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# **Informing Crime Control Strategies With Criminal Career Research**

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A Report Of The Georgia  
Statistical Analysis Center

Criminal Justice Coordinating Council  
Atlanta, Georgia

June 7, 2001



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*We would like to thank the Georgia Crime Information Center, the Georgia Department of Corrections, and the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles for their assistance with this project. A special thanks to Dr. William Holland of the GCIC for facilitating our access to Georgia's CHR data.*

*This project was funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997 State Justice Statistics Program Grant# 97-BJ-CX-K013.*

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<b><u>Chapter</u></b>	<b><u>Page</u></b>
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Perspectives on Criminal Career Research	3
Chapter Three: Conducting Criminal Career Research in Georgia	8
Chapter Four: Policy Questions Informed by Criminal Career Research	14
Chapter Five: Discussion	29
Bibliography	34

This project is supported by an annual grant awarded by the Bureau of Justice (BJA), Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, to the State of Georgia, Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. Points of views, opinions, or interpretation of the data contained within this document are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect or represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. The information provided in this report is derived from sources and databases believed to be reliable and complete. While every attempt has been made to provide correct and accurate information, the author assumes full responsibility for inaccuracies, discrepancies, errors, or omissions that may be contained herein.



## Chapter 1. Introduction

*Without an accurate understanding of what drives the crime rate, effective intervention is impossible.*

The 1986 collection of works by Alfred Blumstein and his colleagues on the *Panel on Research on Criminal Careers* marked a pivotal turning point for the advancement of research-based crime control policy. Convened by the National Institute of Justice, the panel articulated a radical shift in thinking for criminologists and policy makers who analyze data for the purpose of crafting crime control strategies. Fifteen years, one million more inmates, and \$28 billion dollars later, we still struggle with escalating U.S. prison costs and question the effectiveness of incarceration policies (BJS, 1999; BJS, 2000). Yet criminal career research, which has dominated our academic and policy debates since the early 1980s, remains a powerful and untapped tool for the serious analyst.

### A Criminal Career Approach to Research

The term “criminal career” does not suggest that offenders make a living financially from committing crime. Instead, it simply refers to the longitudinal sequence and pattern of crimes committed by an individual offender over the course of his/her lifetime. In a criminal career approach to research, knowledge of the life events of individual offenders is critical to explaining Georgia’s crime trends and crafting effective intervention strategies.

Georgia’s crime rate (the number of crimes per 100,000 residents) is a function of two things: participation and frequency. Participation refers to the proportion of Georgia residents committing crimes; frequency refers to the extent of activity among our active criminals. In other words, Georgia’s index crime rate of 5,000 per 100,000 residents could be the result of 5,000 people committing one index crime during the year or 500 people committing 10 crimes during the year.

The challenge to policy makers is to understand the two components (participation and frequency), since each is influenced by different factors and each calls for a different policy response. Understanding what prevents people from ever getting involved in crime will help curb participation. Reducing frequency requires that we interrupt an active offender’s career through some criminal justice system intervention (prison, community supervision, mandatory treatment).

Without an accurate understanding of crime trends, effective intervention is impossible. For example, the unprecedented decrease in Georgia’s crime rate over the past six years could be the result of many things, including:

- a decrease in the number of new offenders participating in crime
- a decrease in the number of crimes committed by active offenders
- a decrease in the length of the criminal careers of active offenders
- a shift in offending to less serious crimes (which are not counted in the crime rate)

These explanations have different crime control implications. For example, it is possible that the participation rate has remained unchanged, but a low Georgia unemployment rate has created an abundance of low-skilled jobs, thus interfering with the frequency in which active offenders are available to commit crime (they are busy working instead). On the other hand, Georgia has also led the nation with get tough crime control measures, including 2-strikes legislation, longer sentences, and reductions in parole releases. Together, these legislative and policy changes could have reduced the size of the active offender population (because many are in prison), shortened the length of criminal careers (because they stay in prison longer), or deterred offenders from committing more serious crimes, forcing them to shift to less serious offender activity. Only by understanding what drives crime rates can policy makers influence them.

## Practical Implications

*We conduct criminal career research to develop sound intervention strategies.*

The practical outcome of good criminal career research is the development of intervention strategies. Criminal justice decision makers can use the knowledge to help tailor their response to an individual offender: incapacitate him (to interrupt his career), treat him (to modify his career), or make an informed prediction about his future offending (classify him according to an assessment of where he is in his criminal career).

In fact, there are very few decisions in Georgia's criminal justice system that do not involve either formal or informal predictions about the offender's future criminal career. Beginning with arrest and ending with sentence expiration, officials are making determinations about an offender's risk for future criminal activity in such decisions as pretrial release, first offender status, sentencing, prison security risk, parole release, or probation and parole supervision levels.

Unfortunately, criminal careers can range from the one-time, opportunistic offender to the chronic, habitual offender who engages in crime over a long period of time. The challenge is to understand where an offender is located along his criminal career continuum and to intervene in a way that effectively disrupts his career cycle. Do sex offenders, for example, start with misdemeanor offenses like indecent exposure before moving on to other more serious and increasingly violent crimes? If so, can we effectively identify potentially dangerous sex offenders through the progression of their criminal career? If patterns can be detected that help us predict future events, then sanctions can be adjusted accordingly in an effort to reduce the number of violent sex offenses.

## Georgia's Criminal Career Research

The purpose of this report is to demonstrate the power of state-level criminal career

research (using official criminal history records) to inform and evaluate crime control strategies. The data presented was supplied by the Georgia Crime Information Center of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, the Georgia Department of Corrections and the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles. Automated criminal history records (arrests and convictions) were analyzed for every person arrested in Georgia for the past twenty years. This study moves beyond typical criminal career research, which relies upon relatively limited samples of offenders.

Over six million arrest episodes, and the careers of 2.1 million offenders are examined. Those records were merged with corrections and parole agency databases. This unique multi-agency, multi-database collaboration was supported by the Georgia Statistical Analysis Center through the State Justice Statistics Program of the Bureau of Justice Statistics (U.S. Department of Justice).

An overview of criminal career research is presented in Chapter 2. We present a context for the current research, define terms, and offer the opinions of the experts. Chapter 3 clearly outlines how the research was conducted – including participating agencies, databases accessed, and creation of the research file for analysis. The volume of criminal history records in a single state can be so massive that many researchers and agencies are reluctant to take on such a daunting task. By describing what is required to complete the analyses, we hope to stimulate research in other states. In Chapter 4 we offer our analysis of the criminal careers of Georgia offenders in the context of answering three specific policy questions. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes the research and offers a view of how crime control strategies might look if they were driven by criminal career research.

For brevity, this report uses male references (his/him) for offenders. However, 26% of the 2 million offenders in this study were women.



## Chapter 2. Perspectives on Criminal Career Research

### Wolfgang's Famous Cohort

Since Marvin Wolfgang's 1972 seminal Philadelphia birth cohort study, researchers have been attempting to identify and explain criminality among juveniles and adult offenders. Until this study, longitudinal studies of a birth cohort were non-existent in crime and delinquency. Wolfgang's study included 9,945 boys born in 1945 and residing in Philadelphia from age 10 to 18. Using school, police, juvenile court, correctional, and selected service records, the research team was able to track most cohort members from birth to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Among Wolfgang's findings, the concept of the "chronic offender" reshaped our thinking about offender patterns and engendered an entire field of career criminal research and policies. Of the total cohort, 35% (3,475 juveniles) came into contact with police at least one time. However, of the 10,214 offenses committed by members of the cohort, 8,601 (84%) were committed by only one-half of the delinquents. The active, "chronic" delinquents, those arrested five or more times, accounted for 52% of all offenses. That is, *6% of the entire cohort committed more than half of the crime.*

This study prompted investigation into policies grounded in the theory of *selective incapacitation*, whereby one would simply have to identify and incapacitate chronic offenders to see a dramatic decrease in crime rates. Since this study, researchers have looked for ways to predict criminality, detect patterns of specialization and escalation, and identify factors that influence dropping out of crime.

### What Do the Criminal Career Experts Say?

Researchers talk about four dimensions that characterize a criminal career:

1. Participation – The distinction between those who do and those who do not participate in crime.
2. Frequency – The rate, frequency, or chronicity of criminal activity among active offenders. It is typically measured as the number of crimes an individual offender commits in a year.
3. Patterns of Offending (Specialization and Escalation) – The pattern of offense seriousness among active offenders. The question of interest is whether offenders get involved in increasingly more serious crime over time or if they tend to engage in one type of criminal conduct.
4. Career Length – The length of time an offender is actively engaged in crime. This is measured from the age of on-set (first offense) to the point of desistance (last offense).

Scientists believe that a separation of these dimensions will help in our search for the factors that cause crime. Effective crime control strategies would then focus on those causes of crime, with the ultimate goal of inhibiting criminal activity. The progression of knowledge would eventually lead us to the ability to accurately target offenders for appropriate sanctions that maximize the likelihood of ending a criminal career.

### Participation

The participation dimension refers to the distinction between those who do and those who do not commit crime. Criminological research

is replete with fifty years of studies that identify the factors associated with participation in crime. The factors include parental supervision, adult-child interaction, parental criminality, family size and structure, social class, I.Q. and academic achievement, substance abuse, mental health problems, employment, peer-group influences, and countless other social and personal factors. For example, Wolfgang and his colleagues found a “nexus” of factors contributing to what the authors refer to as a “disadvantaged” position – non-white youths belonging to a lower socioeconomic class are more likely to have the lowest grade completion, lower I.Q., high number of residential and school moves, and overall lower achievement scores.

Crime control and prevention policies that address participation should be significantly different from policies that deal with offenders actively involved in crime. As Blumstein et al. (1986) note, reducing participation is probably more a function of social service, educational, and mental and substance abuse intervention while frequency (*the second key career component*) is more amenable to intervention on the part of the criminal justice system.

### *Frequency*

The frequency dimension refers to the number of crimes an offender commits over a period of time. Since Wolfgang et al., (1972), who reported that 6% of the adolescent study cohort accounted for over 50% of the crime committed by the cohort, other researchers investigating juvenile crime document similar findings (Dunford and Elliott, 1984; Farrington, 1983; McCord, 1981; Blumstein and Moitra, 1980; Hamparian et al., 1978; Shannon, 1978; Tracy et al., 1985; West and Farrington, 1977). Most studies estimate between 5% and 19% of the population accounts for over one-half of all crime (Elliott et al., 1982 and Wolfgang, 1983).

Researchers continually report that the best predictor of future arrests for an individual is previous arrests (Blumstein et al., 1986; Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1994; Zimring and Hawkins, 1995). Other predictors of frequency of offending include age of on-set, drug use, and unemployment (Blumstein et al., 1986). Research on individual arrest rates (crimes per year per person) report higher levels of offending among property than violent offenders and significantly higher levels of offending among people who have been incarcerated (Blumstein et al., 1986). Finally, while significant sex, age, and race differences exist at the participation stage, once offenders make the decision to become active in crime, demographic influences drop out (Blumstein et al., 1986).

### *Patterns of Offending (Specialization & Escalation)*

The extent to which offenders specialize in crime (specialization) or the extent to which crime severity increases with each new crime (escalation) has been the focus of considerable debate and research (Britt, 1996; Stander et al., 1989; Blumstein, 1988; Farrington et al., 1988; Cohen, 1986; Lab, 1984; Smith and Smith, 1984; Rojek and Erickson, 1982; Bursik, 1980; Wolfgang et al., 1972). The interest is twofold. Do offenders specialize in certain crimes or are they generalists (commit a variety of crimes)? Do offenders engage in more (or less) serious offenses over time as they progress in their career?

