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PREFACE

This study—based on a survey conducted in five California prisons during July and August 1976—represents the development of a new criminal justice research method. It uses survey research methods and analyses to explore important criminological issues concerning the number of crimes committed by offenders, the characteristics of high-rate "career" criminals, and the associations between the characteristics and the crimes themselves. The study is the first known examination of these issues using offender-provided information, otherwise unavailable, from a large sample survey.

As a result of this methodological development, the report provides substantial new information about criminal offenders. The survey examines in detail criminal offenders' descriptions of their crimes, their involvement with criminal justice agencies, the reasons they offer for the crimes, and their perceptions of and attitudes toward crime and the criminal justice system. It describes how the offenders' characteristics—such as age, prior criminal record, race, and conviction offenses—are associated with the types and amounts of crime that they report having committed.

The study described here is being carried out at The Rand Corporation as part of a program of research supported by the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, U.S. Department of Justice. As part of this program, Rand is also conducting a second, substantially larger survey of men in prisons and jails in three states. The present study illustrates the potential value of the self-reported crime survey method, contributes to basic research on criminal offenders, and raises a number of questions about criminal justice policy. The second study will explore further the utility of this method while providing an opportunity to reproduce and supplement the present results.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the past two decades, criminal justice agencies have experimented with a variety of ways to control America's rising crime rates. After emphasizing rehabilitation and social programs in the 1960s, many researchers and government officials have judged these programs to be ineffective in reducing crime. Instead, jurisdictions throughout the country have recently increased incarceration rates or sentence lengths in an effort to reduce crime both through greater deterrence and increased incapacitation (i.e., the reduction of crime by separating offenders from society). To further increase deterrence and incapacitation, prosecutors in many jurisdictions have begun to concentrate on criminals typically described as "career criminals" who presumably commit a large proportion of all crimes. Offenders identified as career criminals are targeted for special efforts to assure that they are convicted, incarcerated, and sentenced to long terms.

In developing these various crime control strategies, policymakers have been hampered by inadequate information about the criminal behavior of individual offenders, the progression of criminal careers, and the characteristics of persons who might be regarded as career criminals.

This report provides detailed, although still tentative, information about the characteristics and behavior of certain criminal offenders and the differences between highly active and less active offenders. It is based on a survey of 624 incarcerated male felons in five California state prisons, conducted during the summer of 1976. In the survey, respondents told what types of crimes they committed during a three-year period preceding their imprisonment. They also reported on their drug usage, economic circumstances, prior criminal records, reasons for committing crime, and perceptions of the payoffs and penalties of doing crime. As part of the analysis of the data, we developed estimates of the proportion of the criminal population who commit different types of crime and the frequency with which they commit their crimes.

Empirical information about crime commission rates and their correlations with characteristics of offenders can be potentially valuable for the development of informed criminal justice policies. Such findings can be used to estimate how alternative prison or jail terms reduce crime through separating offenders from society—the incapacitation effect. Such findings can suggest what types of offenders might be singled out for special handling by career criminal prosecution programs or how the incapacitation effect might be increased by increasing the length of terms for some prisoners while reducing incarceration for others. The findings can suggest what information about convicted offenders' previous behavior might be taken into account when sentencing them.

Although this study begins to provide new information to help guide policy at this time, its conclusions should not be treated as definitive. There are several reasons why we regard the present conclusions as tentative, among which two are particularly important. First, the findings describe only California prison inmates; we are uncertain whether they apply to the larger criminal population in California or to other states. Second, the accuracy of the survey information is open to ques-

tion, since the anonymous survey procedures prevented us from comparing the answers with known information. Encouragingly, a number of features suggest that the respondents' descriptions of their criminal activity were generally accurate. Subsequent field research projects using nonanonymous surveys are addressing these issues of generalization and validity. For now, this study should be considered as new information about individual offenders' crime and characteristics, not as a blueprint for criminal justice policy. Appropriate use of our research for policy development will come after the accuracy of our findings has been confirmed and after they have been replicated on other populations.

