

# OCCASIONAL DELINQUENCY AND CRIMINAL CAREER. FEATURES AND RISK FACTORS

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*This article presents the route/steps of an exploratory research whose subject was the occasional delinquency and the criminal career. Starting from the ecological paradigm for the study of delinquent behavior we have conceived a model of risk factors divided in four types of risk factors: individuals, concerning the relations of the person with others, community and societal factors. Using the pattern created by us as a work instrument, we have tried through documentary analyses of files from the Probation Service of Bucharest and also through the medium of some "face to face" interviews with probation counselors from the Probation Service Bucharest, to find the characteristics and the risk factors for the occasional delinquents and for the persons that have a criminal career.*

**Keywords:** *criminal career, ecological model, risk factors, occasional delinquency.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The study of the delinquent behavior is a preoccupation spread at a global level among the sociologists, psychologists and criminologists. The variety of criminal behaviors which can be found on the contemporary society is different, depending on the social and cultural context in which the person has grown and the economic and geographical context in which this person has lived. The identification of particularities of each type of delinquent behavior, as well as the identification of risk factors which are specific to each type of behavior, represents an important source of information for the projection of prevention and control programs, for the national and international criminality.

The specific form of criminality on which we have focused our attention is the occasional delinquency. About the individuals that commit acts of delinquency in an occasional manner, the literature stipulates that they "make this kind of felony because of some contextual factors that refer to emotional, economic or political situations in which the person chooses to act in a manner that represents a deviation from the juridical laws and rules accepted by the society" (Butoi, Zdrengea, 1992, p. 61). The persons that commit this kind of acts can be described as "persons that make decisions in a hasty way, that have usually a low self-control and the crime

that they commit is singular, in general the risk that the person will commit any crime being very low” (Mateescu, 2010). During our research we have chosen to include in the area of occasional delinquency the persons that have made only one law or rule, which had the role to protect the life, health, integrity or property of persons.

The concept of “criminal career” is has recently begun being used in the research of delinquent behavior and the sociologists and criminologists that started using this structure defined it in a similar manner. The usage of the term “career” in this area has, as Everett C. Hughes suggests, the meaning of “the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, action, and the things which happen to him” (Hughes apud Kyvsgaard, 2003, p. 1). In a criminological perspective, the expression “career” is being defined as “the criminal history of an individual as it derive from the case studies” (Shaw apud Kyvsgaard, 2003, p.1), by this definition referring to the fact that the criminal career is not the subjective way in which an individual sees his life but an objective perspective of his actions and facts.

The operational definition of the criminal career is that of Alfred Blumstein, Jacqueline Cohen and Paul Hsieh: “the trajectory of an individual, from the first to the last crime that he committed” (Blumstein *et al.* apud Kyvsgaard, 2003, p. 4). This three sociologist reason the necessity of using the concept of criminal career by saying that this term structures and organizes the most important knowledge about criminality, on the level of every individual, by this process facilitating the observation, measurements and the construction of causal relations (Blumstein, Farrington, Cohen apud Blumstein *et al.*, 2007).

In what in concerns the individual that fit in this concept we can say that the career criminal is in the opinion of L. Yablonski, that person which was formed and socialized in the direction of committing crimes. The career criminal makes rush decisions and commits crimes even if the situation is “vulnerable for him, risking a possible conviction” (Yablonski apud Butoi and Zdrenghea, 1992, p. 61). The process of socialization of these persons has occurred in a place in which there were promoted “values and norms, rules and definitions of behaviors different from those of the majority of people” (Yablonski apud Butoi and Zdrenghea, 1992, p. 61), in most of the cases they started performing unmoral acts from their childhood and adolescence. Psychologically these persons are in most of the cases normal, with time they get to improve their techniques of committing crimes, making from this a lifestyle.

The main dimensions of the criminal career on which our study has focus were: the criminal debut of the person, the duration or length of the criminal career, the prevalence of crimes, the seriousness of crimes, the level of criminal activity in a certain period of time, the type of crimes that the individual commits as well as the way in which this crimes are committed.

During our research we have defined the criminal career as the criminal route of an individual, from the first to the last crime that he committed, and as some

indicators for the measurements of this concept we have used the number of crimes that the person had committed- at least three committed felonies recorded in the files from the Bucharest Probation Service, the type of the crime and the way in which the felony was committed- alone or in a group.

As concerns the study of occasional delinquency and the criminal career in the moment, we can say that the concerns of researchers in Romania on this domain are at an early stage, the discussions of these themes being most in an tangential view and not an approach in depth of these problems. Thereby, this exploratory research is trying to make the first steps in the area of occasional delinquency and in the area of criminal career for the population in Romania, so that we can improve this lack of specific information.