Wolfgang and colleagues (1972) were the first to demonstrate with data that juvenile offenders have a slight tendency to specialize – knowledge of a youth’s last offense did help to predict the current offense, especially for theft crimes. Blumstein et al. (1988) found even higher levels of specialization among adults, especially for drugs and property crimes. With some crime types, adult offending becomes more specialized over time among white offenders. Offenders

who were criminally active until older ages were more specialized than others.

The overwhelming research attention given to specialization is not surprising for a number of reasons. First, major criminological theories about the causes of crime make different predictions about the nature of the crime offenders commit. Thus, empirical research about specialization has become increasingly important for theory development and testing. More importantly, policy makers continually make decisions about offenders based on their crime of conviction. These “offense-based” decisions are seen in sentencing, parole release, and community supervision level decisions. Third, many correctional programs assume specialization based on program objectives and the population targeted for intervention—programs for sex offenders, drug abusers, and violent offenders.

Despite the theoretical and policy implications, the empirical evidence is mixed. Wolfgang and his colleagues concluded that there was little evidence to support the idea that juveniles specialize in one type of crime or that offense severity increased with each new crime. While some studies have confirmed these findings (Bursik, 1988; Lab, 1984; Smith and Smith, 1984), other researchers have found some evidence supporting specialization and escalation (Mazerolle et al., 2000; Farrington et al., 1988; Rojek and Erikson, 1982; Bursik, 1980).

One argument in this lively debate is how to measure specialization. Since the early 1970’s, criminologists have relied on a number of different techniques for measuring offense specialization, including inter-correlations, Marchov-chains, transition matrices, specialized coefficients, and simple count methods (Mazerolle, 2000; Hindelang, 1971; Wolfgang et al., 1972; Farrington, 1986; Farrington et al., 1988; Blumstein et al., 1988). Yet, despite the

theoretical and policy promise that “specialization” and “escalation” have for understanding crime and delinquency, the evidence to date is still inconclusive.

### *Career Length*

Many criminal careers are short and end in the teenage years (Blumstein et al., 1986). One regular empirical finding is that the age of on-set (first offense) is an important factor in explaining future offending. Researchers agree that early on-set is the best predictor of long-term, high frequency, serious offending as a juvenile and adult (Nagin and Farrington, 1992; Blumstein et al., 1986; Dunford and Elliott, 1984; Farrington, 1986). Moreover, while offenders who start their criminal careers at younger ages have higher frequency rates, early on-set offenders also show more versatility in the offenses they commit while late on-sets are more likely to specialize in their offenses (Blumstein et al., 1996). Predicting which offenders will stop offending (desistance) is critical to decision makers. For example, the allocation of scarce resources, such as prison beds, should be reserved for offenders least likely to end their careers.

### **Practical Implications of Criminal Career Research**

The practical outcome of good criminal career research is the development of intervention strategies. Criminal justice decision makers can use the knowledge to help craft their response to an individual offender: incapacitate him (to interrupt his career), treat him (to modify his career), or make an informed prediction about his future offending (classify him according to an assessment of where he is in his criminal career). Blumstein et al. (1988) make a very clear distinction between policies targeting *participation* and policies crafted specifically for modifying *frequency*. That is, crime can be reduced through one of two strate-

gies: reducing the proportion of the population committing crime and/or decreasing the rate of offending among active offenders. Blumstein et al. (1988) suggest that larger community-wide prevention strategies targeting the entire population are more appropriate for reducing participation while crime control strategies aimed at identifying, rehabilitating, or incapacitating offenders will have a more pronounced effect on offender frequency. Although strategies aimed at participation and frequency offer considerable opportunities for reducing crime, the authority and responsibility for each are quite different (Blumstein et al., 1986; 1988). The social service sector is better equipped to deal with participation, while frequency falls more appropriately under the venue of the criminal and juvenile justice systems.

An offspring of career criminal research is the focus on the chronic, high frequency offender. Since Wolfgang's discovery that 6% of all juveniles in his cohort accounted for over one-half of the crime, efforts have turned toward selectively incapacitating potentially chronic offenders in an effort to interrupt (or end) their careers. Unfortunately, the focus on this policy implication alone has overshadowed the other aspects of the criminal career concept.

### *Incapacitation*

Selective incapacitation policies include extending time served in prison for offenders predicted to be chronic recidivists or mandatory minimum sentences for selected offenses (targeting offenses popular among high-rate offenders). Unfortunately, there is still considerable debate about the estimation of individual offending rates, incapacitative effects, and its implications for incarceration policies despite research (Canela-Cacho et al., 1997; Zimring and Hawkins, 1995; Nagin and Land, 1993; Horny and Marshall, 1991; Chaiken and Chaiken, 1982; Cohen, 1984; Blumstein and Cohen, 1979; Greenwood and Abrahamse, 1982; Shinnar and Shinnar, 1975).

The challenge to policy makers is to utilize criminal career research to enhance incapacitative policies. If participation in crime is high in Georgia, incapacitating many offenders may be financially impractical (given the high cost of incarceration). Alternatives to prison and strategies to prevent participation in crime may be more effective. If participation in crime is low, but a few offenders are extremely active, incarceration of chronic offenders may be much more beneficial in reducing crime.

### *Career Modification (Treatment)*

Criminal justice decision makers attempt to modify criminal careers through rehabilitation or treatment. The National Institute of Justice Panel on Research and Rehabilitative Techniques (Martin et al., 1981) articulated the popular belief of the 1970s and 1980s that modifying criminal careers was impossible – since treating offenders could not be shown to change behavior. Today, research consistently demonstrates that clinically relevant treatment does work and is most effective in reducing criminal behavior when it is applied to the highest risk cases – those at highest risk of recidivism (Andrews, 1994; Andrews et al., 1990a; Andrews et al., 1990b; Gendreau & Ross, 1979).

We have a number of policies in Georgia aimed at modifying (reducing or ending) criminal careers – specialized drug treatment, sex offender treatment, and parole supervision with a focus on employment. Long-term evaluations of program effectiveness are required to determine their impact on modifying criminal careers.

### *Predictions of Risk*

There are very few decisions in Georgia's criminal justice system that do not involve either formal or informal predictions about the offender's future criminal career. Beginning with arrest and ending with

sentence expiration, officials are making determinations about an offender's risk for future criminal activity in such decisions as pretrial release, first offender status, probation or prison, prison security risk, parole release, or probation and parole supervision levels.

While predicting criminality is extremely difficult, criminal justice decisions made with the help of statistical devices (risk assessment instruments) are superior to decisions made without them (Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1994). Unfortunately, criminal careers can range from the one-time, opportunistic offender to the chronic, habitual offender who engages in crime over a long period. The challenge is to understand where an offender is located along his criminal career continuum and to intervene in a way that effectively disrupts his career cycle.

## **Summary**

Correctional agencies find themselves faced with the task of utilizing scarce resources to manage and control the offending population. To maximize the efficient use of resources, agencies must identify those serious offenders requiring adequate punishment as well as non-serious offenders requiring only nominal sanctions.

Criminal career research can assist policy makers in crafting the most appropriate punishment for individual offenders. Knowing where an offender is positioned in his criminal career offers valuable insight into whether he is likely to commit additional offenses or desist – terminate his career. If an offender is likely to continue participation in criminal activity, such research can also shed light on the likelihood that he will commit the same offense or increasingly more serious crimes. These factors all provide valuable information about future offending that could prove useful in developing punishment and supervision strategies.

## Chapter 3. Conducting Criminal Career Research in Georgia

Georgia represents a unique site for conducting criminal career research. First, Georgia consistently ranks high among states for juvenile and adult crime and arrest rates, resulting in one of the largest criminal history repositories in the nation. Secondly, Georgia is one of the fastest growing states in the nation with a growing ethnic and racially diverse population. Finally, Georgia ranks among the top states in the nation, along with California, New York, and Florida, in the number of criminal fingerprints processed each year and is the first state to have an Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) to create and update criminal history records. Georgia offers an excellent site for investigating the role of criminal history records (CHR) data in public policy research.

### Crime in Georgia Drops

Over the past six years, Georgians have witnessed an unprecedented drop in serious crime. According to the latest crime statistics, Georgia's Violent Crime Index (measured as the number of murders, rapes, robberies, and aggravated assaults reported to police per 100,000 residents) continues to decline. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the Georgia Violent Crime Index has decreased 28% since 1990, while Georgia's Property Crime Index (measured as the number of larcenies, burglaries, and motor vehicle thefts reported to police per 100,000 residents) has decreased 19%.

Figure 1

Georgia Violent Crime Index,  
(crimes per 100,000), 1980-1998

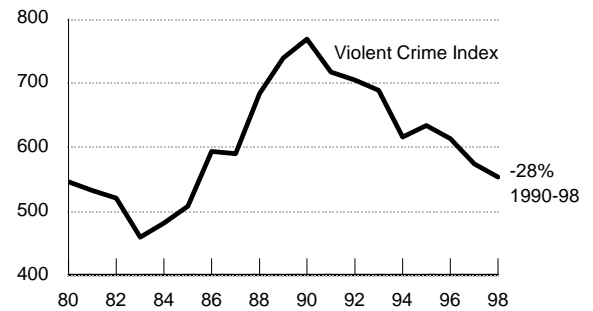
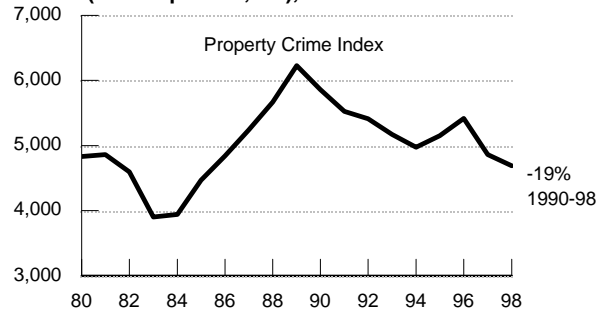


Figure 2

Georgia Property Crime Index,  
(crimes per 100,000), 1980-1998



Decreases in reported crimes have led to a significant drop in *arrests* for serious violent and property crimes across the state. In addition to declining arrests, Georgia has experienced a significant reduction in *adult arrest rates* (adults arrested per 100,000 adult residents).

As shown in Figure 3 on the next page, the total adult arrest rate has dropped 7% statewide since 1990. The drop in arrest rates is more evident when looking at serious or Part I crimes (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, arson). As seen in Figure 4 on the next page, the adult arrest rate for Part I crimes has dropped an unprecedented 40% statewide in the past eight years.

**Figure 3**  
**Georgia Adult Total Arrest Rate**  
 (per 100,000 adults), 1980-1998



*Crime and adult arrest rates have declined, while the correctional population continues to climb.*

**Figure 4.**  
**Georgia Adult Part I Arrest Rate**  
 (per 100,000 adults), 1980-1998



## Correctional Populations Continue to Grow

While Georgia's crime and adult arrest rates have declined significantly over the past six years, the correctional population continues to climb. Georgia ranks among the top ten states in incarceration rates in the nation with 532 persons incarcerated per 100,000 residents. Our current state correctional population exceeds 200,000 – 46,000 inmates, 22,000 parolees, and 138,000 probationers.

