform that world-view in terms of offending behaviour from onset to desistance.
Over the past decade forensic psychology has grown rapidly as a subject, with an increasing number of forensic psychologists under training and working in demanding roles in prisons, secure training facilities, probation services and other parts of the criminal justice system.

Forensic psychology is the application of psychology in the criminal justice system. Forensic psychologists work mainly to develop intervention techniques and treatment programmes for offenders. They develop one-to-one or group treatment programmes to specifically address offending behaviour and psychological need. Forensic psychologists play a significant role in the assessment of offenders and in the provision of support and training for other staff working with this client group.

This *Dictionary of Forensic Psychology* covers key aspects of criminal justice and the criminal justice system and is designed to meet the needs of both students and practitioners. Its entries reflect a wide range of perspectives that will be useful and informative not only to trainee and qualified forensic psychologists but to all practitioners working with offenders.

There are over 100 entries in this dictionary, each between 500 and 1,500 words. Alphabetically arranged entries on key terms and concepts are contributed by both academics and practising forensic psychologists.

Each topic provides sufficient information on the subject. Entries commence with a summary definition, followed by the main text and, where appropriate, a reference section of key texts and sources of information.

There is a significant focus on practice in terms of the subjects chosen for this dictionary, such as addictive behaviours and assessment of offenders, which include intellectual and personality assessments. There are substantial entries on risk assessment and violence risk assessment, and practice interventions in areas such as sex offending, substance abuse, mental disorder and offending behaviours are covered. Many of

* Reviewed by Eileen Richardson, Probation Officer, PBNI SFI team.
Email: Eileen.richardson@pbni.gsi.gov.uk
the entries give details of relevant research and findings. The book also addresses general information relating to key aspects of the Criminal Justice system such as courts, sentencing, Prosecution Services and jury decision-making.

Overall, I found this dictionary to be an excellent reference book. It is well written and easily read, and I believe it will be of interest not only to forensic psychologists but also to probation staff, and anyone with an interest in this field.