

## The Criminal Careers of a Prisoner Cohort <sup>1</sup>

*This paper examines the criminal careers of a cohort of offenders born in 1977-1978 who have at some time been incarcerated for a sentenced offence. This study not only analysed these offenders based on career length but also their main offence type, highlighting those offenders who have the most social and economic impact over time on the community and Queensland Corrective Services. For the purposes of this paper, career length was calculated as the difference between age at first custodial admission and current age (if still incarcerated at time of data extraction) or age at last custodial release (if no longer incarcerated).*

*Findings show that offenders who enter custody at age 17 or 18, and to a lesser extent 19 to 21, are at high risk of having lengthy custodial careers with high recidivism. These offenders are likely to commit more serious offences (i.e. violent offences) and are also likely to go on to be considered prolific offenders.*

*Prolific offenders (with four or more custodial admissions and five or more years of aggregated incarceration time), are not only likely to have entered prison at a young age, but are also likely to be of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background. Many have a current Risk of Reoffending (RoR) score that reflects this profile – 70% have a score of 16 or more. Almost all of this group are also violent offenders with 87.8% having a violent offence as their most serious offence at some point during their custodial career. These offenders present with a number of other needs such as drug problems, poor education and self harm behaviour that require attention.*

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## **Literature Review**

According to Haapanen, Britton and Croisdale (2007), persistent offending is primarily a measure of resistance to formal social control. In the case of this study, incarceration is considered a form of formal social control. Whilst persistent offending that results in incarceration may suggest a failure to respond to external controls, it can also suggest a failure to respond to internal controls. Such behaviour may be categorised by the exhibition of impulsivity, recklessness and aggression (Haapanen, Britton & Croisdale, 2007).

Richardson (2001), examined the records of 34 youths, between 12 and 18 years of age, from Central San Joaquin Valley, California, who were serving time in the Youth Authority (juvenile justice system). Many of these youths were known to Child Protective Services for referrals including parents with drug addictions, parental incarceration and incidents of domestic violence. The children had poor academic records in terms of attendance and performance and many were diagnosed with mental health disorders. Consequently, dropping out of school and substance abuse was prevalent for these youth.

In line with Richardson's (2001) work, it can be assumed that those offenders incarcerated in Queensland at 17 years old would likely have a history of anti-social intervention. They would also be known to their local police and social service agencies given that the incarceration of young persons takes consideration of vulnerabilities.

According to Wileman, Gullone and Moss (2007), juvenile offenders are often found to have high levels of anxiety and neuroticism when compared to their non-juvenile counterparts. These factors are thought to play a role in the development of poor social attachments and integration during adulthood, which in turn contribute to the start of their offending behaviour and ongoing offending. Laub and Sampson (2003) found that improvement in these psychosocial risk factors can occur when significant relationships (e.g. marriage) are developed or strong ties to workplace or employment are made. Moreover, such adult ties can act as protective factors to reoffending by demanding compliance to social rules and

acceptance of rule enforcement (Haapanen, Britton & Croisdale, 2007).

## **Methods**

This research aimed to investigate the criminal careers of a cohort of offenders born in 1977 -1978. Findings respond to three research questions:

- 1. What are the custodial careers of this cohort?**
- 2. Does age at first admission impact on custodial career?**
- 3. What factors appear to contribute to prolific offending?**

Data was extracted from Queensland Corrective Services' Integrated Offender Management System (IOMS) on 21 January 2013. The dataset included all offenders who were born in 1977 or 1978 and had been in a Queensland custodial centre at least once. A total of 3139 offenders were identified. The dataset included variables relating to offender demographics and custodial history. Violent offences or offences against the person include robbery with actual violence and armed robbery. A number of variables were recoded for analysis.

For much of the analysis, offenders have been analysed according to their age at first custodial admission by using the following age brackets: 17-18 years, 19-21 years, 22-25 years, 26-30 years and 31-35 years. To be able to study the impact of age at first admission across these groups, much of the analysis examines the first ten years of their custodial career which involves comparisons of only the three young offender age groups: 17-18 years, 19-21 years and 22-25 years. A custodial career can include multiple admissions into prison over time. For the purposes of this analysis, community based supervision was not examined and therefore includes time outside of prison.

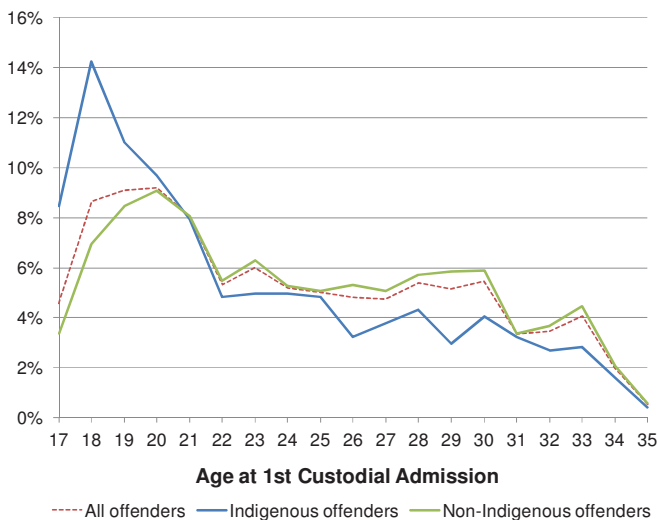
A prolific offender group was also created, comprising offenders who had four or more admissions to custody and a total time in prison of five years or more. A total of 188 (6%) offenders fit this profile.

