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PLANNING OF CRIME AND THE CRIMINAL CAREER: OFFICIAL AND HIDDEN OFFENSES*

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I. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Despite recent increased interest in the criminal career—its development and demise and its content in terms of frequency, patterns and seriousness—only scant attention has been paid to a crucial issue concerning such careers; namely, the presence or absence of planning and its consequences. This issue is relevant for both theoretical and practical concerns. The explanation of crime may take different paths when criminality is planned instead of impulsive. It may be that the well-planned offender closely resembles some of the early images of offenders, which assumed differences between criminals and their law-abiding counterparts.¹ The behavior of the individual who carefully plans his illegal actions, who approaches criminal endeavors in a methodic and rational manner may be explained in ways that differ from the acts of those who accidentally become violators or who commit offenses on the spur-of-the-moment.

The issue of planning is also important for studies of criminal careers. Studies of the prevalence and incidence of crime, particularly self-report studies, have addressed the question of adequacy of official arrest records by identifying demographic and social characteristics impinging upon the likelihood of getting caught and being officially processed.² The way in which planning of the crime may affect the offender's criminal career has been ignored in most studies. This issue may have been overlooked because criminologists, for the most part, were not interested in the practical aspects of criminality or its success attributable to inherent

ingredients in its performance. Rather, their concern centered on the theoretical dimensions of the phenomenon or its sociological correlates. The more practical issues of planning or quality of offender performance were left to criminalistics experts, police detectives and law enforcement personnel interested in studying *modus operandi* as a means of crime prevention and detection.

If planning is followed by, or related to, an increase or decrease in criminality or if it otherwise affects the manner or tempo of criminal activity, it should not be ignored by criminologists in their theory construction. If it is, the theories will continue to be inadequate or incomprehensive.

The issue of planning may also be related to important practical aspects of penal policies. The offender who has a longer criminal record may not necessarily be the more dangerous one. Rather, he may be the one who is less successful in avoiding arrest or the one who is less proficient in crime than his planned counterpart. A short criminal record may not signal a less dangerous offender; it simply may mean more competence or planning preceded other crimes. There is some evidence to suggest that persons who carefully plan offenses are likely to be underrepresented in the category of prosecuted or convicted offenders.³

It is also plausible to assume that the planned offender will be more responsive to deterrent measures. It is the planned offender who is likely to take into his calculation the consequences of his being caught and the magnitude of the resultant punishment.⁴ The issue is also important to the weight to be given to crime prevention policies. If offenders are mostly impulsive, making targets more difficult to obtain may prevent some crime simply by reducing opportunity. This policy will not be as effective if the offender population is mostly planned, for increasing difficulty of achieving targets may lead either to more sophisticated criminality or to the displacement of crime.

³ See F. McCLINTOCK, *THE DARK FIGURE OF CRIME* 91 (2d ed. 1977).

⁴ See F. ZIMRING & G. HAWKINS, *DETERRENCE* 106-08 (1973).

* A version of this paper was presented at the American Society of Criminology Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, November 1979.

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¹ See D. MATZA, *DELINQUENCY AND DRIFT* 1-27 (1964).

² See, e.g., M. WOLFGANG & B. COHEN, *CRIME AND RACE* (1970) (discussion of the effect of race); P. Tracy, *An Analysis of Self-Reported Delinquency and Crime* (May 1978) (unpublished dissertation, University of Pennsylvania) (summary of studies pertaining to the effect of SES).

Criminological research has provided some direct and indirect evidence on planning and its determinants. Indirect evidence may be inferred from the characteristics of the crime, from the circumstances in which it was committed, from physical-environmental correlates of the crime or its spatial distribution (mostly aggregate data) and from studies of distance between offender's residence and the crime site.⁵ Direct evidence is found in descriptions of the manner of crime commission, usually elicited from the participants in crime by means of questionnaires or interviews (including interviews by police for investigation purposes)⁶ or from people who have first-hand knowledge or experience with offenders, either through their work (e.g., street worker) or through other associations (e.g., ethnographic research).⁷ Although such studies indicate that a distinction may be drawn between planned and impulsive offenders, the effect of planning on the criminal careers of offenders has not been examined. It is the purpose of this study to address that question.

II. EMPIRICAL EXAMINATION

The analysis is based on a larger study, the followup of *Delinquency in a Birth Cohort*,⁸ that included interviews with 567 subjects at age twenty-six. Officially recorded offenses as well as self-reported offenses are included in this study. Questions were asked to probe various situational aspects surrounding these official and unofficial offenses. The presence or absence of planning and the duration of planning were included in the questioning.

Offenses selected for close scrutiny were those for which recollection was expected to be good and descriptions faithful to reality. Thus the first and last offenses leading to an arrest were selected for reasons of primacy and recency.

A validity check was made. The responses were compared with the official recorded offenses. The validity check indicated that the assumption about

recollection was justified. Most of the respondents referred correctly to their first and last arrest. Offenses which were associated with difficulty in recollection were mostly those in which the character of the violation was not clear, usually offenses against the public peace or disorderly conduct.

The meaning of planning may become problematic when discussed within the framework of criminal behavior. One may not have any definite plan or detailed scheme about the crime but, nonetheless, may have the intention to commit a crime or have some vague ideas about committing it. Thus, what may appear to be a spur-of-the-moment crime could have been in the mind of the offender all along.⁹ The study was concerned with whether the subjects had had at least an intention to commit a crime and not necessarily a definite or detailed scheme. The question thus stated may also shed some light on the role of situational determinants or opportunities in the crime occurrence. If offenses are not planned in advance, but are precipitated by the situation encountered, attention should be paid to these situations.

