The 1958 Birth Cohort Study

Objectives

Delinquency in a Birth Cohort (Wolfgang et al., 1972) remains the only large-scale birth cohort study undertaken in the United States based upon a generalizable population. The delinquency careers of all boys born in 1945 who lived in Philadelphia from their tenth to their eighteenth birthdays were described, and parametric estimates of their offense rates and recidivism and desistance probabilities were computed. It is important to note that this study developed baseline cohort rates from a data source unlike any other previously investigated in this country: first offense, recidivism, and offense switching rates; offense severity escalation, disposition probabilities, and subsequent offensive behavior. All of these statistics and others can be estimated with validity only from longitudinal, preferably cohort, data.

Because the birth cohort study is unique and, as yet, not duplicated, the major objective of the 1958 birth cohort study is a complete replication of the 1945 Philadelphia birth cohort study as reported by Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin in 1972. The data collection sources and procedures, research design, and methodology of the 1945 cohort study have all been applied in the present research. In general we have tried to establish essentially the same set of parametric estimates as developed for the 1945 cohort to determine the “cohort effects” on delinquent behavior of growing up in the 1960s and early 1970s compared to those activities expressed by a cohort some 13 years earlier.

Many demographic and school variables, such as race, socioeconomic status (SES), type of school attended, residential mobility, highest grade completed, IQ, and level of school achievement, were related to each other and the state of having a police record. In addition, the probabilities of committing, by age, a first, second, third, and out to the nth offense were generated, as were the probabilities of switching from one type of offense to another, or to the state of “desistance” (the
commission of no more officially recorded delinquencies). A multitude of hypotheses may be investigated with these data.

Indeed, in *Delinquency in a Birth Cohort* we uncovered some surprising and some not so unexpected findings. On the one hand, we found that the offensive careers of juvenile males may be modeled as a simple Markov process; that is, the type of the next offense is not related to the past offense types—career specialization is not apparent. On the other hand, it was clear that delinquent behavior, both in relative incidence and severity, is more prevalent and intense among blacks and lower-SES groups than among whites and higher-SES individuals.

The continuous-age data derived from a longitudinal study enabled us to suggest appropriate intervention points in delinquent careers. Thus we were able to state:

> Because 46 percent of the delinquents stop after the first offense, a major and expensive treatment program at this point would appear to be wasteful. We could even suggest that intervention be held in abeyance until the commission of the third offense for an additional 35 percent of the second-time-offenders desist from then on. Thus, we could reduce the number of boys requiring attention in this cohort from 3475 after the first offense to 1862 after the second offense, to 1212 after the third offense, rather than concentrating on all 9945 or some other large subgroup (such as nonwhites or lower SES boys) under a blanket community action program. Beyond the third offense the desistance probabilities level off. (Wolfgang *et al.*, 1972: 254)

We have mentioned above some of the topic areas addressed in the 1945 birth cohort study. All of these areas have been investigated in the present research with regard for the changing orientations and technologies that have been developed since we last worked with cohort materials.

For example, we have tried to determine the differences (if any) which the data will exhibit between the two cohorts in such areas as: (1) overall cohort delinquency rates; (2) demographic and school correlates of delinquency; (3) first and subsequent offense probabilities; (4) age-at-onset of delinquency and offense accumulation; (5) relative seriousness of offenses; (6) offender typologies (one-time, recidivist, and chronic); (7) patterns of delinquent careers; (8) offense-switching probabilities; (9) disposition rates; (10) the effect of various sanctions on the probabilities of subsequent offenses; and (11) propitious intervention points.

In short, our objective was to replicate the 1945 birth cohort study with a cohort of Philadelphia juveniles born 13 years later in order to assess the extent and character of delinquency in the later-age cohort and to determine the amounts of stability and transitivity over time as expressed in the various data sets.