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A large-scale empirical investigation of specialization in criminal career

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Abstract:

We use a comprehensive longitudinal dataset on criminal acts over 6 years in a European country to study specialization in criminal careers. We present a method to cluster crime categories by their relative co-occurrence within criminal careers, deriving a natural, data-based taxonomy of criminal specialization. Defining specialists as active criminals who stay within one category of offending behavior, we study their socio-demographic attributes, geographic range, and positions in their collaboration networks relative to their generalist counterparts. Compared to generalists, specialists tend to be older, are more likely to be women, operate within a smaller geographic range, and collaborate in smaller, more tightly-knit local networks. We observe that specialists are more intensely embedded in criminal networks, suggesting a potential source of self-reinforcing dynamics in criminal careers.

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