Criminal Life Courses in Context

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ABSTRACT

The future of the Historical Sample of the Netherlands (HSN) will certainly include the enrichment of the foundational database with additional, new sources of information. In general, the HSN would highly benefit from current mass digitization projects involving citizen science. This essay proposes a pilot in linking 19th- and early 20th-century criminal records to HSN. In spite of the extensive state and parish registration documenting individual and family lives in close systematic detail, life course approaches to historical crime are less common. The large datasets necessary to conduct longitudinal life course research into deviant behaviour will facilitate both the analysis of criminality as an event and the scrutiny of the trajectories of individuals' lives leading up to their involvement in crime.

Keywords: Historical criminology, Life course, Citizen science, Court and prison records

1   INTRODUCTION

In the autumn of 1883, 25-year-old Adriaan van Dommelen, a shoemaker from Sprang-Capelle, served a short prison sentence of three days in the nearby house of detention in Heusden.[1] He and a few of his associates, also shoemakers, were convicted of 'night rumour' (*nachtgerucht*). This petty crime — they probably had a few too many in the local pub and started stirring up trouble in the street on their way back home — turned into a short detention order. Maybe some neighbours had complained about the noise, or perhaps a shop window was smashed? We can only guess as the prison register, in which we find Adriaan in October 1883, only includes the one-word accusation without further specifications. However, his brief stint in prison does provide us with detailed information on his life. His record shows that he was of the Catholic faith, that he was unmarried, and that he spoke *Hollandsch.* The records also disclose the full names of his parents; he was probably still living with them. Although there is little chance that Adriaan's likeness was ever captured on camera, we do know from the prison records that he was 174 centimetres tall, that he wore a beard, had reddish hair and blue eyes, and that his complexion was 'healthy'. Whether Adriaan received primary education remains, in this case, unrecorded, but we do know that he was perfectly able to write his own name. We also find that he behaved well during detention. While this historical source allows us to shed some light on this historical 'troublemaker', it remains unclear whether this was a once in a lifetime misdemeanour or if Adriaan had been — or would become — a habitual offender. Was this his first offence with many to follow, perhaps even of the more serious kind, or did he refrain from committing any further crimes? Recent developments in mass digitisation of Dutch historical criminal court and prison records, and a life course criminology approach, may provide some answers.

2   A LIFECOURSE APPROACH TO CRIME HISTORY

What distinguished the lives of criminals from those who chose to abide by the law? Which circumstances constituted tipping points in subjects' lives? These types of questions have been central to life course criminology, which has developed into a rich field of study during the past few decades. As a 'study of life-course events, transitions and trajectories and their relation to stability and change in crime involvement' (McLaughlin & Muncie, 2013, p. 254), it aims to understand change at both the personal and collective level. Due to the themes it seeks to address, research within this field tends to be longitudinal. The (lack of) available historical source material has also meant that most studies have remained relatively contemporary in scope. Now classic studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s in Cambridge, Rochester, Pittsburgh and Dunedin used data from school and other local civil registers to scrutinise the shaping of 'criminal careers' from the 1950s onwards. The Dutch Criminal Career and Life Course Study followed 5,000 offenders and their family members based on criminal cases adjudicated in the Netherlands in 1977, while the Stockholm Life-Course project follows offenders between the early 1940s and early 1970s. Various works by Bijleveld go back a little further in time, examining the lives of criminal boys after leaving a Dutch reform school in the 1910s (Bijleveld & van Poppel, 2011).