## State Population Grows

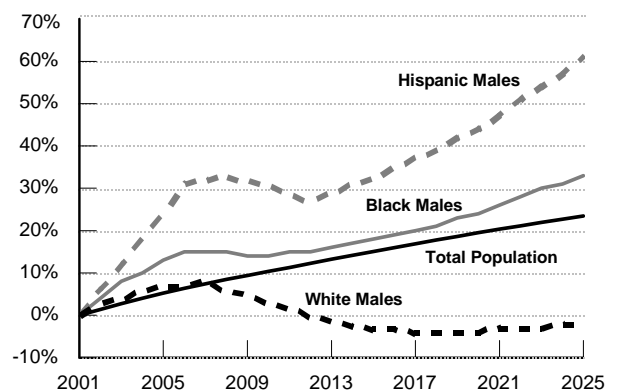
Home to 8 million people, Georgia is one of the fastest growing states in the nation. Our population grew 26% in the past decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Georgia is the

seventh fastest growing state in the nation, and the fastest growing state in the Southeast. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by the year 2025, more than one-third of the total U.S. population will reside in the South. Among the ten most populated states, Georgia ranks fourth in projected population growth, expecting to gain another 2.7 million residents over the next 25 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Between 1998 and 2020 Georgia's overall population is expected to increase by 25%. However, growth is not uniform across all age and ethnic groups. For example, Georgia can expect an 11% increase in the number of youth between the ages of 13-17 in the next seven years alone. This trend is critical to planners, as this age cohort is considered by experts to be "at high risk" for involvement in criminal activity.

The most striking projected increases are among Georgia's young Hispanic and African-American males (see Figure 5). This is important to criminologists, since these demographic groups are considered at "high-risk" for committing crimes.

**Figure 5**  
**Projected Percent Change in Georgia Male Population, Ages 13-17 (2001-2025)**



Hispanics are Georgia's fastest growing population. According to U.S. Census projections, the Hispanic male population age 13-17 is expected to grow 31% over the next six years, while the African-American

male population age 13-17 is projected to increase by 24%. African-American males age 18-24 are projected to increase an unprecedented 36% over the next fifteen years.

We cannot accurately predict the next downturn in the economy, or upturn in crime, but experts agree that the current national trends (decreasing crime and arrests) are temporary. Georgia is facing specific demographic trends, apart from national trends, that could threaten the momentum of the current decline in crime and could send the justice system into a crisis over the next ten years. Specifically, the aging of the pre-teen and teen generation currently impacting Georgia's juvenile justice system should be a warning to policy makers that adult crime will likely increase during the next six years.

### **Georgia Has A Large Criminal History Repository**

*Georgia has one of the largest criminal history record repositories in the nation -- 6 million arrest episodes.*

Georgia maintains one of the largest criminal history repositories in the nation along with California, New York, and Florida. To date, the criminal history database includes over 2 million individuals, 6 million arrest episodes, and 7.7 million charges. Despite the richness of Georgia's computerized criminal history records (CHR) database, researchers still do not rely on this data source to perform critical policy and program analyses. One reason for this neglect is that the CHR database was designed to support the needs of criminal justice agencies requiring real-time access to criminal history records, not the needs of researchers engaged in policy and program evaluation research. The size of the database, complexity of the data structure, issues of confidentiality, and obstacles to linking records have all made regular use of CHR data unattractive to most agency and academic researchers.

### **Building a Research Version of the CHR Database**

The effort to build a research version of the complete CHR database represented a significant investment of time and resources and multi-agency collaboration on the part of our research firm (Applied Research Services, or ARS), the Georgia Crime Information Center (GCIC), Department of Corrections (DOC), Board of Pardons and Paroles, and the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC). The paragraphs below outline the steps involved in completing this unprecedented project.

#### ***Gaining Access & Permission***

The transfer of the CHR data to ARS required a series of confidentiality agreements and approved security plans to ensure the confidentiality of the sensitive arrest records. This project required access to, and transfer of, the following data to ARS with all personal identifiers:

1. GCIC CHR Database: All arrest records for all persons arrested in Georgia for both felonies and misdemeanors during the period 1980 to 2000. These records contain personal identifiers including state inmate and FBI number, social security number, name, arresting agency, race, gender, date-of-birth, aliases, correctional tracking fields, and disposition codes (6 million records).
2. Georgia DOC Inmate Research File: Detailed legal, personal, social, medical, and mental health records of all persons admitted to Georgia prisons since 1972 (400,000 records).



### *Transfer of CHR Data Tapes*

The transfer of the CHR database involved the physical transfer of data on more than 300 IBM tape cartridges. ARS read the IBM tapes and transferred the separate data tables to a secure computer system for analysis and reconstruction. The CHR raw data files are stored on a mainframe in a relational database format that relies on several record types: personal identifiers, aliases, social security numbers, arrest episode (charge 1), additional charges, dispositions, and correctional transfers. Once the CHR files were transferred, the entire CHR database required more than 13 gigabytes of computer storage space.

### *Creation of the Offender-Based Research File*

The relational database format of GCIC records did not provide for easy manipulation and analysis of longitudinal arrest patterns. The authors utilized statistical software (SPSS) to completely rebuild the database so that each record in the new research file represented an individual offender (2 million offenders) and the fields represented personal identifiers, race, date-of-birth, gender, place of birth, dates-of-arrests, all charges (up to 17 per arrest episode, since 99% of arrests included 17 or fewer charges), and dispositions.

In order to distinguish among the maximum of 17 charges for each arrest episode, a severity index/ranking protocol was developed to identify the most serious offense among arresting charges. Georgia statutory minimum and maximums were used along with crime type to construct a rank for each of the 599 GCIC arrest codes used over the past 20 years. This index provides a numerical rank for each crime code, allowing us to identify the most serious offense in one episode.

Following creation of the CHR research file, the arrestee state identification number (SID) was used to merge the CHR records with the DOC Inmate Research File. Integrating existing correctional and court data with CHR data offers new avenues of research that could shed light on the state's ongoing evaluation and policy questions. This project provides the first look at the movement of offenders throughout Georgia's criminal justice system, documenting the relationships among arrest, court disposition and sanction.

### **The Research Cohort**

The CHR research database consists of complete criminal histories for all persons arrested and fingerprinted in Georgia between 1980 and 1999. During the 20-year study period, 2,022,733 people were arrested in Georgia, and they accumulated 5.6 million individual arrest episodes. Added to the 5.6 million arrest episodes were all arrests of cohort members that took place prior to 1980 (since some cohort members were arrested *prior* to the 20 year time period that would put them in the study). Adding all the arrest episodes together, the cohort members accounted for 6 million arrest episodes and 7.7 million charges.

### *2 Million Adult Offenders*

Men account for three-fourths (74%) of the 2 million adult arrestees in the research cohort; 59% are Caucasian, 40% African-American, and 1% are from other ethnic/racial groups (including "unknowns"). The typical Georgia arrestee is between 30 and 31 years of age, and there are no significant age differences between persons arrested for felonies and misdemeanors. On average, violent and property offenders are 29 to 30 years of age, while drug offenders are younger (average age of 28).

*2/3 of Georgia arrestees have been arrested more than once.*

Two-thirds (67%) of Georgia arrestees have been arrested more than once. In fact, 10% of the research cohort has 10 or more arrests. One offender, a female with a long history of fraud (bad check) arrests, has been arrested 101 times during the course of her criminal career.

### 7.7 Million Charges

Table 1 shows all charges accumulated by the research cohort throughout their criminal careers. Up to 17 separate charges are captured at each arrest episode (one arrest date). For example, an individual arrested three times has information captured on anywhere between 3 and 51 charges (3 arrests with 17 charges each). One in five arrest episodes (20%) has more than one charge.

The most common charge among the research cohort is traffic, primarily comprised of DUI charges (73%). Traffic offenses account for more than 1 in 4 charges (28%), and are present in one-third of the arrest episodes (sometimes accompanying a more serious charge). Other frequently occurring charges include theft (larceny), assault/battery, drug offenses, fraud, and probation/parole revocations. It is interesting to note that drug charges, which account for 11% of all charges, are present in 14% of all arrest episodes.

### 6 Million Arrest Episodes

Table 2 on the next page shows the most serious offense charged in all arrest episodes accumulated by the research cohort between 1980 and 1999. The most serious charge is a felony in 56% of the arrests. DUI-related traffic arrests far exceed any other arrest in volume, accounting for more than 1 in 4 arrests (28% of all arrest episodes). Other frequently occurring arrests include theft (larceny), assault/battery, drugs, fraud, and probation/parole revocations.

**Table 1**

#### Summary Of All Georgia Charges By Crime Type (1980-2000)

	# of Charges	% of Charges
Traffic (DUI, Suspended License)	2,104,111	27.4
Theft (Larceny)	944,774	12.3
Assault/Battery	860,087	11.2
Drug Offenses	858,853	11.2
Fraud	439,046	5.7
Probation/Parole Revocation	409,251	5.3
Obstruction	400,071	5.2
Invasion of Privacy	284,831	3.7
Weapons Offenses	221,980	2.9
Burglary	217,704	2.8
Forgery	118,060	1.5
Family Offenses	113,876	1.5
Sexual Offenses	113,413	1.5
Damage to Property	98,204	1.3
Alcohol/Liquor Offenses	95,437	1.2
Robbery	83,716	1.1
Rioting/Public Disturbance	46,326	.6
Escape	45,565	.6
Other -- Idle and Loitering	40,309	.5
Miscellaneous	28,092	.4
Kidnapping	27,427	.4
Commercial Sex/Morals	27,315	.4
Conspiracy/Solicitation	27,026	.4
Homicide	25,680	.3
Gambling	12,565	.2
Arson	9,313	.1
Conservation/Gaming Violations	8,139	.1
Crimes in Prison/Correctional Institution	2,370	0
Revenue/Licensing	2,330	0
Obscenity	1,807	0
Bribery/Abuse of Public Office	1,250	0
Health and Safety	1,066	0
Bombs/Explosives/Bio Weapons	722	0
Computer Crime	410	0
Treason/Subversive	33	0
Extortion/Misuse of Public Office	23	0
Election Fraud	20	0
Criminal Abortion	13	0
Total	7,671,215	100%

Table 2

**Summary of All Georgia Arrest Episodes By Most Serious Charge  
(1980-2000)**

	<b># of Arrests</b>	<b>% of Arrests</b>
Traffic (DUI, Suspended License)	1,662,681	27.7
Theft(Larceny)	852,680	14.2
Assault/Battery	726,532	12.1
Drug Offenses	663,447	11.1
Fraud	398,719	6.6
Probation/Parole Revocation	365,248	6.1
Burglary	203,693	3.4
Obstruction	185,544	3.1
Invasion of Privacy	175,710	2.9
Family Offenses	96,978	1.6
Sexual Offenses	91,344	1.5
Weapons Offenses	90,214	1.5
Forgery	89,830	1.5
Robbery	73,962	1.2
Damage to Property	67,612	1.1
Alcohol/Liquor Offenses	64,599	1.1
Escape	41,434	.7
Homicide	25,265	.4
Kidnapping	21,738	.4
Other--Idle and Loitering	20,297	.3
Rioting/Public Disturbance	19,343	.3
Conspiracy/Solicitation	16,674	.3
Commercial Sex/Morals	14,744	.2
Gambling	8,481	.1
Arson	7,550	.1
Miscellaneous	5,244	.1
Conservation	3,634	.1
Crimes in Prison/Correctional Institution	1,580	0
Obscenity	1,373	0
Bribery/Abuse of Public Office	1,014	0
Revenue/Licensing	944	0
Bombs/Explosives/Bio Weapons	460	0
Computer Crime	304	0
Health and Safety	262	0
Treason/Subversive	27	0
Election Fraud	18	0
Extortion/Misuse of Public Office	12	0
Criminal Abortion	10	0
Total	5,999,201	100%