## Results

### Age at First Admission

Figure 1 provides an overview of all offenders in the cohort and their age at first custodial admission. Specifically, the graph shows that the most likely age (mode) at first admission is 20 years, whilst the average (mean) is 24 years. When age at first custodial admission is analysed by Indigenous status, figures suggest that Indigenous offenders enter prison earlier. Moreover, for Indigenous offenders the most frequent age to enter prison was 18 years, and the average was 23 years. In comparison, the most frequent age for non-Indigenous offenders was 20 years, whilst the average age was 25 years.

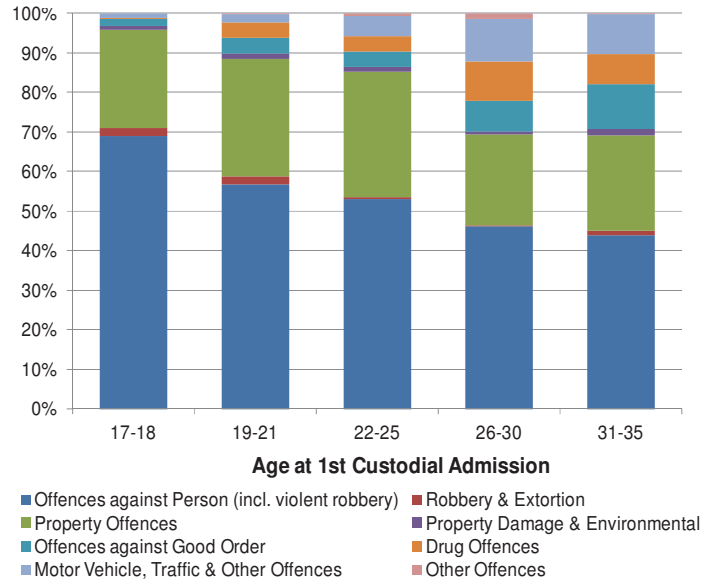
**Figure 1: Age at First Custodial Admission by Indigenous status**



### Custodial Career by Age of Entry

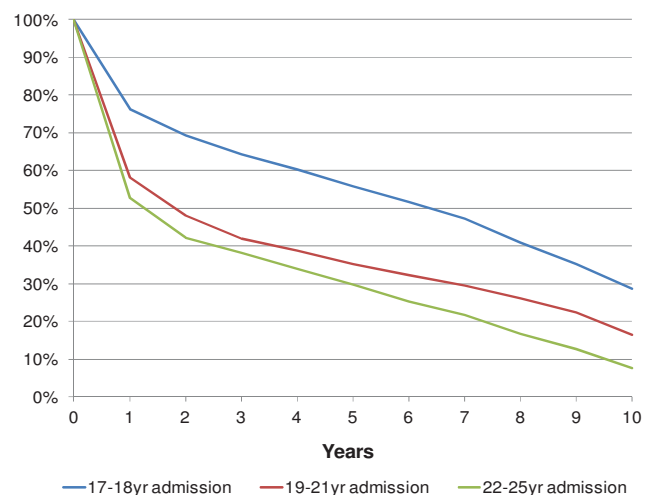
**Most Serious Offence (MSO):** Figure 2 suggests that there is a relationship between age at first admission to prison and most serious offence type ever. Moreover, the graph suggests that approximately 70% of offenders admitted to prison at 17 or 18 years old have a violent MSO as part of their custodial career. As age at first admission increases, the likelihood of being incarcerated for a violent crime decreases - by age 31 to 35 (for first admission), the percentage of offenders with a violent MSO ever was 44%.

**Figure 2: Age at First Custodial Admission by Most Serious Offence Ever**



**Custodial Career:** Offenders whose custodial careers started early were not only more likely to commit more serious offences than those who started later, but were also more likely to be in custody ten years later. Figure 3 shows that of those who first entered prison at age 17 or 18, 29% were in custody ten years later compared to 16% of those who first entered custody at age 19-21, and 8% of those who first entered at age 22-25.

**Figure 3: Age at First Custodial Admission by Custodial Career over Ten Years**



These figures highlight 17-18 year olds as being particularly at risk of long custodial careers. Of the 416 who were first admitted at age 17 or 18 years, 17% desisted at age 17-18 years, 19% desisted at age 19-21, 14% desisted at age 22-25 years, 16% desisted at

age 26-30 years, and 34% or one third were still continuing a custodial career at age 31-35 years. Moreover, of those who first entered custody at age 17 or 18, 70% returned to prison at some stage before the age of 35 years.