The remainder of this summary describes our basic research methodology, our principal findings from the data, and our tentative conclusions about their implications.

CRIME RATES OF INDIVIDUAL OFFENDERS

Surveyed inmates answered detailed questions about what crimes they had committed during the three years before their present prison terms. These questions dealt principally with the violent crimes of armed robbery, use of a weapon (shooting or cutting), threat with a weapon, aggravated beating, and attempted murder, and the property crimes of burglary, car theft, forgery, fraud, and drug sales. Although all respondents were in prison, the extent of their reported crime varied considerably. Most inmates reported activity in a number of different crime types—49 percent of those reporting crimes committed four or more different types. However, 19 percent reported committing only one type of crime.

For each type of crime, most inmates who reported committing the crime reported only a few commissions. Thus, most inmates appeared to have been either (1) occasional offenders who committed only a few crimes or (2) broadly active criminals who reported slight or moderate activity for a number of different types of crime. For each crime type only a small number of offenders committed the crime at high rates.

Relatively few inmates were specialists who committed only one type of crime at high rates. These specialists represented at most 10 percent of the sample. Rather, most respondents who committed one crime at a high rate also reported substantial commissions of other types of crime. These inmates—the ones who reported many commissions for a number of different types of crime—are of particular interest for policy purposes. At least in principle, a criminal justice strategy of protecting the public through use of prison confinement would be much more efficient if these most active offenders could be identified.

Estimates of crime rates derived from the survey suggest why attempts to concentrate on the most active offenders might increase the effectiveness of this incapacitation policy. Mathematical models were used to estimate the number of crimes committed during the previous year of street time by a typical group of incoming prisoners in California. Under an assumption that an offender's crime commission behavior in the future would be similar to his previous behavior, these figures are roughly indicative of the number of crimes prevented by each year of sentence duration. (Because this assumption does not always hold, the level of past crimes probably overestimates the incapacitation effect.) On the average, an incom-

ing prisoner in California committed about 14 serious crimes per year during the three years before his prison term. However, because the average is markedly raised by the activity of a few high-rate offenders, very few offenders have crime rates anywhere near this average. We estimated that more than half of the incoming prisoners committed fewer than 3 crimes per year of street time. The most active 8 percent of incoming prisoners, on the other hand, committed over 60 crimes per year. Incarceration of the most active 8 percent might prevent three times as many crimes as the incarceration of the least active half of California prisoners.

Accuracy of Survey Self-Reports

The usefulness of the inmate survey depends on the accuracy of the responding inmates' reports about their crimes. A number of features of the self-reports suggest that the respondents' descriptions of their criminal activity are generally accurate. First, inmates did not deny committing crimes. Eighty-seven percent of the sample reported committing at least one criminal offense prior to their present incarceration.

Second, respondents did not merely report about the crimes for which they were serving terms. Seventy percent of the sample reported committing more than one type of crime, whereas only one-quarter said they were serving sentences for more than one type of crime. For all crimes other than rape and attempted murder, many more respondents reported committing a crime than reported being convicted of the crime.

Third, the responding inmates answered related survey questions consistently, indicating that they were not merely providing capricious answers. They also answered alternative questions about their commissions of crimes consistently. Respondents who reported committing burglary in one question almost always reported committing burglary in the other question. Those who reported a high commission rate in one question reported high rates in the other. Inmates generally reported committing the crime for which they said they were convicted. Also, if they identified themselves as a particular type of criminal (e.g., a thief, a robber) they generally reported committing that crime at substantial rates.

These considerations indicate that the self-reports provide an adequate basis for describing how inmates' characteristics are associated with their criminal activity. The survey information can be used to explore the important questions of (1) who commits what particular crimes and (2) who are highly active criminals.

Homicide, rape, armed robbery, assault, burglary, auto theft, and forgery are included. Drug sales and frauds are not included.

The survey only asked about 11 types of crime. Half of the inmates who did not report committing any one of these 11 were, according to their responses, convicted of a different crime.