## Chapter 4. Policy Questions Informed By Criminal Career Research

The purpose of this report is to demonstrate the use of state-level criminal career research using official criminal history records to inform and evaluate crime control strategies. Although there are many pressing policy questions, this chapter narrows the focus to three as a way of highlighting the value of CHR data in policy research. These questions represent a broad range of policy areas that surface in day-to-day legislative, policy, and operational discussions about Georgia's offenders and the system's response to them. At the same time, these questions were picked in order to analyze different dimensions of the criminal career concept – participation, frequency, specialization, and escalation. Our analysis addresses three selected policy questions:

*The crime rate is a function of the proportion of people who participate in crime and the frequency in which active criminals offend.*

**Question #1. Why Is Crime Down In Georgia?** *The first policy question addresses Georgia's unprecedented decline in crime over the past six years in an effort to shed light on a key question: Is the crime rate declining because fewer new offenders are entering the system, or is the crime rate declining because "get tough" laws and policies are impeding active Georgia offenders?*

**Question #2. Do "Offense-Based" Criminal Justice System Decisions Make Sense?** *The second policy question addresses the use of offense-based classification systems in making a number of key correctional placement and management decisions. That is, does our current method of labeling offenders (based on current and prior crimes of conviction) provide the best picture of an offender's past criminal behavior?*

**Question #3. Are Sex Offenders Held Accountable?** *In the past ten years, truth-in-sentencing, parole abolition, and "get tough" laws have resulted in national benchmarks for measuring offender accountability and criminal justice system performance – prison sentence length and time served in prison. However, despite Georgia's punitive legislative and parole efforts, sentencing and parole practices provide only a limited perspective on sex offender accountability. Our final question expands upon the prior investigation of sex offender accountability in Georgia by asking how often persons arrested for a sex crime are convicted for their crime.*

### Policy Question #1: Why is Crime Down in Georgia?

As noted in Chapter 3, Georgia's crime rate has been falling for six straight years, with significant decreases in all serious (Part I) crimes. While this decline is certainly welcomed, the drop has sparked considerable debate and rhetoric among legislators, criminal justice professionals, and academics, each citing a different explanation. At one end of the policy continuum, observers credit the decline in crime to "get tough" sentencing and incarceration policies. At the other end, credit is given to a combination of social, demographic, and economic changes (such as the improved economy).

While the debaters may not mention criminal careers, crime trends are inextricably linked to career criminal concepts – namely *participation* and *frequency*. The aggregate crime rate is a function of the proportion of people participating in crime and the frequency in which active offenders engage in criminal activity. Our annual crime rate of 5,000 crimes per 100,000 residents may be the result of 5,000 people committing one crime each, or 500 people committing ten crimes

each. Why is the distinction important? Because the crime control implications are very different.

Georgia may be experiencing a reduction in the proportion of “new” youths and adults who decide to participate or begin a career in crime. Scientists argue that the decision to participate in crime is impacted by social, economic, and political policies. Intervention strategies focus on preventing “high risk” individuals from choosing crime – by improving early school performance, supporting families and providing economic alternatives to crime.

Likewise, Georgia’s policing, prosecutorial, and sentencing policies may have had a pronounced impact on the frequency in which active offenders commit crime. Frequency is the only dimension of criminal behavior that can be influenced by the criminal justice system. Intervention strategies focus on disrupting or terminating careers through incarceration.

*More repeat offenders get arrested in Georgia today than any time during the past 20 years.*

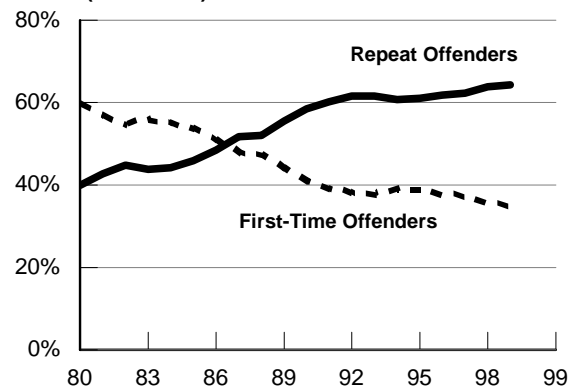
The present analysis attempts to shed some light on the debate by examining historical arrest trends for first-time adult offenders. Until now, such a study has not been possible. Official (UCR) data documents arrest activity in terms of aggregate *arrest episodes* per 100,000 Georgia adults. Unfortunately, aggregate arrest rates do not distinguish between the number of persons arrested and the number of arrest episodes. While criminal history information is available in correctional databases, this analysis would be limited only to convicted offenders.

The availability of individual criminal history records allows us, for the first time, to isolate individual offenders, expressing arrest rates as the number of *people* arrested per 100,000 Georgia adults. We can then examine whether crime participation trends coincide with aggregate shifts in the crime rate. In other words, is *participation* or *frequency* driving the crime rate?

## Participation in Crime Drops Among Georgia Adults

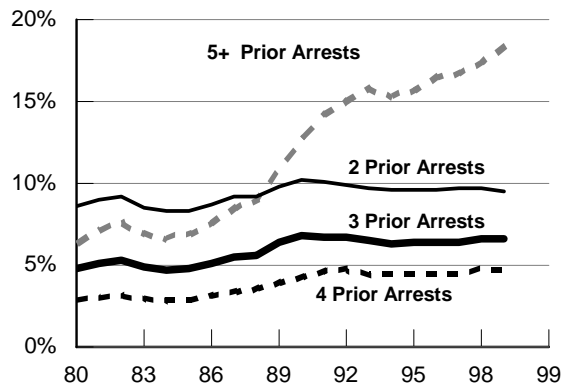
Figure 6 describes the types of people arrested annually since 1980 as first-time or repeat offenders (those with at least one prior arrest). In 1980, first-time offenders represented 61% of all people arrested, while repeat offenders accounted for 39%. Today, the opposite is true. Repeat offenders account for 65% of all arrests and first-timers account for only 35%. It is possible that some of this change could be attributable to improved record keeping. Since 1972, when GCIC was designated as the state’s criminal history repository, Georgia has steadily improved the accuracy of CHR data.

**Figure 6**  
Proportion of First-Time and Repeat Arrestees (1980-1999)



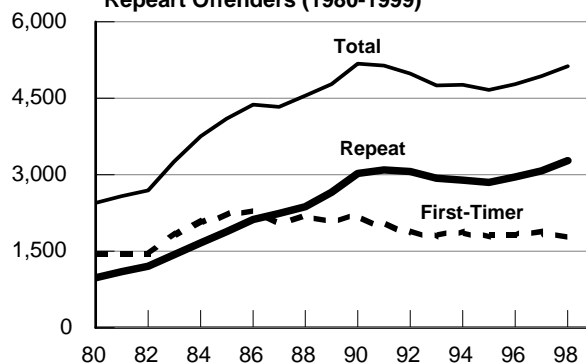
We not only have more repeat offenders today, there has also been a significant increase in the volume of “chronic” offenders (those with *many* prior arrests). Figure 7 on the next page shows that the proportion of all people arrested (arrestees) that have five or more prior arrests has tripled over the past 20 years, from 6% to 18%.

**Figure 7**  
**Proportion of Arrestee Population with**  
**Prior Felony Arrests (1980-1999)**



Another line of inquiry is to explore trends in arrest *rates*, or the number of persons arrested per 100,000 residents. This analysis is quite different from UCR arrest statistics that summarize the number of arrest episodes per 100,000. Here, the data reflect people arrested annually per capita — not arrest episodes. Figure 8 provides a glimpse into this dimension of arrest trends.

**Figure 8**  
**Number of People Arrested For a Felony**  
**(Per 100,000 Adults): First-Timers vs.**  
**Repeat Offenders (1980-1999)**

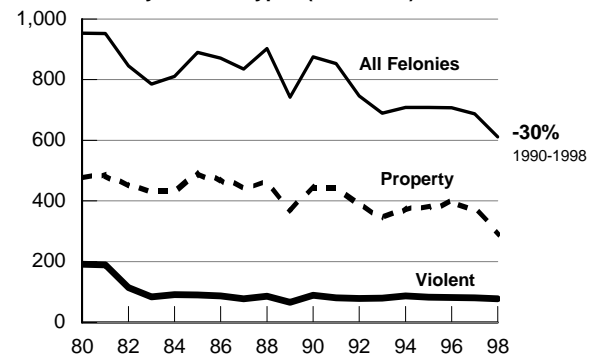


Since 1980, Georgia's arrest rate has grown a remarkable 235%, while first-time offender arrest rates have increased only 25%. That is, as a proportion of the adult population, law enforcement is seeing increasingly more repeat offenders arrested annually than first-time offenders.

Surprisingly, since 1990, a period of significant decline in violent crime, first-time offender arrest rates have dropped 12% while repeat offender arrest rates increased 24%. This pattern of findings suggests that the recent declines in crime are attributable in large part to fewer first-timers entering the system — a decrease in the rate at which people are participating in crime for the first time.

To further investigate the decline in first-timers entering the system, the next analysis profiles arrest rates among first-timers for the major felony crime types (see Figure 9). In 1990, there were 875 people arrested for the first time for a felony per 100,000 Georgia adults, compared to only 612 arrested in 1998, a 30% decrease.

**Figure 9**  
**Number of People Arrested For First-Time by**  
**Felony Offense Types (1980-1998)**



Among violent felony arrestees, there was 14% decrease in the rate of first-timers entering the system; among property felony arrestees, there was a 36% decrease in the rate of first-timers entering the system. First-time felony drug arrestees peaked in the late 1980's during the height of the drug war. Today, the arrest rate among first-time felony drug offenders is at the lowest level since 1983.

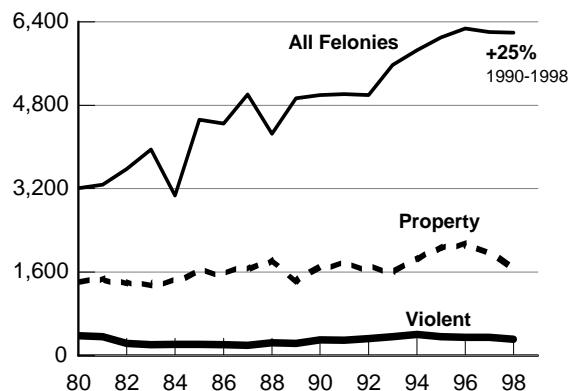
### *Even the Youngest Adults Are Less Likely to Participate in Crime*

Since youth is a predictor of the decision to participate in crime, we examined patterns among young adult offenders – 18 and 19 year olds. If participation rates are indeed dropping, then we would expect to see a significant decline in the proportion of 18 and 19 year old arrestees that are first-timers (at least as defined by the adult system).

Figures 10 and 11 show that the proportion of first-timers among 18 and 19 year olds committing property, violent, and other felonies has dropped 3%, 5%, and 5% respectively since 1990. A notable difference to this trend is felony sex offenses, which increased 60%. Such declines among selected serious crimes may account, to some extent, for the observed decline over the past six years in the UCR Part I aggregate crime rate.

