

English summary and conclusion

Strategic offences

Published by:

National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ)
P.O. Box 1386
SE-111 93 Stockholm
Sweden
Internet: www.brottsforebygganderadet.se

Reference:

BRÅ-report 2000: 3
ISSN 1100-6676, ISBN 91-38-31614-5

Available in Sweden from:

Fritzes kundtjänst
SE-106 47 Stockholm
Sweden

One of the more important tasks of crime policy is to reduce the level of recruitment into criminal lifestyles. In order to achieve this, it is important to identify as quickly as possible those offences whose appearance early on in a criminal career indicates a long and serious subsequent career in delinquency. This question has received little attention in either Swedish or international research.

The principle objective of this study is to identify those debut offences which indicate a high risk for a continued criminal career, and those indicating a lower risk. It is thus a question of identifying what are generally known as 'strategic offences'. In addition, the study estimates how large a proportion of offences are committed by individuals engaged upon different types of criminal career, and in which offence categories. A third objective is to examine variations between different birth cohorts in order to see whether the results are stable over time.

The study is based on criminal conviction data for cohorts born in 1960, 1965, 1970 and 1975. Information has been retrieved on all convictions registered between 1975 and 1997 relating to individuals born in one of these four years. The principle analyses were carried out on the 1960 birth cohort.

The study shows that around 24 per cent of those born in Sweden in 1960 have been convicted of an offence at some point. This proportion increases to 37 per cent for men, whilst for women it is 10 per cent. The study uses a four-

category typology of criminal careers: one-time offenders (with only a single registered conviction), occasional offenders (with 2-3 convictions), recidivist offenders (with 4-8 convictions) and chronic offenders (with 9 convictions or more). The chronic offenders are responsible for half of the total number of registered offences in the material.

The findings indicate that chronic offenders begin offending earlier, and have received their latest conviction more recently than individuals from the other three groups. They are also responsible for the largest proportion of more serious offences such as robbery, theft, drug offences and vehicle theft.

The study identifies three strategic offences. The crime most widely identifiable as a strategic offence is vehicle theft. More than a quarter (27 %) of those receiving their first conviction in connection with a vehicle theft will subsequently find themselves among the small group responsible for 50 per cent of the total of offences committed. Robbery and theft also merit being designated strategic offences. The risk of becoming a chronic offender is 19 per cent for those whose first conviction is for robbery and 16 per cent for those whose first conviction is for theft. By contrast, the risk of becoming a chronic offender for those whose first conviction is for shoplifting is very low (4 %). Traffic offences, including driving whilst intoxicated are also indicative of a low risk of becoming a chronic offender. The findings also suggest a significant increase in the level of risk for many of those whose first conviction comes between the ages of 15 and 17.

When combinations of the principle offences from an individual's first and second convictions are examined, estimations of risk become more distinctive. Four high-risk combinations emerge, three of which include vehicle theft. A person whose first and second convictions are both for this offence, runs a 60 per cent risk of becoming a chronic offender. This is the highest risk produced by any combination of first and second convictions. Vehicle theft in combination with another of the strategic offences, namely other forms of theft, produces a 54 per cent risk of becoming a chronic offender (whichever of the two offence types comes first). The fourth high-risk combination is a drug offence and a (non-vehicle) theft. The combination which produces the lowest risk involves a first conviction for criminal damage and a second for assault. This combination produces a 2 per cent risk. The combination shoplifting - shoplifting, is also low risk, with only 7 per cent of such individuals going on to become chronic offenders.

Comparisons with the later birth cohorts indicate that these results have to a large extent remained stable over time and thus retain their validity today.

Conclusion

It is very common for above all young people to commit at least one criminal offence at some stage. It is thus very important from a preventative perspective to identify with some degree of certainty those persons at high risk of

developing habitual criminal or antisocial patterns of behaviour. This is of course impossible to achieve at the individual level. What is possible, on the other hand, is to decide on the basis of studies such as this one, which groups are at high risk of committing additional offences in the future. Such judgements become possible once strategic offences have been identified.

Young offenders coming into contact with the police prior to the age of 18 are reported to the social services as a matter of course. On the basis of an assessment of the extent of an individual's problems, it is the job of the social services to formulate various support strategies. The social services thus carry out a form of risk-assessment – how high is the risk of this youth continuing to offend and to engage in other socially unacceptable behaviours?

Whilst the fundamental principles of how to carry out such an assessment are not particularly well developed, a small body of knowledge does exist in this area. We know for example that offences appearing at a very early stage in the life course indicate that the individual in question may go on to engage in an extensive criminal career.

The findings presented in this report provide an additional contribution to this body of knowledge. They show that there are certain types of offence and offence combinations which predict with reasonable accuracy that an individual will end up as a member of the small group of chronic offenders. Two thirds of those whose first two contacts with the justice system relate to vehicle thefts, for example, will in time find themselves belonging to this small but active group of offenders. At the same time, the risk of evolving into a chronic offender is small for those presenting certain other types of first offences and offence combinations.

If the objective is to reduce the crime level in the country as a whole, there is much to be gained from a review of the distribution of resources focused on the redirection of first time offenders to a more law-abiding life. If it were possible to exercise a decisive effect on the future delinquency of the restricted number of individuals whose first convictions concern the high risk combinations *vehicle theft – vehicle theft*; *theft – vehicle theft*; *vehicle theft – theft* and *drug offence – theft*, this could lead to a substantial reduction in crime at the national level. At the same time, a similar strategy instead directed at low-risk combinations such as *assault – drunk driving* or *shoplifting – shoplifting*, would have little or no effect on the subsequent crime level.

There is a preconception that individuals who have been convicted of offences constitute a special class of person, more or less lost to society. This study has shown however that one in four of all those born in Sweden will find themselves convicted of a criminal offence sooner or later and no less than 37 per cent of men. For the majority of those convicted, this remains a one off event. There are thus good grounds for viewing these one-time offenders as ordinary citizens who have made a mistake at some stage in their lives. Despite their large number, such individuals are responsible for a relatively small proportion of the total of offences committed.