



# National Institute of Justice

## Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

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# Adult Patterns of Criminal Behavior

*Summary of a Research Study by Julie Horney, D. Wayne Osgood,  
and Ineke Haen Marshall, University of Nebraska*

Can changes in life circumstances, such as being employed, living with a wife or girlfriend, or modifying alcohol or drug use, alter the crime patterns of convicted adult male felons? This question was the focus of a study conducted for the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), which sought to understand the relationship between adult patterns of criminal behavior and relatively short-term changes in work, family, and other social situations.

It is widely believed that criminal behavior is the result of a basic propensity that is established early on and persists throughout life, and that changing life circumstances in adulthood are unlikely to alter this criminal propensity. Others have theorized that short-term factors such as getting fired from a job, quarreling with a wife or girlfriend, or abusing alcohol or drugs may be important catalysts in adult patterns of criminal behavior. The researchers conducted indepth interviews with convicted felons and analyzed month-to-month changes in offending and life circumstances to understand change in adult criminal behavior. The results strongly demonstrate that social events during adulthood are related to crime.

## Research design

The study was based on interviews conducted with 658 newly convicted male offenders sentenced to the Nebraska Department of Correctional Services during a 9-month period in 1989–1990. Interviews were completed with 94 percent of those selected to participate. The sample was 57 percent Caucasian; the average age was 28. Because the sample was of incarcerated offenders, the study was not representative of the general offender population. Offenders in this study were likely to have committed more crimes, committed crimes for which it was easier to be caught and convicted, and were less likely to avoid detection than the general offender population.

A detailed interview was used to collect month-by-month information on criminal behavior and life circumstances in the 2-year period preceding the month of arrest. Using an event calendar constructed for each subject, the respondent was asked to identify those months during which he had been on probation, on parole, going to school, working, living with a wife, living with a girlfriend, drinking heavily, or using illicit drugs other than marijuana. A crime calendar was created in the same manner to determine the months during which the respondent committed any burglaries, personal robberies, business robberies, assaults, thefts, auto thefts, frauds, forgeries, or drug deals. Many studies have successfully used similar life-history calendars to facilitate recall of past events.

## Adult crime and life circumstances

Separate analyses were conducted for each of four measures of offending: any crime, property crime (burglary, personal robbery, business robbery, theft, auto theft, forgery, and fraud), assault, and drug crime (dealing). Increases or decreases in specific criminal behaviors varied depending on which life circumstance was undergoing change. Some life circumstances affected all types of offending; others affected only one type of crime.

## Highlights of the analyses include:

- **Illegal drugs.** Use of illegal drugs was related to all four measures of offending. For example, during months of drug use, the odds of committing a property crime increased by 54 percent; the odds of committing an assault increased by over 100 percent. Overall, illegal drug use increased the odds of committing any crime sixfold.
- **Wives versus girlfriends.** Living with a wife was associated with lower levels of offending, specifically assault; however, living with a girlfriend was

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associated with higher levels of any crime, especially drug crimes. These findings support results of other NIJ-sponsored research showing that lack of marital attachment is a strong predictor of adult criminality.

- **School and work.** Attending school reduced the likelihood of committing any crime by 52 percent and involvement in drug crimes by 61 percent. Surprisingly, working was only weakly related to adult criminal behavior in this sample. The simple dichotomy used in the study (working or not) may be insufficient to capture a respondent's commitment to a job, which may be important in reducing criminal behavior.
- **Justice supervision.** The only variable that was not related significantly to any measure of crime was justice supervision in the form of probation or parole. Justice supervision did lower rates of offending modestly, but it did not produce substantial reductions in crime among these serious offenders.

### Implications

This study demonstrates that the criminal careers of adult offenders do not necessarily follow a predetermined course. Short-term life circumstances may sharply

increase or decrease criminal activity among serious offenders. Inmate prerelease and transition programs need to focus on helping these offenders avoid life circumstances that may lead to increased criminal activity and adopt activities that will reduce their involvement in crime. Moreover, it is possible that the combined effects of several crime-inhibiting life circumstances may bring about substantial long-term change in patterns of criminal behavior among previously incarcerated felons.

This Research Preview was adapted from a study by Julie Horney, professor of criminal justice, University of Nebraska at Omaha; D. Wayne Osgood, associate professor of sociology, University of Nebraska at Lincoln; and Ineke Haen Marshall, professor of criminal justice, University of Nebraska at Omaha. This study was supported under NIJ grant 89-IJ-CX-0030. For further information on this study, see "*Criminal Careers in the Short-Term: Intra-Individual Variability in Crime and its Relation to Local Life Circumstances*," *American Sociological Review*, October 1995.

Points of view in this document do not necessarily represent the official position of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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