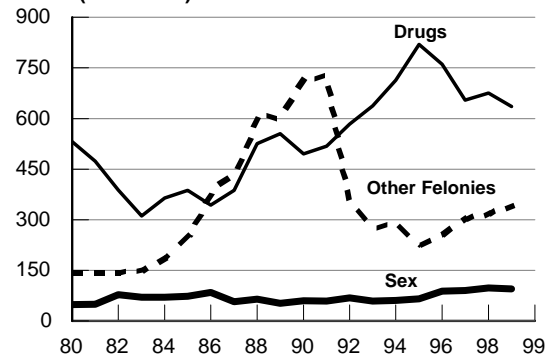
**Figure 10**

**Number of 18-19 Year Olds Arrested (Per 100,000) By Felony Offense (1980-1998)**



**Figure 11**

**Number of 18-19 Year Olds Arrested (Per 100,000) By Specific Felony Offenses (1980-1998)**



### **What Factors Impact Georgia's Lower Participation Rates?**

Fewer Georgians are making the decision to participate in crime today than in previous years for a number of possible reasons. These reasons could include recent declines in homicides among intimate partners, expansion of the Georgia economy, and reductions in drug use.

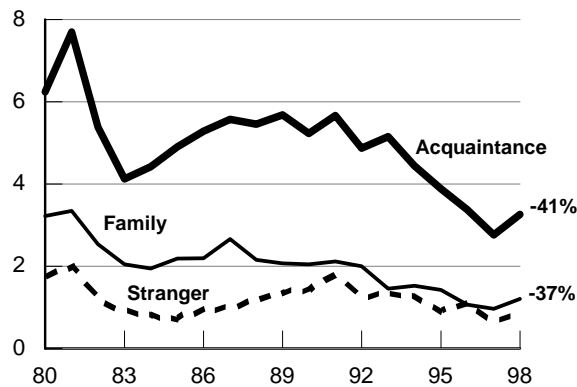
#### *Declines in Intimate Partner Homicides*

One explanation for the reduction in violent crime in the U.S., especially homicide, is the two-decade reduction in intimate partner homicides – homicides among spouses, family members, neighbors, acquaintances, and girlfriends/boyfriends (Chaiken, 1999; Blumstein and Rosenfeld, 1998). In Georgia, intimate partner homicides have steadily declined during the past 20 years.

As shown in Figure 12 on the next page, the intimate partner homicide rate in Georgia has decreased 41% for family members and 37% for acquaintances since 1980 (Supplemental Homicide Data, 1980-2000). Chaiken (1999) suggests that a number of factors related to domestic violence, including expansion of shelters, increased use of protective orders, and zero-tolerance police

arrest policies, have coalesced to provide alternatives to many violent and potentially lethal domestic situations.

**Figure 12**  
**Homicides Rates By Victim/Offender Relationship (1980-1998)**



Since intimate homicides constitute a large percentage of the total number of homicides and aggravated assaults, modest reductions in the rate at which intimates kill one another could significantly impact the overall violent crime rate.

### *Expansion of the Georgia Economy*

Unemployment rates are at a 25-year low in Georgia. Increased employment opportunities could be responsible for some part of the reduction in crime. As legitimate career opportunities become more readily available, teenagers and others at high-risk for participating in crime turn to gainful, legitimate employment. Between 1997 and 2000, Georgia's total employment industry areas grew 8%. For example, the service sector (a major employer of the at-risk population) increased 12% and eating and drinking establishments grew 8%, while the retail trade grew 9% (Georgia Department of Labor, 2000).

### *Reductions in Drug Use and Abatement of the Crack Epidemic*

In 1999, approximately 14.8 million Americans were drug users, down from 25 million in 1979. Although "crack" cocaine abuse

remains at serious levels, federal and state officials contend that the problem does not approach the emergency situation witnessed in the late 1970s, or the crack epidemic of the 1980s.

According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), the percent of youth between the ages of 12 and 17 that report recent use of an illegal drug declined from 11% in 1997 to 9% in 1999. The number of 12<sup>th</sup> graders that admit to "ever using cocaine" declined from 6% in 1999 to 5% in 2000; admission of the "use of crack cocaine in the previous year" dropped from 6% in 1999 to 5% in 2000. Marijuana use dropped 15% since 1996 among 8<sup>th</sup> graders and dropped 10% since 1997 among 10<sup>th</sup> graders (ONDCP, 2001).

Favorable attitudes toward drugs have slipped as well. In 1999, more American students reported that they "believed marijuana use had negative consequences" than students in 1997. Exposure to marijuana is also declining. In 1997, 59% of students surveyed said they had "seen marijuana around them." This figure dropped to 47% in 2000 (ONDCP, 2001).

## **Summary**

The annual aggregate crime rate is a function of participation (making the decision to become involved in crime) and frequency of offending among active offenders. Our analysis of criminal careers in Georgia indicates that a drop in participation is largely responsible for the observed drop in crime rates over the past six years. Fewer new offenders are embarking on a career in crime (the proportion of offenders that are "first-timers" has been falling steadily for the past 20 years).

Many argue the drop in crime could be attributable to the frequency in which active offenders commit crime or shifts to less

*Georgia's drop in crime and arrests is largely due to fewer 1st-time offenders entering the system, not our "get tough" responses to crime.*



serious crimes among active criminals. This interpretation may seem more plausible, considering the 10-year effort nationally to establish truth-in-sentencing – increasing sentence lengths, time served in prison, and abolishing and/or limiting discretionary parole. If this were the case, then one would expect to see a significant decline in the rate and proportion of offenders who are repeat offenders. However, the evidence weakens the merit of this argument.

While some combination of participation and frequency is likely the cause for Georgia's drop in crime, this analysis elevates the importance of *the decision to participate in crime* into a policy debate that has largely ignored its significance.

### Policy Question #2: Do “Offense-Based” Criminal Justice System Decisions Make Sense?

A wide variety of decisions made about offenders as they move through the criminal justice system are based on (or heavily influenced by) “offense” – the most serious crime for which an offender is convicted. These decisions include sentence enhancements, transfer from juvenile to adult court, parole release from prison, and probation and parole supervision level assignments. A criminal career approach to research and complete offender-based arrest history information can help us to investigate the soundness of such policies.

### Do Offenders Specialize In Certain Crimes?

Do offenders tend to specialize in one area of crime (such as violent offenses) or are they diverse, committing a variety of crimes (violent, property, and drugs)? Realistically, specialization is relative. No one suggests that offenders repeat the same crime

throughout their entire criminal career. Specialization is a term used to describe a *tendency* to repeat crime types over time. If offenders specialize, it would make sense to label them according to their crime of choice (a violent offender), and treat them accordingly.

Since the early 1970s, criminologists have relied on a number of different techniques for measuring offense specialization (Hindelang, 1971; Wolfgang et al., 1972; Farrington, 1986; Farrington et al., 1988; Blumstein et al., 1988). We looked for specialization among successive arrests in criminal careers by producing a transitional probability matrix, which allows us to see the probability of repeating the same offense type among successive arrests.

Tables 3-8 below present transition matrices, starting with the probability of repeating the same offense type from first to second arrest (Table 3), second to third arrest (Table 4), and so on until the seventh arrest.

**Table 3**

**Transition Probabilities From Arrest 1  
To Arrest 2 By Crime Type**

Arrest 1	N	Arrest 2				
		Violent	Property	Drugs	Sex	Other
Violent	142,355	<b>.337</b>	.195	.086	.023	.359
Property	309,300	.111	<b>.501</b>	.084	.020	.284
Drugs	114,476	.107	.177	<b>.325</b>	.023	.369
Sex	34,284	.116	.172	.096	<b>.224</b>	.392
Other	403,201	.113	.144	.079	.021	<b>.643</b>
Total	1,003,616					

**Table 4**

**Transition Probabilities From Arrest 2  
To Arrest 3 By Crime Type**

Arrest 2	N	Arrest 3				
		Violent	Property	Drugs	Sex	Other
Violent	93,256	<b>.308</b>	.189	.094	.024	.386
Property	185,517	.112	<b>.488</b>	.085	.018	.297
Drugs	75,056	.111	.171	<b>.306</b>	.020	.392
Sex	17,455	.123	.171	.104	<b>.182</b>	.421
Other	272,332	.122	.150	.091	.019	<b>.618</b>
Total	643,616					

**Table 5**  
**Transition Probabilities From Arrest 3**  
**To Arrest 4 By Crime Type**

Arrest 3	N	Arrest 4				
		Violent	Property	Drugs	Sex	Other
Violent	67,281	<b>.330</b>	.178	.092	.019	.381
Property	129,111	.104	<b>.509</b>	.080	.015	.292
Drugs	55,011	.110	.160	<b>.334</b>	.016	.381
Sex	10,937	.136	.162	.094	<b>.219</b>	.390
Other	201,363	.122	.146	.091	.016	<b>.625</b>
Total	463,703					

**Table 6**  
**Transition Probabilities From Arrest 4**  
**To Arrest 5 By Crime Type**

Arrest 4	N	Arrest 5				
		Violent	Property	Drugs	Sex	Other
Violent	50,663	<b>.301</b>	.181	.099	.020	.399
Property	95,050	.108	<b>.491</b>	.080	.014	.306
Drugs	41,498	.115	.160	<b>.309</b>	.015	.402
Sex	7,171	.140	.175	.099	<b>.174</b>	.411
Other	151,922	.131	.156	.099	.016	<b>.598</b>
Total	346,304					

**Table 7**  
**Transition Probabilities From Arrest 5**  
**To Arrest 6 By Crime Type**

Arrest 5	N	Arrest 6				
		Violent	Property	Drugs	Sex	Other
Violent	39,512	<b>.328</b>	.172	.092	.017	.392
Property	73,676	.101	<b>.511</b>	.076	.012	.299
Drugs	32,449	.115	.153	<b>.330</b>	.013	.390
Sex	5,119	.144	.160	.092	<b>.216</b>	.388
Other	118,609	.125	.155	.097	.014	<b>.610</b>
Total	269,365					

**Table 8**  
**Transition Probabilities From Arrest 6**  
**To Arrest 7 By Crime Type**

Arrest 6	N	Arrest 7				
		Violent	Property	Drugs	Sex	Other
Violent	31,210	<b>.302</b>	.177	.094	.017	.412
Property	58,498	.103	<b>.497</b>	.079	.012	.308
Drugs	25,410	.111	.162	<b>.309</b>	.011	.406
Sex	3,662	.153	.188	.092	<b>.178</b>	.388
Other	93,741	.129	.163	.100	.014	<b>.595</b>
Total	212,521					

Table 3 on the previous page shows that among the 142,000 offenders arrested for a violent offense at their first arrest, one-third (.337) also committed a violent offense at their second arrest. One-half (.501) of the 309,000 offenders arrested for a property offense at their first arrest committed a property offense at their second arrest. Since the “other” crime category encompasses such a wide array of offenses (the largest being traffic/DUI), specialization here is somewhat meaningless.

Tables 3-8 show some tendency among Georgia offenders to repeat the same offense type – especially among property offenders. However, it would appear that between one-half and two-thirds of a typical career is devoted to crimes outside of one’s specialty. “Property offenders” also get arrested for a sizable volume of violent, drug and other crimes. A violent offender (labeled by his first arrest) still has a 2 out of 3 chance of being arrested for something other than a violent crime at his second arrest.