Alternative questions were used for only two crimes, robbery and burglary.

The actual number of burglaries differed substantially for different types of questions. This discrepancy raises question in estimating the number of crimes that respondents committed. However, the general level of reported criminal activity (i.e., none, few, many) was stable. All statistical analyses were performed on these stable general measures of criminal activity.

CHARACTERISTICS OF OFFENDERS

The survey examined in detail the relationship between crime rates and three kinds of self-reported information:

- Personal characteristics—age, race, drug use.
- Experience with the criminal justice system—prior criminal record, current conviction offenses, juvenile criminal history.
- Social-psychological characteristics—self-concept, motivation for committing crime, attitudes about crime, perception of the payoffs of crime, and economic, residential, and marital status.

Here we summarize the most important findings in each of these categories.

Personal Characteristics

Age. Although there are highly active criminals of all ages, nearly all research shows that young offenders are more active than older offenders. Our survey analysis suggests that criminal activity decreases with age primarily because older offenders narrow the types of crimes they commit. For the crime types that they continue to commit, older offenders reported about the same crime commission rates as did younger offenders. However, even the oldest respondents typically reported activity for a number of different types of crime, just a smaller number than younger offenders.

Age was found to be a surrogate for other characteristics that are more strongly correlated with crime commission. Younger offenders were more likely than older offenders to have extensive juvenile records, to use drugs, and to have criminal attitudes and self-identities. Each of these characteristics is associated with heavy criminal activity. When the analysis is adjusted for these other factors, the relationship between age and criminal activity disappears. However, since the criminal justice system seldom has information about these other characteristics, an offender's age may provide useful information about his overall rate of criminal activity.

Since older offenders tend to have longer records, offenders' ages and prior records are naturally confounded. The analyses of the survey data adjusted for this confounding of age and prior record and showed that each was separately associated with the rate of criminal activity. Among offenders with similar numbers of prior convictions, younger offenders were the most active. Among offenders of similar ages, those with numerous prior convictions were the most active. The separate importance of age and prior record suggests that the criminal justice system should view as most dangerous those young offenders who have accumulated a lengthy record in a few years.

Race. The survey results on race are complex. A disproportionate number of California prisoners are black. Although California's population was less than 10 percent black at the time of the survey, one-third of California's prison inmates and one-third of our sample were black. Explanation of the greater number of blacks in prison remains a matter of heated debate.² However, no matter how one

²Our research suggests that blacks and Mexican-Americans are more likely than whites to be arrested.

interprets the fact that blacks are overrepresented in prison, that fact provides no information about individuals. It does not indicate whether individual black offenders are likely to commit more crimes than individual white offenders.

Our survey compared the criminal activity reported by individual prisoners of different races. Based on self-reports, the survey indicates that on the average black respondents were less active and dangerous criminals than were white respondents. White survey respondents reported committing more different types of crime and higher rates for the crimes they committed. In particular, they reported more property crime than black or Mexican-American respondents.

On the average, whites and Mexican-Americans reported about the same amount of violent crime; both reported more violence than black respondents. Across all crimes, Mexican-American survey respondents reported criminal activity in almost as many crime types as whites, but at a slightly lower rate. On the average, black respondents reported committing the least number of different types of crime and reported the lowest rates for the crimes they committed. These effects of race remain when the analyses are adjusted for other characteristics in the survey, such as prior record, age, drug use, or psychological characteristics.

The reasons for these survey results remain unclear. They could indicate true differences in the activity of criminals of different races. They could also reflect (1) sampling differences that determine how offenders of different races get into prison and into our sample or (2) differences in how respondents of different races interpreted and answered the survey questions.

Drug Use. Over 40 percent of the respondents reported use or addiction to drugs during the three years prior to their incarceration. Most of the offenders who used drugs used heroin.

Drug use figured prominently in property crime. Drug users reported substantially more property crime than did nonusers, and this relationship persists even after controlling for other personal characteristics. They also reported more violent crimes, but when the offender's age and psychological characteristics were also considered, drug use was no longer significantly related to the likelihood for violence.