The main goal of our investigation was to detect the socio-demographic characteristics of the persons that have committed facts that can be fit in the area of occasional delinquency and the characteristics of individuals that have a criminal career, as well as to try to spot the risk factors that are proper for these types of behavior. The achievement of an analysis of two kinds of people situated in a different position, at least in terms of number of crimes committed, was an original idea that had the purpose of creating a complex and complete picture of the two areas of study. We have chosen as subjects for this research persons that were at the time of our study in the supervision of the Bucharest Probation Service, the main criteria that made the two classes of people – occasional delinquents and career criminals- being the number of crimes that they have committed.

## 2. METHODS OF RESEARCH

Our research design used as pattern the ecological way of studying the criminal behavior, like it was adopted by Etienne Krug (Balica, 2008, p. 155) and had four different categories of factors: individuals, concerning the relations of the person with others, community and societal factors. With this four factors we have compile some key factors that we have followed in our study for every gainer of the Bucharest Probation Service.

In the category of individuals factors we have included: the gender of the person, the age, the residence, the place of birth, the type of origin family

from which the person has his origins, the level of education, the occupational status, the persons health, if he takes alcohol or drugs, the way he spends his free time and if he/she has criminal history. The factors concerning the relations of the person with others, we have included the relations with the origin family, the marital status and the relations with his group of friends. In the community factors we have refer to the area in which the person lives and the area in which he grew up, and in the societal factors we have refer to possible reforms, lows or changes in the society that could have influenced in a way or another the life of individuals that we have studied.

Our study was realized with two groups of persons that were at the time of our investigations in the Bucharest Probation Service. The distribution in the two groups was made considering the number of crimes that each person have committed, thereby we had a group of 20 persons that had committed each, one felony, and a group of persons that had committed each at least three felonies until the moment of our research.

The techniques of data collection that we have used were the documentary analysis of 40 files of the persons that were registered at the Bucharest Probation Service, as well as some interviews “face to face”, with 4 guides that were working for a while at the same service. These interviews with the councilors of probation were created following the four categories of factors that we have used for the documentary analysis, but for obtaining more information and a description more complete of the type of persons that the delinquents were, we have added some questions that tried to surprise aspects from the life of the persons in question that were not described enough in the files. Accordingly we have asked some questions about the age of the criminals at their first injury, the types of crimes that the person committed at the beginning of his criminal career, the way in which the felonies were committed, the way in which the criminal pattern varies and the way that the councilors of probation can work with this persons according to the number of crimes that they committed.

### **3. RELEVANT CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING THE GROUP OF “OCCASIONAL DELINQUENTS”**

The illegalities for which these persons were being hold in the custody of the Bucharest Probation Service were different, from felonies concerning the safety of persons to felonies concerning the property of persons: robbery, deprivation of liberty, kidnapping, drug trafficking, drug possession, attempted murder, injury, collisions or injuries causing death, theft, complicity to theft, driving without a license, traffic of influence.

In what it concerns the level of education for the persons in this group, we can say that the majority of them have finished the gymnasium at the moment that they have committed the first felony. In this group of persons we have also met some persons that have finished the primary education. Regarding the marital status, this persons that have committed only one felony, have declared in their majority that they have a stable relationship, and in what about their occupational status most of them have presented a certain instability, meaning they have had different jobs in a very short period of time. About special events that could have happened in their childhood or adolescence the individuals from this group did not have any notable information in their files, as well as for the indicator that concerned their health problems or alcohol or drug abuse. There was no person from this group that had any previous delinquent behaviors indicated in their file.

Concerning the factors that made a reference at the relations that the individual has with his family of birth, we can say that we have found some cases in which the individual had special situation in his family (meaning his parents were separated, divorced, the individuals were raised by someone else than their natural parents or there were some scenes of domestic violence involved), but the majority of them were persons that had good relations with their families, relations based on understanding one another and mutual support.

Looking at the individuals lives by the perspective of their relation with their group of friends, we have found that the majority of them perceive their friends as a bad or negative influence, most of the times they committed crimes being in a situation of complicity with these persons or at their impulse.