Excursions further back into time are far and few between, but are steadily increasing. The importance and fruitfulness of moving research into life chances and offending histories back into the past have recently been demonstrated by studies by Vikström on Sweden and Godfrey on England. Going back in time as far as the 1840s, their works examine criminal behaviour in relation to factors such as relationship formation, employment, residential stability and support system for various types of offenders based on criminal registers, newspaper reports and census material (Godfrey, Cox, & Farrall, 2007; Vikström, 2011). In spite of the extensive state and parish registration in Europe documenting individual and family lives in close systematic detail, life course approaches to historical crime are less common on the continent. Lacking the large datasets necessary to conduct longitudinal life course research into deviant behaviour, most crime historians predominantly approach criminality as an event, rather than being able to scrutinise the trajectories of individuals' lives leading up to their involvement in crime. Although we should first explore its feasibility, enriching the Historical Sample of the Netherlands could constitute an excellent starting point to significantly further critical historical research into crime by tracing cohorts' situated choices and their shared as well as

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1   Prison register, archive number 52, Prisons in 's-Hertogenbosch, 1815–1940, inventory number 324. Municipality of 's-Hertogenbosch, 1881–1882.

divergent structural contexts. In any case, direct sampling from prison records would ideally include the Dutch Historical Sample as a control group.

Many life course criminologists implicitly engage with the notion that an individual's life chances were highly contingent on the opportunities provided by or risks brought on by social structures. While early works argued that differential access to socioeconomic opportunities was a key driver of delinquency, more recent works have focused on evaluating which (combination of) characteristics of individuals' lives were decisive in engagement with or desistance from criminal offending in the past. Examples of personal characteristics that have been put to the fore are sex, gender, age, employment, marital status or life state, residential stability, and mobility. While we are increasingly aware that the registered involvement of men and women in crime varied significantly over time and space due to highly gendered prosecution policies, younger men are nevertheless considered especially likely to become involved in crime throughout history. Other factors are more particular to historical periods. There is, for example, little evidence for a constant 'marriage effect': while research into the past 75 years indicates a causal relationship between marriage and reduced criminal offending, it does not seem to put a brake on crime in periods before that. The shifting importance of these 'risk factors' over time demonstrates that we cannot assume historical criminal life courses to follow the same logic as contemporary ones, and emphasise the need for a historical context-sensitive inquiry into criminal life courses.

3   CITIZEN SCIENCE

How could this be put into practice? Currently, various digitisation projects initiated by Dutch archives involve the participation of citizen science. Citizen science, or crowd-sourced science, concerns the public participation in scientific research regarding, in most cases, data collection. Particularly for the historical sciences, the Dutch crowd-sourcing initiative *VeleHanden* is of great importance. Through its website, archival institutions upload scans of collections which will be digitised and made available to the general public, by the public. Current projects include, for example, the digitisation of local population registers, notarial deeds, and court verdicts. The aim of platforms like *VeleHanden* is twofold. First and foremost, citizens engage in large-scale data collection projects as volunteers because they, like archives, aim to facilitate individuals' genealogical interest in tracing back their ancestors beyond the commonly used sources of civil records and population registers. The fact that many family trees contain either small-time or habitual criminals makes it all the more relevant to include the abundance of historical records contained within various local and district courts (*Kantongerecht*), correctional courts (*Arrondissementsrechtbank*), courts of assises (*Hof van Assisen*), courts of appeal (*Hooggerechtshof*), military courts, and prisons in these digitisation schemes.

Second, the time-, money- and labour-consuming task of collecting data for research into historical criminology also means that scholars rely on a close collaboration with archival institutions and the aid of citizen science. The engagement and hard work of citizens enables researchers to answer new questions based on these newly-created large datasets and, in the future, linked data. A striking example of mass digitisation of Dutch historical crime records is the indexing of all 19th- and early 20th-century prison registers in the Dutch province of North Brabant by the Brabant Historisch Informatie Centrum from 2014 onwards. The nightly mischief of Adriaan van Dommelen with which this contribution opened is derived from this database, which includes an index of names and the matching scan of the prison registration. The prison records inform us of some of Adriaan's other misdeeds: in 1877 at the age of 18 he was sentenced to eight days in solitary confinement for a group assault; and a month after his detention for night rumour in 1883 Adriaan — now recorded as being married — was again arrested for wounding and molestation, and was convicted of *nachtgerucht* twice more in 1884 and 1885. After a quiet ten years, he was found guilty of the receiving of stolen goods (*heling*) in 1896, and finally, two years later at the age of forty, for theft (*diefstal*). What did his life look like during these days, and when these prison records no longer mentioned him? Did he continue his lifestyle while moving to another jurisdiction, or did he settle down into a quieter life? And how typical or atypical was Adriaan within his birth cohort? These are just a few examples of questions that show the potential impact of the expansion of the Historical Sample of the Netherlands into a new range of sources. If Adriaan happened to be an index person of the Historical Sample of the Netherlands we would certainly gain more insight into his whereabouts and the circumstances leading up to and throughout his life of crime; at the individual, family and societal level.