Experience with the Criminal Justice System

Prior Record. Offenders who reported committing many recent crimes were likely to have lengthy criminal records, as measured by the number of self-reported felony and misdemeanor convictions. Offenders with more prior felony convictions reported a greater number of recent violent and property crimes. Respondents with prior misdemeanor convictions were more likely to commit violent crimes. These associations between prior convictions and crime rates were only moderately strong. Many respondents with repeated prior convictions reported few recent crimes; other highly active offenders reported few prior convictions.

ed for their crimes. However, this study does not allow us to determine whether a greater proportion of blacks commit crime, or at least crimes that are likely to result in arrest and imprisonment (Sullivan, 1974), or whether blacks are more likely to be imprisoned than are whites who commit similar crimes. Moreover, we cannot weigh the relative importance of these factors in explaining the overrepresentation of blacks in prison.

Respondents who had received more severe sentences in the past did not report a greater amount of recent crime than did others with similar conviction histories. For example, respondents who had served a prior prison term reported no more crimes than did those who had been convicted of felonies but not sentenced to prison. Nor was the number of prior prison terms associated with either violent or property crime. Rather, even after adjusting for their greater number of felony convictions, highly active offenders were more likely to have been placed repeatedly on probation.

Conviction Offense. Survey analyses show that it can be misleading to describe and differentiate among offenders by their conviction offense. First, most offenders who had committed a particular type of crime were not convicted of that crime. Second, a substantial number of respondents reported that they only infrequently committed the crime for which they were convicted. Third, relying on a single principal conviction offense label obscures differences among offenders convicted of the same offense. For example, there were substantial differences in the types and amounts of crime committed by respondents who were convicted of robbery and homicide, robbery and assault, robbery and burglary, robbery and some other felony, or simply robbery. Fourth, describing offenders in terms of a single conviction offense obscures the fact that most offenders committed many different types of crime. We estimated, for example, that a typical group of 100 persons convicted of robbery would have committed 490 armed robberies, 310 assaults, 720 burglaries, 70 auto thefts, 100 forgeries, and 3400 drug sales in the previous year of street time.

Since offenders tend to be nonspecialists, career criminal programs aimed at the selective incapacitation of offenders convicted of a particular offense might have a broader effect, reducing the level of other types of crime as well.

Juvenile Criminal History. Those respondents who were very young when they first began committing crimes and who committed serious crimes frequently as juveniles reported greater crime as adults during the three years prior to their incarceration. Indices of the starting age and of the extent and seriousness of juvenile crime were each strongly associated with all measures of adult crime, including both violent and property crime, the range of crime types, and the level of activity for those types.

These results support criminological theories which argue that serious adult criminals are socialized into crime when they are young. Indeed, respondents who became involved in crime before they were 13 reported the most crime. They reported that they became criminals because "everyone ... was doing crime" and because it was "just a normal way of life." For them, juvenile crime was a common and perhaps expected way of life.

The survey results suggest that juvenile records can provide important information about adult criminality. However, the survey does not indicate that juvenile crime necessarily leads to adult crime. As a survey only of incarcerated adult offenders, it cannot identify the serious juvenile offenders who did not become involved in adult crime. Thus the results neither support nor challenge a policy of extended incarceration for juveniles with lengthy juvenile records. They do indicate that if an adult becomes involved in crime, his juvenile record could substantially help the criminal justice system in deciding how to deal with him.

Social-Psychological Characteristics

Employment and residential stability, as measures of social stability, were associated with the respondents' criminal activity. Offenders who did not work or who seldom worked, and those who held a series of short-term jobs, tended to commit more crime. Similarly, respondents who moved frequently from city to city reported committing more crime. However, although the associations between crime and employment and crime and residential stability were statistically significant, both associations were weak. Psychological characteristics and drug use appear to be more important variables in predicting crime rates.