*Number of Admissions:* Not surprisingly, within the ten years following first admission, offenders aged 17 or 18 years at first prison entry had the highest recidivism rates. Table 1 shows the number of returns in the first ten years for those offenders whose first admission was at age 17-18, 19-21 or 22-25 years. Of those who entered prison at 17-18 years, 28.6% returned to prison five or more times in the ten years following, compared to 16% of those age 19-21 years and 10.7% of those aged 22-25 years.

**Table 1:** Age at First Custodial Admission by Number of Admissions over Ten Years

Number of admissions	Age at first admission (%)		
	17-18yrs	19-21yrs	22-25yrs
1	29.8	49.8	56.4
2	15.4	18.0	19.9
3	14.4	11.7	8.0
4	11.8	7.5	5.0
5+	28.6	16.0	10.7
Total	100%	100%	100%

*Education:* The offenders' highest level of educational attainment, as at 21 January 2013, was extracted from IOMS. As expected, the earlier the offender started their custodial career, the less likely they were to be educated to Grade 10 or Grade 12 level. As shown in Table 2, by age 35, 43% of those who first entered prison at age 17 or 18 still had not received their junior or Grade 10 certificate. Considering this group were the most likely to enter prison multiple times, short sentences may have prevented them from obtaining further education within prison. Figures also suggest that there is little change in education levels between age 26-30 and age 31-35 years.

**Table 2:** Age at First Custodial Admission by Highest Education Level

Highest Education Level	Age at first admission (%)				
	17-18	19-21	22-25	26-30	31-35
<Grade 10	42.9	32.3	29.2	22.9	24.6
Grade 10/11	48.6	51.2	51.0	50.1	44.6
Grade 12	5.8	14.9	17.5	19.3	20.0
Post sec. study/trade	2.7	1.6	2.3	7.7	10.8
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

*Drug Use in Prison:* Almost one in five (17.8%) offenders who entered prison at 17-18 years had a drug incident whilst in prison in the first ten years of their custodial career. This figure is significantly higher than that of those who entered at 19-21 years (12.5%) or 22-25 years (13.3%).

*Self-harm Episode:* The risk of self harm increases significantly for those that enter prison later in life. Whilst on average 6.6% of young offenders (age 17-25 years) had a self harm episode in their first ten years, 15.5% of those who entered prison at 26-30 years, and 20% of those who entered at 31-35 years had a self harm episode. This is particularly significant considering that those that entered prison after 26 years of age do not have the same comparative ten year time frame as the other three groups, and were also more likely to have only been admitted to prison once in this time. These figures suggest that entering prison for the first time after age 26 is a risk factor for self harming behaviour, likely due to the lack of early institutionalisation experienced by younger cohorts and the possibility that they are leaving established lives and therefore have more at stake in the community.

#### *Prolific Offenders*

Prolific offenders (as defined in this paper) from the 1977-1978 cohort, appear to have a significantly different profile to those who do not fit the 'prolific' category. Figures presented in Table 3 are based on each offender's entire custodial career. Marital status is based on information collected at the offenders' last custodial admission.

## References

**Table 3:** Prolific Offenders compared to non-Prolific Offenders across a Number of Factors

Factor	Offender Group (%)	
	Not prolific	Prolific
Violent MSO ever	50.9	87.8
Drug Incident	9.0	41.0
Self harm episode	10.4	33.5
RoR score $\geq 16$	13.0	69.7
Defacto/married relationship	20.5	39.4
1st admission age 17-18	10.8	52.1
1st admission age 17-21	36.7	85.1
Indigenous	22.4	44.7

These figures suggest that prolific offenders are more likely to be Indigenous, and have a high chance of entering custody by 17 years, with almost all prolific offenders having entered custody by 21 years. The RoR score appears to accurately predict recidivism for these offenders, with 70% of them having a high risk RoR score of 16 or more. This group of offenders also have other risks and needs that require attention – they are significantly more likely than non-prolific offenders to be violent, self harm in prison, and to have a drug incident.

### Conclusion

The findings presented show that those offenders who enter custody at age 17-18 years, and to a lesser extent, 19-21 years, are likely to be violent offenders, with extensive custodial careers in terms of career length and high recidivism. They are also more likely to go on to become prolific offenders with significant needs that should be addressed such as violent offending, poor education, drug use and self harm.

Haapanen, R., Britton, L. & Croisdale, T. (2007). Persistent criminality and career length, *Crime and Delinquency*, 53(1): 133-155.

Laub, J.H. & Sampson, R.J. (2003). *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70*. Harvard University Press: Massachusetts, USA.

Richardson, N. (2001). *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Central San Joaquin Valley Delinquents and the California Youth Authority*. California Youth Authority: Sacramento, USA.

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