The consistency in this specialization pattern over career length can be seen in Table 9 on the next page, which shows only the diagonals of the matrices (crime repetition) for up to 20 arrests. The likelihood of repeating the same offense is the same regardless of where an offender is in his 20-arrest career. This indicates that there is no increasing trend toward specializing in one crime type as an offender gets further into his criminal career.

**Table 9**  
**Diagonal Elements of the Matrix of Transitions Between Arrest 1 and Arrest 20**

	Previous Arrest					
	N	Violent	Property	Drugs	Sex	Other
Arrest 2	1,003,616	.337	.501	.325	.224	.643
Arrest 3	643,616	.308	.488	.306	.182	.618
Arrest 4	463,703	.330	.509	.334	.219	.625
Arrest 5	346,304	.301	.491	.309	.174	.598
Arrest 6	269,365	.328	.511	.330	.216	.610
Arrest 7	212,521	.302	.497	.309	.178	.595
Arrest 8	170,844	.329	.515	.330	.212	.605
Arrest 9	138,684	.297	.500	.305	.162	.588
Arrest 10	113,413	.325	.530	.332	.212	.601
Arrest 11	93,163	.297	.510	.299	.172	.579
Arrest 12	77,232	.330	.536	.326	.211	.602
Arrest 13	64,329	.291	.512	.297	.176	.573
Arrest 14	53,383	.333	.541	.336	.228	.596
Arrest 15	44,664	.294	.518	.288	.154	.573
Arrest 16	37,294	.329	.551	.321	.207	.593
Arrest 17	31,476	.280	.523	.280	.192	.568
Arrest 18	26,431	.328	.553	.340	.218	.594
Arrest 19	22,284	.286	.539	.300	.173	.569
Arrest 20	18,698	.345	.561	.341	.246	.590
Total	1,003,616					

## Unique Patterns With Sex Crimes

It is interesting to note crime-type switching to/from sex offenses. If you look at the “sex” columns across all transition tables you will see that there is a very low probability of a “non-sex” offender being arrested for a sex crime at his next arrest (about a 2% chance).

It would appear that those we label as violent, property or drug offenders dabble in many types of crimes, but rarely in sex crimes. But for a sex offender (someone arrested at least once for a sex crime), there is almost a 1 in 4 chance (22% probability) of being arrested for a sex crime at the next arrest. Sex offenders still dabble in non-sex crimes, while non-sex offenders dabble in *all but sex crimes*.

This finding would appear to contradict Blumstein and colleagues (1988), who concluded that “rapists” were among the

least likely offenders to specialize. However, researchers may be missing the point by separating sex offenders by crime type (rapists vs. child molesters).

Recent sex offender research funded by the National Institute of Justice concludes that sex offenders admit, *only under polygraph*, to committing a wide array of sex crimes (“rapists” also commit child molestation, incest, bestiality). Therefore, a traditional analysis that separates sex offenders by sex crime type will be misleading (English et al., 2000). In this first focus on Georgia sex offenders as a group, regardless of specific sex crime, evidence of specialization indeed exists. This issue will be revisited later in *Policy Question #3*.

## Specialization Measures Can Summarize A Career

Since the offenders in our study are at different points in their criminal careers, it would be helpful to know if our conclusions about specialization would differ if we viewed our offenders at different points in their career. Recently, Mazerolle and colleagues (2000) created a “diversity index” to examine specialization among delinquent careers. This measure taps the probability that any two arrests drawn at random from an offender’s total career belong to different offense types. That is, if an arrestee has a coefficient of zero, then there is a 0% chance that any two-crime groups randomly selected from all arrests will fall into different crime types – high specialization. On the other hand, if an arrestee has a coefficient of 1, then there is a 100% chance that two crime types drawn randomly from this person’s entire career will fall into different crime type categories.

Our coefficient of .18, when calculated for the 2.1 million arrestees, confirms that some specialization exists among Georgia offenders. However, interpretation of such measures is difficult with such a large group of

diverse offenders. If arrestees are broken into gender and age groups, we find that female offenders in Georgia are more likely to specialize than males, which is reasonable given female arrest trends (primarily property crime). There is also a distinct pattern among age groups, with the youngest offenders (up to age 20) showing the least specialization and oldest offenders (age 35 and older) showing the most specialization.

### **Do Criminal Careers Escalate? (In Offense Severity Over Time)**

While we consider drug offenses to be a single crime type, there is a wide variety of drug crimes, ranging from possession of a small amount of marijuana to trafficking kilos of cocaine. As an offender moves through a criminal career and consistently participates in the same variety of crimes, it would also be helpful to know if that offender's crimes become more serious. In other words, does possessing marijuana ultimately lead to trafficking cocaine?

While Wolfgang et al. (1972) reported that offense severity did not increase over time among juveniles, Blumstein et al. (1988) found evidence of escalation among adult arrestees. To examine escalation, we relied upon our measure of offense seriousness (see *Creation of the Offender-Based Research File* in Chapter 3). Similar to the diversity index for specialization, we computed our own "escalation coefficient"<sup>1</sup> to summarize offense seriousness patterns across careers.

It appears that Georgia criminal careers do *not* escalate in seriousness over time. This conclusion remains stable for males and females, and across age groups.

Our inability to find escalation in criminal careers may simply be an artifact of examining adults. Many Georgia adult offenders

were graduates of our juvenile justice system. A true examination of a criminal career would then include juvenile arrests (which are not available in the automated arrest records due to legal restrictions). If the typical adult offender started his criminal career as a juvenile, he may have committed less serious crimes as a juvenile. Until juvenile and adult arrest information is shared, true career escalation theories cannot be tested.

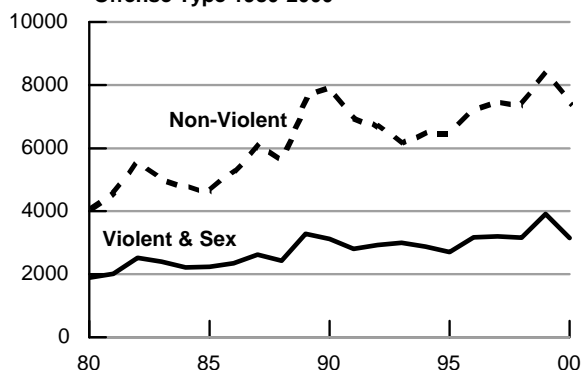
### **Can We Identify The "Non-Violent" Offender?**

Following the popular notion (substantiated by Georgia data) that offenders tend to specialize in certain types of crimes, criminal justice professionals and policy makers alike label the "non-violent offender" as the best candidate for alternatives to incarceration. Prison alternatives such as diversion programs, transition centers and half-way houses cost significantly less money to build and maintain, reducing the ever-increasing strain of correctional facilities on the state's budget.

Historically, violent and sex offenders have accounted for roughly one-third of the new commitments to prison (See Figure 13 on the next page). The Department of Corrections defines a "non-violent offender" as someone convicted of an offense other than violent or sex, who has no prior *convictions* for violent or sex offenses. They are typically property and drug offenders. Using this definition, 56% of all new offenders entering prison by court commitment since January 2000 can be defined as a non-violent offender (roughly 6,000 inmates).

Figure 13

Georgia New Commitments To Prison By  
Offense Type 1980-2000



Identifying non-violent offenders for alternative punishments could have a tremendous impact on the prison system. The question of interest is how many of the non-violent offenders specialize in a non-violent criminal career? We answer this question by merging the DOC inmate database with arrest records for two cohorts that meet the DOC non-violent offender definition – offenders entering prison during 2000 (as new commitments from court) and current Georgia inmates.

*1 in 3 system-labeled “non-violent” offenders has a violent arrest history.*

Both of the non-violent inmate cohorts have substantial criminal careers. The typical non-violent offender entering prison has been arrested more than 8 times and has been in prison before. While their criminal careers are primarily characterized by property and drug offenses, *one in three has a violent arrest history*. Since arrest history is not available to correctional decision makers, these offenders remain classified as “non-violent.”

Table 10 profiles the non-violent prisoner cohorts. Among the “non-violent” prisoners that have a violent *arrest* history, the typical offender has 12 prior arrests, including 2 prior violent arrests. Given the large body of research confirming that prior criminal behavior is the best predictor of future risk, the arrest data indicates that one-third of our “non-violent” offenders may be questionable candidates for community-based alternative programs.

Table 10

“Non-Violent” Prisoners (year 2000)

	New Commitments To Prison	Inmates
# Prisoners	5,884	7,990
# Prisoners with no violent arrests	3,954 (67%)	5,221 (65%)
# Prisoners with violent arrests	1,930 (33%)	2,769 (35%)
Prisoners with violent arrests:		
Average # of arrests	12	12
Average # of violent arrests	2	2
Average # sex arrests	0	0

Note: Georgia Department of Corrections defines “Non-Violent Prisoner” as (1) No current conviction for violent or sex crime, and (2) No prior conviction for violent or sex crimes.

## Summary

Sentence enhancements, parole release from prison and community supervision level assignments (probation and parole) are examples of criminal justice decisions influence heavily by offense – the offender’s current and prior crime at conviction. These offender classifications are often used in discussions of the need for alternatives to incarceration, such as diversion and detention centers and intensive probation supervision.

As the findings above suggest, these “short-hand” system labels provide only a glimpse into an offender’s total criminal career. Such decision making has the tendency to freeze the offender in time without making a longitudinal assessment of their entire criminal career, including arrests and convictions, specialization, frequency, age of onset, time between arrests, and other career dimensions. An offender’s *criminal career* can provide a more complete picture of his past and provide a better predictor of his future.

### Policy Question #3: Are Sex Offenders Held Accountable?

*Sentencing and parole practices provide a limited perspective on sex offender accountability.*

One of the most important functions of the criminal justice system is punishment – holding offenders accountable for their crimes. In the past decade, Georgians have seen a significant shift in punishment philosophies. Especially notable was the Georgia Sentence Reform Act of 1994, referred to as the “2-strikes law” (O.C.G.A. § 17-10-6.1). This Act requires that offenders convicted for one of seven serious violent felonies, known as the “seven-deadly sins,” serve 100% of their court imposed sentence in prison on the first conviction (1<sup>st</sup> strike), and life in prison without eligibility for parole for a second conviction (2<sup>nd</sup> strike). This selective incapacitation policy is designed to remove the *violent few* from society and end their criminal career. The seven-deadly sins include rape, aggravated sodomy, aggravated sexual battery and aggravated child molestation.

The same four sex crimes are included among the seven violent felonies addressed in the 1994 Georgia School Safety and Juvenile Justice Reform Act (O.C.G.A. § 15-11-5(b)(2)(A)), which granted the adult felony court exclusive jurisdiction in cases involving a child 13 to 17 years of age who is charged with one of the seven felonies. Similar to the 2-strikes law, this legislation was intended to increase the accountability of offenders charged and convicted of serious felonies, including sexual assaults.

In addition to legislation, the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles imposed a “90% time served” policy in 1998 for offenders convicted and sentenced to prison for any of 20 violent and sex crimes. This formalized a priority of the Board to increase time served for inmates convicted of violent and sex crimes.