Self-Concept. The survey revealed that criminal activity was strongly associated with a respondent's self-concept, that highly active criminals tend to think of themselves as criminals.^a Sixty percent of the respondents indicated that before they were arrested, they thought of themselves as some type of criminal, e.g., a robber, a thief, a burglar. In contrast, one-fourth of the respondents thought of themselves as noncriminals, "straight." The remaining 15 percent of the respondents did not describe themselves either as criminals or solely as straights, but chose some other socially deviant identity, e.g., drug user/addict, gang member.

Criminal activity was strongly associated with how respondents described themselves. Respondents who described themselves as straight reported the fewest crimes. Those who described themselves as criminal committed the most. Indeed, respondents who described themselves in terms of more than one type of crime (e.g., they were both a "robber" and a "burglar") reported substantially more crime than those who provided only a single criminal identity. Only 15 percent of the respondents used multiple criminal identities to describe themselves. However, these respondents committed more different types of crimes, and they reported substantially greater activity for each of the crime types in which they were active.

Motivation. The survey asked respondents to indicate the reasons for their main crimes. Analyses of the respondents' answers revealed three separate (i.e., statistically unrelated) sets of reasons: (1) distressed economic conditions, (2) desire for high living and high times, and (3) temper. Forty-seven percent of the respondents reported that economic distress was important as a reason for their crimes; 35 percent reported that their desire for high times was an important reason for their crimes; and 14 percent reported that temper was important.

Not surprisingly, motivation is related to the type and rate of criminal activity. Offenders who cited "high living" as their primary motivation also reported the greatest criminal activity. Offenders who cited economic need reported fewer violent crimes; those who cited temper reported more.

Frequently, commentators about crime problems assume that offenders are a homogeneous group—for example, all offenders are victims of social and economic oppression, or all are calculating and hedonistic predators. In fact, crime and criminals are much more complex. Some offenders are motivated by economic need, some by hedonism, some by both reasons, some by neither. Further, according to our study, although most crime is committed by hedonistic offenders seeking high

^aA scale of the extent of criminal identities had the strongest association with self-reported crimes for any variable examined in the survey, explaining 20 percent of the variation in activity for all reported crime and 25 percent of the variation for property crime. This level of association is unusually good for criminological variables.

living, most criminals are not hedonistic.

Payoffs of Crime. Classic deterrence theory assumes that persons consider the possible benefits and costs of their criminal acts. This theory predicts that persons who see the greatest benefit from crime relative to noncriminal alternatives should be most likely to commit crime.

When considered at a general level, the results from the survey are consistent with deterrence theory. Respondents who see the greatest advantage of crime over a straight life do commit more crime.

However, more detailed analyses indicate inconsistencies between the survey responses and deterrence theory. The theory predicts that respondents who see a great chance of getting caught or who believe that other bad outcomes will result from crime should be least likely to commit crimes. Contrary to this prediction, survey respondents who were most certain in reporting that they would be arrested or otherwise suffer for crime did not report committing fewer crimes. Rather, the survey results suggest that individual offense rates are related only to offenders' perceptions of the benefits to be derived from crime. Respondents who reported most certainly that they would benefit from crime reported committing substantially more crime.

For several reasons, these survey-supported observations about deterrence must be cautiously interpreted. First, the survey uses a sample of incarcerated offenders, persons who have not been deterred. Other potential offenders might have been deterred from committing crimes by their perceptions of the risks involved. Second, the survey did not explore the possibility of a deterrent effect associated with the offenders' selection of crimes. We have no information about whether the respondents chose to commit crimes that they considered less risky. Finally, what an individual describes as his motivation may not, in fact, be the true motivation for his behavior.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CAREER CRIMINAL PROGRAMS

Our analysis of the survey identified a group of offenders who share common characteristics and who commit a large proportion of the crime reported by the entire survey sample. These offenders can appropriately be described as career criminals. As juveniles they began committing serious crimes. Their psychological characteristics support their criminal life and suggest that they will continue to commit crimes. They tend to identify themselves as criminals in multiple ways, to be motivated by hedonism, to see crime as a safe and enjoyable way to obtain the good life, and to see themselves as proficient criminals. They appear to be unconcerned about being caught; they expect to return to crime after prison.