The amount of planning that preceded the offenses studied was first examined. The distribution of the responses pertaining to the first and last offenses presented in Table I demonstrates very similar results regarding the presence of planning. The majority of offenders committed both offenses impulsively without advance planning or forethought. The second highest frequency was the nonplanners, namely those who did not devote even some instantaneous type of planning to their offensive acts or whose acts were accidental.

The planner group was rather small. Those who devoted any amount of time to planning constituted 17% and 21% of the sample for the first and last offenses respectively. But the offenses that were preceded by elaborate planning, at least a day before, comprised only 6% of the first offenses and 14% of the last ones. Furthermore, those who planned both offenses constituted only 6% of the sample.

In order to study the effect of planning on the criminal career, those who planned both offenses were classified as planners, and the remainder of the sample was classified as impulsive. It was assumed that the subjects who planned both offenses exhibited a tendency to plan their criminal affairs, although with any particular offense this assumption may not be realized.

⁹ See J. PETERSILIA, P. GREENWOOD & M. LAVIN, *CRIMINAL CAREERS OF HABITUAL FELONS* (1977).

⁵ For a summary of these studies as they point to planning, see E. Erez, *Situational Analysis of Crime: Comparison of Planned and Impulsive Offenses* (Dec. 20, 1979) (unpublished dissertation, University of Pennsylvania).

⁶ See, e.g., J. CONKLIN, *ROBBERY AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM* 63-68 (1972).

⁷ See, e.g., Einstadter, *The Social Organization of Armed Robbery*, 17 *SOC. PROB.* 64 (1969); Shover, *The Social Organization of Burglary*, 20 *SOC. PROB.* 497 (1973).

⁸ M. WOLFGANG, R. FIGLIO & T. SELLIN, *DELINQUENCY IN A BIRTH COHORT* (1972).

TABLE I
MANNER OF COMMISSION OF THE OFFENSES

Manner of Offense Commission	First Offense		Last Offense	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Not Planned	37	17	23	18
Spur of the Moment	145	66	76	61
Some Planning (an hour before or earlier that day)	25	11	9	7
Planned (the day before)	<u>13</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>14</u>
Total	220	100%	125	100%

$$X^2 = 7.23$$

$$p \leq .07$$

TABLE II
DIFFERENCES OF MEANS OF SELF-REPORTED VIOLENT OFFENSES BETWEEN IMPULSIVE AND PLANNED OFFENDERS

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>P</i> (one tailed test)
Impulsive	169	757.0	1143.8	1.66
Planned	23	350.4	696.7	—

TABLE III
DIFFERENCES OF MEANS OF SELF-REPORTED NONINDEX OFFENSES BETWEEN IMPULSIVE AND PLANNED OFFENDERS

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>P</i> (one tailed test)
Impulsive	107	1393.8	1465.7	1.73
Planned	14	687.3	1185.3	—

The hypothesis was that planning will express itself in a smaller number of offenses committed by planners. It is conceivable that the planned offender who engages in thinking and preparation prior to the offense will commit fewer offenses in his criminal career as the tempo of offensivity will be somewhat inhibited by the carefulness and cautiousness of his activity. It is also conceivable that, at least in property offenses, assuming that offenders are "satisfiers,"¹⁰ planned offenses will yield more returns, thus requiring fewer offenses. At the same time, these same characteristics of the planned offense would lead to more difficulties in detecting and apprehending offenders and therefore would result in fewer arrests compared to the number of offenses committed.

Impulsive offenders, on the other hand, are more likely to commit offenses indiscriminantly, whenever opportunities arise or situations present themselves, and will exhibit more offenses in their career. But the impulsiveness of their crimes should lead to a higher ratio of arrests to offenses, for offenses

¹⁰ See McPheters, *Criminal Behavior and the Gains From Crime*, 14 *CRIMINOLOGY* 137 (1976).

committed on the spur-of-the-moment are less carefully executed and thus are less likely to escape detection.

The total number of offenses the subjects admitted committing was examined by offense type: violent, property—for which the hypothesis is most applicable—and nonindex. The significance test indicated that there are no statistically significant differences between the two groups in their number of property offenses. Comparison of the groups with respect to violent offenses, however, yielded significant differences, as presented in Table II. Violent offenses included all types of assaultive, aggressive behavior, including threat or intimidation. The mean of the impulsive group is twice as large as that of the planned group. Similarly, comparison of the groups with respect to nonindex offenses yielded significant differences, as presented in Table III. The mean number of nonindex offenses of those defined as impulsive is twice as large as that of the planned group. Comparison of the ratios of arrests to self-reported offenses for these two groups did not indicate statistically significant differences.

These results may illuminate the behavior of the impulsive offender more than the effect of the tendency to plan on the criminal career. It is not possible at this point to claim that the individual who tends to plan differs from his impulsive counterpart in the number of property offenses he commits or in his likelihood of arrest. It is, however, plausible to argue that impulsive or unplanned offenders tend to violate the law more readily, their behavior is more often violent, and they come into conflict with the law on many occasions in which

specific situations are conducive to crime. These are situations in which planned individuals either avoid or are able to control their behavior.

The finding that the majority of offenses are unplanned coupled with the finding that those defined as impulsive (who constitute the majority of offenders) exhibit a larger involvement in crime covering various types of antisocial activities points to the importance of microanalyses of the offense situations.