#### 4. THE "CAREER CRIMINALS"

The type of felonies that the persons included in this group have committed were: fraud- in a continuous manner or in a combination with other crimes like untrue documents, use false or access to restricted information and injury of the propriety of a person through the modification of the personal information of the victim. Also the felonies of theft is very spread, this being committed with other crimes like complicity to robbery or driving a vehicle without a driver license and intoxicated with alcohol. Beside this there are some felonies from the area of drug abuse like drug possession and illicit drug use. The felonies in the area of circulation rules are also present in this population of criminals with a career in committing felonies, in this group being included some persons that have been driving without a driving license and committing in the same time crimes as outrage or theft. Among the crimes that were rarely found in the studies of criminality, but present in the population that we have analyzed there were the felony of usurpation of officials and falsification of electric payments instruments, possession of illegal instruments for the electric payments and performing illegal financier operations in an abusive way.

As concerns the age of the individuals when they have committed their first crime, the workers from the Bucharest Probation Service believe that the majority of these persons start having misconducts while they were minors and they could not have been held accountable before the law for their acts.

"Usually they start at a very young age, when they are minors and they have 14 years old or less, in the period when they cannot be held accountable before the law for their facts, and they continue with this behaviors when there is a risk of being hold responsible." (D., of probation counselor, 4 years' experience)

Referring to the types of delinquent behaviors that this persons have at their debut in the criminal career, the counselors from the Bucharest Probation Service state that in general they start their career with theft and robberies, and while

growing up they start committing more and more serious crimes, involving the use of drugs and other substances.

As well as the level of education from the group of occasional delinquents, these persons are in their majority trained to the gymnasium, the extreme in this population being a person that finished the primary education and a person that finished the university education. The workers from the Probation Service speak about the level of education of these persons:

“Their level of education is very low, at some it is inexistent. If we have to talk about the school years that they have done most of them have very few notions. They have abandoned the school after repeating a class several times. And in their family the level of education is also very low.” (C., probation counselor, 4 years’ experience)

Regarding the marital status of the persons with criminal career, we have discovered that there is a variety in which these persons are, some of them being married, divorced, living in a consensual union or they have short term relationships.

In what it concerns the occupational status of these persons that have committed at least three felonies, we have noticed that there were some persons that were working with legal forms and have a stable work place, but there also were some persons that have an unstable work place, with very low remuneration.

About the childhood and adolescence of the 20 career criminals, we have found only one person that was abused by his father when he was a child, but the workers from the Probation Service think that each of these career criminals has suffered at a certain time in their life a form of abuse mental, emotional or physical.

Even if the majority of these persons didn’t have any special health problems or any addictions, we have found some persons that had some mental health problems- suicide attempts or health problems occurred after a period of drug abuse or a chaotic lifestyle. On this subject the counselors of probation states:

“They (the career criminals) have health problems, but coming from a place in which they haven’t been preoccupied by this kind of problems they are not informed by what problems they have. If we should take about the drug addicts, they most certain have HIV or other disease. Some of them get <lucky> by the fact that they are arrested and in the arrest at the prison they have made some medical tests.” (C., probation counselor, 4 years’ experience)

Unlike the group of persons that have committed only one felony, the group of career criminals has some records in what it concerns their criminal history. A part of them have some felonies in the criminal records before the acts for which they were registered in the Probation Service. Some of the career criminals have committed the same type of crimes before, as the ones for which are being held responsible at the time of the research, but there also were some that were being honest and admitted that they had been committing others acts that no one knows about like: violent acts, drug abuse, thefts and robberies.

The factors that refer to the relations that the individual has with his family of birth and friends, revealed that for this group of persons is characteristic a dysfunctional or defective relation with the family of birth, the relations with the members of this family being tense and in some cases the individuals don't keep any connection with their family.

When asked about the family of birth of their beneficiary that committed at least three felonies, the workers from the Probation Service in Bucharest emphasize that all their gainers come from not organized families, some of them without a legal ground and with a lot of tensions. In an attempt of finding out more about this subject we have asked as well what is the impact of the relations with the birth family in the reintegration and reinsertion of the individual in the society:

"There are some of them (career criminals) that have more than a supportive family, but sometimes even this is not enough." (I., probation counselor, 4 years' experience)

In what it concerns the group of friends, the majority of career criminals felt that the group of friends is a bad or negative influence, which makes them commit felonies and to behave in a delinquent manner.

Related to this specific indicator, the counselors support the founding of the documentary analyses and they sustain the fact that the group of friends and the company in general has a negative influence on their recipients:

"They (the career criminals) assimilate all kinds of antisocial values from this group- like the addictive behavior- and they start behaving like that in the group and after that when they are alone in the society. In some cases the initiative of committing an illegal act occurs in the group, someone comes with the idea and the rest of them accept it." (D., probation counselor, 4 years' experience)

The community factors from the analyses had two indicators: the place where the individual lives and the neighborhood. In the case of this group we were able to identify some persons that have the residence in areas that were well known for the high rate of criminality, where the gangs promote a delinquent lifestyle.