The 25 percent of our sample that most consistently shared these characteristics reported committing a disproportionate amount of every crime examined in the survey. For example, the same 25 percent reported committing 58 percent of all armed robberies reported by our entire sample, 65 percent of all burglaries, 60 percent of all auto thefts, and 46 percent of all assaults. The criminal justice system might reduce crime by directing its scarce resources to obtain thorough prosecution and extended incarceration for offenders who share characteristics indicative of heavy criminal activity and who seem most likely to continue their heavy involve-

ment in crime.

The majority of respondents who do not share these characteristics of career criminals committed relatively few past crimes. Presumably these offenders pose less of a threat to society than do career criminals. Their confinement, lengthy or not, may provide society with far less protection than confinement of career criminals.

Although the survey provides empirical support for the general objectives of career criminal prosecution programs, it also suggests some important limitations. First, the survey indicates that career criminal programs would be more effective in reducing property crimes than in reducing violent crimes. Offenders who commit property crime at high rates can be identified within the survey, while those who commit violent crimes at high rates cannot—high-rate violent offenders do not share any distinguishable characteristics. In short, the survey found evidence of career property criminals and career criminals who commit both property and violent crime. It provides no evidence of an identifiable group of career criminals who commit only violence.

The survey analysis suggests a second limitation to career criminal programs: They can expect only incomplete success in identifying true career criminals. Like any other program that involves identification, career criminal programs will make two types of predictive errors. First they will identify as career criminals some offenders who would commit relatively few crimes if they were not in prison. Errors of this kind may result in unnecessarily harsh sentences for marginal offenders and will also result in inefficient use of scarce and costly criminal justice resources. The programs will make a second type of error by failing to identify some true career offenders. Errors of this kind will result in reduced public safety.

In attempting to identify these high-rate offenders, the criminal justice system is hampered in two ways. The system does not have access to all the information available to us in the survey, and the system does not routinely use information that is or could be available to it. The findings from our analysis illustrate both problems.

Much of the information we used in the survey to identify and describe career criminals is unavailable to the criminal justice system. For example, prosecutors or judges cannot systematically consider the psychological characteristics that are typical of true career criminals. To examine the significance of this limitation we considered how well criminal justice agencies could identify career criminals using only the information usually available to them. Analyses using such accessible information were only two-thirds as successful as those including the private, psychological variables contained in this survey.

As a second problem, information that could be used to identify high-rate offenders is not always used effectively. For example, the survey found that drug use was associated with extensive criminal behavior. The most active offenders tended to report an addiction to or regular use of heroin. However, some criminal justice agencies have no record of an offender's history of drug use, even though this information is often available from parole or probation records. Even when evidence of drug use is available, it may result in more lenient treatment of the offender. This sentencing practice is the exact opposite of one that would serve an incapacitation policy. As a second example, the survey found that the most serious adult offenders began committing crimes at an early age. However, many courts

and prosecutors do not use information about an adult offender's juvenile record, either because of legal restrictions or because the information is difficult to obtain.

Our survey provided extensive empirical information about the criminal activities, motivations, and characteristics of individual offenders. These rich data make it possible to begin changing the way we make decisions about and evaluate criminal justice policies. Our research is contributing to reasonable, empirically based estimates of how incarceration might affect the number of crimes committed. However, our survey was limited in size and location, and left unanswered questions about the validity of data derived from self-reports. To address these limitations, Rand researchers are now analyzing the results of a second survey of criminal offenders in three states. In this second survey the methods of data collection were improved and provided much more thorough bases for evaluating the candor of the self-reports. This continuing research will increase our understanding of criminal offenders and suggest more effective ways for the criminal justice system to use available information in identifying the most serious offenders. While our analysis continues, this report on the first Rand inmate survey provides new, but at times tentative, information about criminal offenders and their behavior.

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