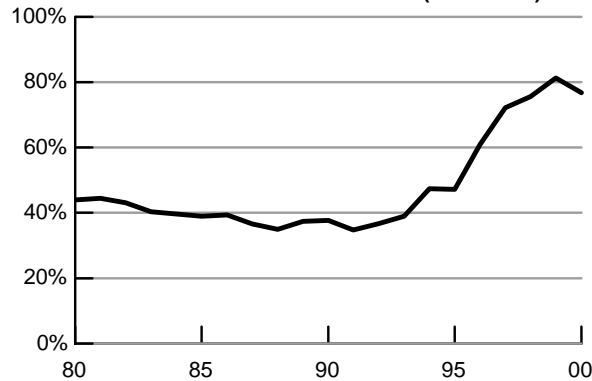
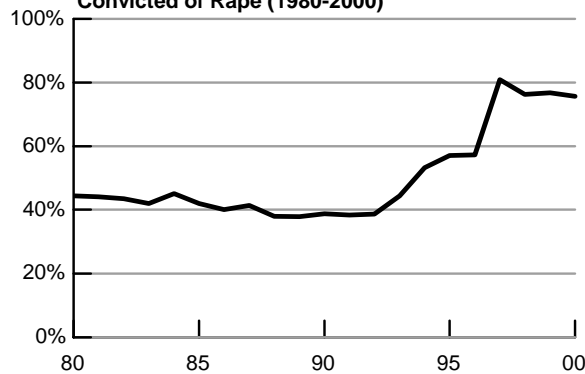
Such “get tough” responses to crime have resulted in typical national benchmarks for measuring offender accountability and system performance – prison sentence length and percentage of sentenced served in prison (time served). However, despite Georgia’s punitive legislative and parole efforts to punish sex offenders, sentencing and parole practices provide only a limited perspective on sex offender accountability.

The current analysis expands upon the investigation of sex offender accountability in Georgia by incorporating arrest and conviction data (criminal history records). While incarceration of convicted offenders is an essential element of punishment, this analysis allows us to move closer to the “front-end” of the criminal justice system and ask how often persons arrested for a sex crime (misdemeanor or felony) are convicted for their crime.

### Previous Measures of Sex Offender Accountability

The previous SAC project looked at historical sentencing and time served practices for sex offenders in Georgia (ARS, 2000). The report demonstrates Georgia’s tough response to sex offenders at the “back-end” of the criminal justice system – the point of sentencing and parole release.

Figures 14 to 16 on the next page show the average time served in prison for offenders released from prison since 1980 for all sex offenses, rape, and child molestation. The average time served in prison among sex offenders has increased significantly since 1990, with rapists now serving over 80% of their sentence in prison and child molesters serving almost 90% of their sentence in prison.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 14****Percent of Time Served in Prison by Those Convicted of all Sexual Offenses (1980-2000)****Figure 15****Percent of Time Served in Prison by Those Convicted of Rape (1980-2000)****Figure 16****Percent of Time Served in Prison by Those Convicted of Child Molestation 1980-2000**

### *Research Limitations Are Dictated by Data*

While our previous study marked an important effort in Georgia to examine the system's response to sex crimes (and

resulted in the Georgia Statistical Analysis Center receiving a national publication award from the Justice Research and Statistics Association), the data limitations required a very narrow definition of offender accountability – sentencing and time served. It represents the historical neglect (nation-wide) of efforts to measure the impact of “front-end” strategies to hold sex offenders accountable. These include the efforts of law enforcement, prosecutors, victim advocates, and victim service providers. Examination of these efforts requires individual-level data on offenders as they move through the criminal justice system (criminal career research).

### **Combating Violence Against Women**

It is critical that system effectiveness measures include an examination of *all* aspects of the criminal justice system, especially since current national efforts to combat violence against women focus heavily on front-end operations. For example, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (Pub. L. 103-322, 108 Stat. 1796) authorizes formula grants to fund projects in order to enhance the apprehension, prosecution, and adjudication of persons committing violent crimes against women. Title IV, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), of the 1994 Crime Act provides a substantial new commitment of federal resources for police, prosecution, prevention and victim service initiatives in cases involving sexual violence. The principal funding initiative under VAWA is the *STOP (Services, Training, Officers, and Prosecutors) Violence Against Women* formula grant program, which promotes a coordinated, multi-disciplinary approach to improving the criminal justice system's response to violence against women.

CJCC is designated by the Governor as the state agency to administer the *STOP Vio-*

*lence Against Women* Grant Program for Georgia. This task includes development of a statewide plan for implementation of the grants. VAWA lists seven broad purposes for which states may use funding, focusing primarily on law enforcement and prosecutorial responses to violent crimes against women, such as sexual assault and domestic violence.

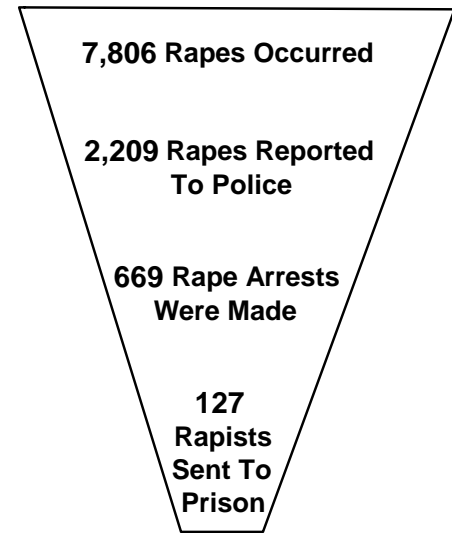
### Measuring Our Effectiveness At Combating Violence Against Women

Measuring the effectiveness of Georgia's efforts to combat violence against women and hold sex offenders accountable for their crimes is impossible by looking only at sentencing. Accountability is a much larger concept, beginning well before the offender and the victim encounter the criminal justice system. In fact, it begins at the time the crime is committed.

An example of this concept is illustrated in Figure 17. The criminal justice system's processing of rape cases is often described as a "funnel-effect," where crimes and offenders drop out of the system along progressive steps of official case processing. National survey estimates of crime reporting behavior among U.S. citizens indicate that roughly 28% of victims of rape will report their victimization to the police (BJS, 2001). Given the 2,209 rapes reported to police in Georgia in 1999 (the most recent year complete data is available), we estimate that roughly 7,806 rapes occurred. A total of 669 arrests were made in 1999 for rape, and 127 rapists were admitted to a Georgia prison. We can summarize this funnel-effect: if all rapes were committed by unique offenders, roughly one in 61 rapists was imprisoned (1.6%).

**Figure 17**

**Funnel Effect of Georgia Criminal Justice System Processing of Rape (1999)**



### Measuring Accountability As Conviction

The Georgia CHR data allow us to measure offender accountability by examining the proportion of arrested offenders that are convicted. Table 11 on the next page shows the proportion of arrestees convicted for their most serious arresting offense, including sex and non-sex crimes for comparison.

Based on the selected offenses shown in Table 11 on the next page, it appears that rape has a very low conviction rate in comparison to other serious crimes. A total of 39% of rape arrests result in some conviction; only 1 out of 5 results in a *rape* conviction. Of all rape arrests, 61% result in no conviction. Similarly, only 45% of the offenders arrested for child molestation are convicted for this crime; 14% are convicted for a less serious offense. Unlike rape, only 41% of child molestation cases result in no conviction.



**Table 11**  
**Georgia Conviction Rates (1999)**

Arresting Offense	Not Convicted %	Convicted Of Other Offense %	Convicted Of Arresting Offense %
Murder	37	30	33
Aggravated Assault	79	1	20
Armed Robbery	46	19	35
Cruelty to Children	70	1	29
Rape	61	20	19
Child Molestation	41	14	45
Theft by Taking	48	11	41
Burglary	31	14	55
Cocaine Poss/Sell/Manuf	59	2	39
Marijuana Poss/Sell/Manuf	79	2	19
DUI	15	5	80

*85% of DUI arrests  
and 39% of rape  
arrests result  
in conviction.*

### What Explains Low Conviction Rates?

From the moment a sex crime occurs a series of factors can impact whether the offender is ever held accountable for the crime. These include, for example:

- Failure of the victim to report the crime to law enforcement
- Failure of witnesses to come forward
- Failure to apprehend the defendant
- Failure to collect and process physical evidence
- Failure of the victim to identify the offender in line-up
- Evidence of a false allegation surfaces
- Victim recants allegations
- Victim refuses to cooperate in investigation
- Parents refuse to bring a child to court (child molestation cases)
- Case fails to meet evidentiary standards
- Jury finds the defendant not guilty

Therefore, the statistics above do not necessarily reflect a lack of commitment on the part of the system to prosecute, convict, and punish offenders. Quite the contrary, many factors enter into a decision to nolle prosequere, charge bargain, drop and/or consolidate charges, or exchange witness statement for immunity from prosecution. Given the complex factors involved in sex crimes, it is predictable that other crimes are likely to show higher conviction rates, particularly in offenses in which the arresting officer is the only required witness (such as DUI).

Fortunately, Georgia's campaign to combat violence against women targets many of these issues for improvements. Our strategies include initiatives such as law enforcement and prosecutor training, special sex crime and domestic violence police units, development of sex crime policies and protocols, and linking police, prosecutors and courts for the purpose of identifying and tracking offenders. It will be critically important to measure the impact of such initiatives on conviction rates over time.

## Are “Chronic” Offenders Held to a Higher Standard?

As described above, Georgia has responded to victims of crime, their advocates and the public’s desire for increased accountability for the chronic (career) criminal with “get tough” legislation.

To examine whether chronic offenders are held to even higher standards of accountability than less active offenders, we examined the criminal justice system’s processing of chronic sex offenders, defined as offenders with 3 or more sex crime arrests. Of the 2.1 million people arrested in Georgia during the past 20 years, 3,354 can be defined as a chronic sex offender.

Arrest activity among chronic sex offenders ranges from 3 to 83 arrests, with 12 arrests for the average chronic offender (which includes 4 sex crime arrests). In addition to their sex crimes, members of this cohort have extensive criminal careers. They average 1 violent, 1 drug and 2 property arrests; they average 2 felony convictions and one incarceration.

Table 12 below presents conviction information for the chronic sex offenders broken down by arresting offense. The most common sex crime arrests were (in order by volume) child molestation, aggravated sodomy, solicitation for sodomy and rape. It appears that conviction rates increase for some chronic offenders (rape, child molestation). Of all rapists, 39% are convicted (19% are convicted of rape). In comparison, 60% of all chronic sex offenders arrested for rape are convicted (35% are convicted of rape, 25% are convicted of a less serious offense).

**Table 12**

**Georgia Conviction Rates for Chronic Sex Offenders (1999)**

Arresting Offense	Not Convicted %	Convicted Of Other Offense %	Convicted Of Arresting Offense %
Rape	40	25	35
Statutory Rape	47	18	25
Aggravated Sexual Battery	50	30	20
Sexual Battery	35	2	63
Sodomy Solicitation	29	27	44
Sodomy/Aggravated Sodomy	23	48	29
Sodomy Solicitation/Under 17 YOA	20	46	34
Child Molestation	24	12	64
Aggravated Child Molestation	37	44	19
Sexual Exploitation of Children	50	0	50
Enticing a Child for Indecent Purposes	29	26	45
Fornication	50	50	0
Peeping Tom	25	8	67
Incest	38	19	43
Public Indeceny	21	9	70
Sexual Assault Against a Person in Custody	0	67	33
Failure to Register as a Sex Offender	50	8	42

## Summary

Over the past ten years, considerable attention has been given to sentence length and time served practices as the benchmark for assessing offender accountability and criminal justice system performance. However, as the conviction data suggest, sentencing and time served represent only a piece of the picture in ensuring that sex offenders are held accountable.