4   LINKING THE HSN TO CRIME RECORDS: A PILOT

We may draw inspiration from two impressive British projects aiming to disclose the historical lives of non-elite people, in a digitised and searchable form. The London Lives project, which started in 2010, covers a wide range of primary sources about 18th-century London and, at this moment, includes over 240,000 digitised manuscripts from eight archives and fifteen datasets (londonlives.org). It includes mostly institutional records, such as the records from the criminal justice system, as the lives of the plebeian Londoners were often only captured in these sources. Based on the already digitised proceedings from the Old Bailey (the Central Criminal Court of England and Wales), London Lives facilitates research into all sorts of aspects regarding various types of offences, policing and punishment in the city of London. The data of London Lives is also incorporated in the Digital Panopticon website which contains the records of fifty datasets in total, including the lives of about 90,000 convicts sentenced to transportation (Australia), imprisonment or death at the Old Bailey between 1780 and 1913 (digitalpanopticon.org). This database contains photographs as well: recently, the website disclosed additional information about the tattoos of almost 58,000 convicts. The two projects of London Lives and Digital Panopticon show that this integrated approach can be very successful.

The future of the Historical Sample of the Netherlands certainly includes the enrichment of the foundational database with additional, new sources of information. An important step would be to examine the possibilities of linking information from the tax registers to the research subjects, to supplement class and status classifications currently primarily based on occupation alone. Likewise, the Historical Sample of the Netherlands would highly benefit from mass digitization and linking of 19th- and early 20th-century criminal records. Studies based on the Historical Sample of the Netherlands database already show that a large part of the population lived, at least during some part of the life course, in an institutional household. This includes institutions such as orphanages, almshouses and old people's homes, as well as criminal institutions. For example, the Dutch population register covers criminal institutions as independent households in the case of the agricultural pauper colonies (Society of Benevolence) in the province of Drenthe and the great many youth homes scattered all over the Netherlands which functioned as juvenile rehabilitation centres, reform schools or places of long-term confinement. Furthermore, brothels — often lumped together with crime and increasingly criminalised in the Netherlands in the 19th century — are included in regular population registers. Additionally, military barracks and prisons functioned as independent households as well. These institutions often have left trails of historical information in a fairly standardized way: registers, personal files, descriptions, criminal recordings, et cetera. In a way the possibilities are endless because, in the past, the actions of normal people were overwhelmingly framed as criminal behaviour. The poor and destitute, but also psychiatric patients (or 'the ill' in general) and even migrants experienced higher risks of ending up in criminal records as their existence and behaviour simply became criminalised. This makes it all the more relevant to examine crime as part of the contours of individuals' lives in the past. To explore the potency of a larger-scale criminal life course approach in the Netherlands, we would propose a pilot study based on the historical crime records in North Brabant. Fully digitised and indexed as they are, the prison registers would constitute a solid test case for linking with the HSN as well as the other digitised sources available for that region.

Linking the Historical Sample of the Netherlands to criminal records will add to this an in-depth knowledge about the place of crime within a life course — not only for those with full-fledged criminal careers traceable in the criminal records, but also for the many individuals whose criminal endeavours constituted only temporary interludes in their otherwise ordinary lawfully-lived lives.

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