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## Symposium on the Career Criminal Program-- Prologue

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# CRIMINOLOGY

## SYMPOSIUM ON THE CAREER CRIMINAL PROGRAM

*The problem of the career criminal has attracted a great deal of attention in both the academic world and the criminal justice system. On September 20-21, 1979, a Special National Workshop on the career criminal was held in Alexandria, Virginia. The program was sponsored by the Office of Development Testing and Dissemination, National Institute of Justice, United States Department of Justice. The conference was organized by the University Research Corporation under a contract from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, United States Department of Justice.\**

*The participants in the program represented a wide variety of those concerned with career criminals, including practitioners, academicians, researchers, prosecutors, and judges. This symposium represents a selection of eight papers presented at the conference. The first four papers focus on some of the general theoretical problems associated with career criminal programs, while the last four evaluate different aspects of existing career criminal programs.*

THE EDITORS

### PROLOGUE

MARVIN E. WOLFGANG\*\*

A career is defined as "a course of continued progress (as in the life of a person . . .)," as "a field for or pursuit of consecutive progressive achievement"; and in another instance as "a profession for which one undergoes special training and which is undertaken as a permanent calling."<sup>1</sup> None of the examples given by a standard dictionary make any reference to or imply anything about a criminal career or a career criminal.

As the papers in this collection report, career criminals are those who are serious, usually violent, convicted recidivists whose incapacitation is viewed as desirable. That desirability is translated into (1) social defense, or protection of society; (2) the utilitarian rationale of specific deterrence; and (3) retributive justice.

The Law Enforcement Assistance Administration has sponsored a career criminal program that has been conducted by prosecutors and other agents of criminal justice and evaluated by specialists in research evaluation. Using the insightful design of Charles Work, the program has been flourishing across the country for several years. The

\* The points of view expressed in the symposium are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United States Department of Justice.

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<sup>1</sup> WEBSTER'S THIRD NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY UNABRIDGED 338 (3d ed. 1965).

papers presented here represent some of the descriptions and analyses that were offered for discussion at a two-day conference on the work of the career criminal program.

Among other things, the program has been designed to provide the means by which the principal social control—the response agents in criminal law enforcement, prosecution, and administration—can give highest priority to the arrest, prosecution, and conviction of persons who repeatedly commit serious assaultive crimes. The intent of the program is clear. The implementation apparently has been efficient, and the enthusiasm of the functionaries is high. The extent to which the program has been effective is perhaps less clear, partly because of the difficulties of evaluating phenomena that contain the kinds of complexities that are found in the career criminal program.

It has been noted that the average age at which these offenders have been prosecuted as career criminals is twenty-nine. This age commonly is recognized, in the aggregate, as beyond the peak age of assaultive criminality. By this age, offensiveness is declining; offenders have begun to "age out" of crime. Even if these assertions were not true for the subjects in the program, as distinguished from criminals in general, these same persons most likely had a "career" prior to the end of their juvenile court statutory age of eighteen, as our Philadelphia birth cohort has indicated. In fact, we found that only about 12% committed their first crime after

age eighteen and that 45% who had an adult record also had a juvenile delinquency record.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Wolfgang, *Crime in a Birth Cohort*, 117 PROCEEDINGS OF THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY 404 (1973).

These observations suggest that a career criminal program well might consider the feasibility of reaching below age eighteen to satisfy more fully its original purpose.