Based on the dismal conviction rates among sex offenders, even chronic sex offenders, it would appear timely for policy makers to devote more attention to enhancing sex offender accountability through front-end criminal justice operations – crime reporting, victim and witness participation, and law enforcement and prosecution resources to combat crimes of violence against women.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The escalation coefficient was calculated by counting seriousness changes across successive arrests. If arrest <sub>1</sub> is more serious than arrest <sub>2</sub>, 1 point is added. If arrest <sub>1</sub> is less serious than arrest <sub>2</sub>, 1 point is deducted. If 2 successive arrests have the same seriousness score, no change. The total changes across all arrests is summed and divided by the total number of arrests; +1 would then indicate escalation, and 0 would indicate random fluctuation.

<sup>2</sup> Since the statistics include offenders who were convicted prior to enactment of the 2-strikes law and the Parole Board's 90% time served policy, we expect that time served will increase over the upcoming years as more sex offenders are convicted and sentenced under the new tougher laws and policies.

## Chapter 5. Discussion

Historically, our knowledge of criminals has depended largely upon snapshots of aggregate UCR statistics or agency data on sentenced offenders. Policy researchers seldom have access to longitudinal data to assist them in crafting data-driven crime prevention and control strategies.

In many states, the criminal history record (CHR) repository offers an untapped source of longitudinal arrest and disposition data. Unfortunately, these data systems are designed to support the needs of criminal justice agencies requiring real-time access to criminal history records. The data are organized by event, where one offender may be involved in multiple arrest episodes. Researchers engaged in policy and program evaluation research need individual-based data. Therefore, substantial CHR database reorganization is required to create person-based arrest histories that document each offender's criminal career. The effort is worthwhile, as powerful research questions can be answered through a criminal career approach to policy research.

The purpose of this report is to demonstrate the use of state-level criminal career research (using official criminal history records) to inform and evaluate crime control strategies. The data presented were supplied by the Georgia Crime Information Center of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, the Georgia Department of Corrections and the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles. Automated criminal history records (arrests and convictions) were analyzed for every person arrested in the state of Georgia for the past twenty years. This study examined 6 million arrest episodes and the criminal careers of 2 million offenders.

As a conceptual framework, we relied on the *criminal career* concept to demonstrate the power of combining criminal history records

and correctional databases to inform public policy. Therefore, the research examines entire criminal careers (based on official arrest records). We analyze participation in crime, frequency of offending among active criminals, specialization and escalation in offending over time, and the system's response to crime (charging and dispositional practices).

Although the research questions that developed during the course of this study were unlimited, we narrowed our analytical focus to answer three selected policy questions. We are confident that our efforts to answer these questions demonstrate the value of criminal history data and a criminal career approach to policy research. The three research questions include:

1. *Why is Crime Down in Georgia?*
2. *Do "Offense-Based" Criminal Justice Decisions Make Sense?*
3. *Are Sex Offenders Held Accountable?*

### Policy Question #1: Why Is Crime Down In Georgia?

This section examines possible explanations for Georgia's six-year drop in crime. The decline has sparked considerable debate and rhetoric among legislators, criminal justice professionals, and academics, each citing a different explanation. At one end of the policy continuum, observers credit the decline in crime to "get tough" sentencing and incarceration policies. At the other end, credit is given to a combination of social, demographic, and economic changes (such as the improved economy).

Explaining crime trends is inextricably linked to career criminal concepts – namely *participation* and *frequency*. The aggregate crime rate is a function of the proportion of people

*CHR repositories offer rich, untapped data sources for examining criminal careers and answering powerful research questions.*

participating in crime and the frequency in which active offenders engage in criminal activity. Georgia's annual crime rate of 5,000 crimes per 100,000 residents may be the result of 5,000 people committing one crime each, or 500 people committing ten crimes each. Why is the distinction important? Because the implications for crime control strategies are very different.

First, Georgia may be experiencing a reduction in the proportion of "new" youths and adults who decide to participate or begin a career in crime. Scientists argue that the decision to participate in crime is impacted by social, economic, and political policies. Thus, intervention strategies should focus on preventing "high risk" individuals from choosing crime – by improving early school performance, supporting families and providing economic alternatives to crime.

Likewise, Georgia's policing, prosecutorial, and sentencing policies may have had a pronounced impact on the frequency in which active offenders commit crime. Frequency is the only dimension of criminal behavior that can be influenced by the criminal justice system. Thus, intervention strategies should focus on curbing, disrupting, or terminating careers through treatment or incarceration.

*Georgia's drop in crime is largely due to fewer 1st-time offenders entering the system, not our "get tough" responses to crime.*

The data demonstrates that the drop in crime and arrest rates since 1990 is largely due to fewer first-time offenders entering the system (those with no prior adult arrests). This finding suggests that increases in sentence lengths, time-served, and strict parole policies, factors impacting *frequency*, cannot solely be responsible for the reduction in crime. Our analysis elevates the importance of *the decision to participate in crime* into a policy debate that has largely ignored its significance.

## Policy Question #2: Do "Offense-Based" Criminal Justice System Decisions Make Sense?

A wide variety of decisions made about offenders as they move through the criminal justice system are based on (or are heavily influenced by) "offense" – the most serious crime for which an offender was convicted. These decisions include sentence enhancements, transfer from juvenile to adult court, parole release from prison, and probation and parole supervision level assignments.

If offenders specialize, it would make sense to label them according to their crime of choice (a "violent" offender), and treat them accordingly. Realistically, specialization is relative. No one suggests that offenders repeat the same crime throughout their entire criminal career. The term specialization is used to describe a *tendency* to repeat similar crimes over time.

The data indicate that there is some tendency among Georgia offenders to repeat the same offense across arrest episodes, especially among property offenders. However, it would appear that between one-half and two-thirds of a typical career is devoted to crimes outside of one's specialty. Those we label as violent, property or drug offenders dabble in many types of crimes. Sex offenders are the most unusual; three-fourths of their careers are spent committing non-sex crimes, while non-sex offenders dabble in *all but sex* crimes.

The tendency toward specialization remains consistent over careers. An offender is *not* more likely to specialize as he commits more crimes. Finally, females and older offenders (age 35 and older) are the most likely to specialize in a crime type.

If a criminal has a tendency to participate in the same types of crimes over his career, it would be helpful to know if his crimes

*There is a tendency among Georgia offenders to specialize in crime, but criminal careers do not escalate in seriousness over time.*

become more serious over time (escalation). The data indicates that Georgia criminal careers do *not* escalate in seriousness over time. This conclusion remains stable for males and females, and across age groups. Despite the rhetoric, possessing a small amount of marijuana does not ultimately lead to trafficking kilos of cocaine.

Consistent with the data that shows an offender will tend to specialize in certain types of crimes, criminal justice professionals and policy makers alike adhere to the popular notion of labeling the “non-violent offender” as the best candidate for alternatives to incarceration. According to the Department of Corrections, a non-violent offender is someone convicted of an offense other than violent or sex, who has no prior *convictions* for violent or sex offenses. Using this definition, 56% of all new offenders entering prison by court commitment during 2000 can be defined as a non-violent offender (roughly 6,000 Georgia inmates).

Identifying non-violent offenders for alternative punishments could result in tremendous cost savings to the state, as diversion program, transition center, or half-way house beds cost substantially less than a prison bed. Our final question of interest on this topic is how many of Georgia’s “non-violent offenders” specialize in a non-violent criminal career?

*1 in 3 system-labeled “non-violent offenders” has a violent arrest history.*

The data tell us that the typical DOC-labeled “non-violent offender” entering prison has been arrested more than 8 times and has been in prison before. While their criminal careers are primarily characterized by property and drug offenses, *one in three has a violent arrest history*. Thus, potentially one-third of our “non-violent offenders” may be questionable candidates for community-based alternative programs. Since *arrest* history is not available to correctional decision makers (DOC and CHR data are not linked), these offenders remain classified as “non-violent.”

Our findings suggest “short-hand” system labels (such as *non-violent*) provide only a glimpse into an offender’s total criminal career. Decision making based on such labels has the tendency to freeze the offender in time without making a longitudinal assessment of his entire career. An offender’s *criminal career* can provide a more complete picture of his past and provide a better predictor of his future behavior.

### **Policy Question #3: Are Sex Offenders Held Accountable?**

In recent years, the national momentum toward “get tough” responses to crime has popularized new benchmarks for measuring criminal justice system accountability – sentence length and proportion of sentence served in prison (time served). Georgia is a leader in this movement with punitive legislative and parole efforts to punish sex offenders.

However, we all know that there “*are more persons arrested than charged, more persons charged than finally brought to adjudication, more persons adjudicated than found guilty, and more persons found guilty than subjected to incarceration. As the caseload moves through it, the criminal justice process sifts out cases...*” (LaFave, 1988: 13).

If the criminal justice system is visualized as a funnel, beginning with commission of a crime, most studies examining offender accountability are limited to a review of the narrow range of cases that pour out of the spout at the end of the sequence of events (at sentencing and incarceration).

To fill this void, our final analysis examines the correspondence between charging, arrest and final court disposition for selected sex and non-sex offenses. Findings show that sex offenders are less likely to be

*85% of DUI arrests  
& 39% of rape arrests  
result in conviction.*

convicted than offenders arrested for a non-sex crime. The highest conviction rate is found among DUI offenders, where 85% of arrests result in a conviction. In comparison, 39% of rape arrests result in a conviction.

Once convicted, Georgia rapists serve the majority of their sentence in prison. Yet of the estimated 7,806 rapes that occurred in Georgia in 1999, 2,209 were reported to the police (28%). In 1999, 669 arrests were made for rape and 127 rapists were sent to prison. To summarize this funnel effect: if all rapes were committed by a unique offender, roughly 1 in 61 rapists was imprisoned (1.6%).

To examine whether chronic offenders are held to higher standards of accountability than less active offenders, we examine chronic sex offenders (those with 3 or more prior sex arrests). During the past 20 years, 3,354 arrestees in Georgia can be defined as a chronic sex offender. Members of this cohort have extensive criminal careers, with an average of 12 arrests (including an average of 4 sex crime arrests). Conviction rates among this cohort do indeed increase; 60% of all chronic sex offenders arrested for rape are convicted (35% for rape, 25% for a less serious offense).

*Holding sex offenders  
accountable requires  
attention to "front-end"  
criminal justice  
system operations.*

As the conviction data suggest, sentencing and time-served represent only a piece of the picture in ensuring that sex offenders are held accountable. Based on the dismal conviction rates among sex offenders, even chronic sex offenders, it would appear timely for policy makers to devote more attention to enhancing sex offender accountability through "front-end" criminal justice operations, such as crime reporting, victim and witness participation, and law enforcement and prosecution resources to combat crimes of violence against women.

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate the important role of state-level criminal career research (using official criminal history records) to inform and evaluate crime control strategies. In the past, the use of CHR records is limited to samples of offenders. This study shows that it is possible to convert an entire state's CHR repository into a useful offender-based research database that can be merged with existing corrections and parole agency databases.

Of the hundreds of research questions that emerged during the course of this study, our analytical strategy was to answer three selected policy questions. We are confident that our efforts to answer these questions demonstrate the value of criminal history data and a criminal career approach to policy research.

There is a wide variety of remaining research questions timely to the state of Georgia. These include recidivism patterns (re-arrests) among parolees versus those released from prison without post-release supervision (max-outs), the role of CHR data in sentencing research and sentencing guidelines development, and examination of the variation in charging and dispositional patterns across judicial circuits. Our ultimate goal is to stimulate continued policy relevant research.

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