Referring to possible factors from the society that could have influenced the life of these persons from the group of career criminals, we haven't found any major changes in the society, changes that could make them embrace a delinquent behavior. More than that the workers from the Probation Service from Bucharest had the opinion that no change in the society could have influenced the behavior of these persons:

"I don't think that you can explain criminality through poverty. A man if he is poor but well raised in a certain way of life, he won't go steal or murder someone because he doesn't have what to eat. That man if he is poor, he will go to the poor cafeteria [...] he will go and take a job poorly paid or help someone that has money to get something. So no one steals to buy a car or a house. They steal so that they can have fun, girls, cool sneakers or drugs. That is way you cannot use the poverty, the economic crises or anything else that happens in the society as an excuse for criminality." (C., probation counselor, 4 years' experience)

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The study structured on factors: individuals, concerning the relations of the individual, community and society, of the persons that have committed only one felony and also of the persons that have committed three or more than three felonies, allowed us to identify the specific characteristics of these kinds of criminals and also to identify some risk factors for these two groups.

In what it concerns the persons that we have included in the group of occasional delinquents, we can say about them that they are in their majority from families in which they have been valued and supported, they have had affective relationships with their parents and they haven't been molested in any way by them. These individuals have a low level of education; they present in their life mostly instability in what it concerns their jobs, because they cannot manage to keep a job for a long time. In general they don't have any addiction problems or mental health problems, even when they try drugs their motivation is the curiosity or an extravagant behavior. Until the felony for which they were at the time of our research in the custody of the Bucharest Probation Service, they haven't had any other misconducts or delinquent behaviors registered in the official reports.

Referring to the reason for which these individuals commit crimes, from the analyses of the official reports we have found that the majority of them were influenced by their friends when they committed the felony, their company provoking them to act, this also being the main risk factor that we have identify at the level of this group of delinquents.

The group of career criminals that we have selected from the gainers of the Bucharest Probation Service has some particularities different from the group of occasional delinquents. Thereby we can say about these persons that they are especially from birth families in which there were conflicting relations due to the lack of financier resources or due to the frequent misunderstandings between the members of the family. In general these individuals have a low level of education, the dropout from school being very common and from a very young age. Concerning their jobs we can say that in most of the cases they work without legal forms, being involved in seasonal activities, in the domain of construction or other domains that are poorly paid. Some of the persons from this group had health problems due to their drug addiction, some of them being admitted in rehab clinics.

Unlike the group of occasional delinquents, the majority of these persons have had a criminal history before the felonies for which they were in the surveillance of the Probation Service. A part of them started committing crimes at a very young age and in the adulthood they commit the same felonies that they used to commit in their childhood, only that now their techniques are more advanced. For those who had an early criminal debut, beside a certain specialization in the manner of committing felonies that we can talk about, we can also say that they had a pattern of evolution in what the felonies concern, meaning that they have

started by committing felonies with a low social danger – theft and they have reached at the point in which they commit very dangerous crimes for the society-robberies, injuries.

Also there are a notable number of persons in this group that come from places with a high criminal risk in which the delinquent behavior is being promoted as a lifestyle.

In what it concerns the motivations that these persons from the group of career criminals have in committing felonies, we have noticed the perception of the group of friends as a negative influence on them, on the way that they behave in public and on the way that they choose to understand the rules and values of the society. On the other hand there are some persons in this group that admit that they have committed the felonies alone and that the main reason was the lack of sufficient financier resources.

Synthesizing the factors that we have identify in the 20 surveillance files that we have used from the Bucharest Probation Service, as well as the answers from the counselors that we have interviewed, we have come to the conclusion that the individual risk factors that increases the risk of recidivism for the group of career criminals are the dysfunctional or defective relations that the individual had with his birth family and also the early criminal debut.

As a risk factor that concerns the relations of the individual with others, we have noticed that the group of friends or the companionship that the individual has, represents a negative influence on his behavior and in most of the times is the main element that pressures the person into committing felonies.

Another factor is a risk factor that regards the community and it makes reference at the places or the neighborhoods in which these persons live, some of them living in places in which the criminal lifestyle in being promoted and in which they have to confront every day with bad or negative ways of living.

Because the number of persons included in this study was very low and the two groups cannot be considered representative for the entire population of occasional delinquents or career criminals from Romania, we hold that our conclusions should be sustained by other researches so that we can extrapolate this conclusions at the level of all the population of occasional delinquent and career criminals in our country.

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