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SELF-REPORTED DELINQUENCY IN PERSISTENT YOUNG OFFENDERS [#]

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Self-reported delinquency was examined with a sample of persistent convicted young offenders. Three different strategies of data analysis were used: (i) the number of different offences committed, (ii) the frequency of committal over the previous 12 months, and (iii) the seriousness of these acts. The offences were classified into types to investigate whether the offenders tended to be specialists in one or two types of crimes, or whether they were more diverse in their law breaking. Analyses revealed that the young people were more "diverse" than "specialist" in their offending.

The issue of the nature and extent of crime committed by young people is of widespread concern to the general public and criminal justice specialists alike. It is long established in criminological research that "official" records do not reveal the true extent of juvenile delinquency, and that not all juvenile offenders come to the attention of the police (Ramachandran, 1994). For example, variations in law enforcement procedures according to individual offender characteristics, socioeconomic status, and geographic region are all potential sources of bias within official records (Erickson, 1972; Hindelang, 1971). It is estimated by the Home Office (1993) that less than five per cent of all offences committed lead to a conviction. Since 1960s the use by researchers of self-report measures to supplement police and court records has greatly increased.

Self-reported measures have the advantage of allowing a more representative picture of the incidence and distribution of delinquent behavior to be obtained. Furthermore, the fact that many measures are anonymously administered means that the offender's natural reluctance to admit more serious offences may be reduced (Connell & Farrington, 1996). However, these potential advantages of self-report measures

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must be balanced against the possibility of inaccuracy in at least three areas: The deliberate falsification of answers; inaccurate recall of past events; and errors relating to the construction and application of the self-report measures itself (Elliott & Ageton, 1980; Farrington, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, Van Kammen, & Schmidt, 1996; Junger-Tas, Terlouw, & Klein, 1994). Nonetheless, when reliability and validity checks have been conducted, the general conclusion is that self-report questionnaires are capable of yielding accurate information (Connell & Farrington, 1997; Hardt & Peterson-Hardt, 1977; Huizinga & Elliott, 1986). Furthermore in the Pittsburg Youth Study, Farrington et al. (1996) found a self-reported delinquency seriousness scale and a combined delinquency seriousness scale (based on information from the young person, their mothers and their teachers) to have significant concurrent and predictive validity in relation to official delinquency.

The issue of anonymity of self-report questionnaires has been debated by various authors (e.g., Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1981; Kulik, Stein, & Sarbin, 1968). A large study carried out by Hindelang et al. (1981) on the measurement of delinquency examined the relative merits of anonymous and non-anonymous administration of self-report measures of delinquency. From their results they concluded that there was no discernable superiority of either condition in terms of reliability, test-retest and internal consistency, correlational validity, or reverse record checks. This conclusion also applied to interviews as opposed to questionnaire administration. However, they did caution that as delinquency (or the potential for it) increases, the ability of respondents to accurately report acts appears to decrease, even when they are co-operative (Hindelang et al., 1981). Although, as they note, this finding is probably not that surprising, as these individuals typically come from that portion of the population least equipped to deal with survey methods in terms of literacy and verbal skills.

Elliott and Ageton (1980) identified three areas that need to be addressed when constructing self-reported delinquency measures. First, item representativeness is important: often-trivial offences are over-represented while more serious offences are under-represented; similarly, some offences, such as theft, are often over-represented. Second, care needs to be taken to avoid item overlap, which can inflate scores. Finally, the response sets and coding for the scale need to be carefully considered. Often normative categories are used — for example "often", "sometimes", "occasionally" — which are open to wide variations in interpretation by respondents; alternatively, scales

can be imprecise or have a ceiling effect — leaving no room for discrimination among those at the higher end of the scale.

Early self-report scales were often constructed for use with non-delinquent populations, and so were skewed towards the trivial offences typical of such populations. Other researchers attempted to produce cumulative, unidimensional Guttman scales (e.g., Dentler & Monroe, 1961; Erickson, 1972; Nye & Short, 1956; Short & Nye, 1957), resulting in measures with very few items. These first measures were also characterized by basic response sets, with respondents simply required to indicate which offences he or she had committed (e.g., Gibson, 1967). However, frequency categories were soon incorporated into self-reported delinquency scales to allow for greater accuracy. Again, most of these scales were aimed more at non-delinquent populations, and frequencies over a certain level would be grouped together producing ceiling effects (e.g., Clark & Wenninger, 1962; Hindelang, 1971). It followed that differentiation among individuals at the upper limit of self-reported offending, as with chronic young offenders, was almost impossible (Cernkovich, Giordano, & Pugh, 1985). In turn, little could then be found out about this particular type of delinquency.

These problems led Elliott and Ageton (1980) to construct a new scale in which respondents are asked to indicate how often in the previous 12 months they have committed various acts. Specifically, respondents select one of the following categories: "never", "once a month", "once every 2-3 weeks", "once a week", "2-3 times a week", "once a day", or "2-3 times a day". Empirical research suggests that unlike previous scales this approach appears to be more sensitive to differences in behaviour at the higher end of the continuum (Cernkovich et al., 1985; Elliott & Ageton, 1980).

One further issue regarding coding of data relates to the seriousness of the criminal act. Although the majority of juvenile delinquency is not serious, a small minority of delinquents do commit serious crimes (Hagell & Newburn, 1994; Lyon, 1996). Hirschi, Hindelang, and Weis (1980) noted that not all self-report delinquency measures, particularly the earlier ones, covered serious delinquent behaviour. Overall scores on self-report delinquency measures are often distorted by high frequency answers on low seriousness items. For example, five instances of playing truant would count for the same as five violent assaults within a total score (Tolan & Lorian, 1988), obscuring differences in the behaviour and amount of harm caused by offenders (Kern & Bates, 1980; Morash, 1986). This led to some authors making a case for the weighting of offences by their

seriousness (Sellin & Wolfgang, 1964). Cernkovich and Giordano (1992) used seriousness ratings from the U. S. National Survey of Crime Severity (Wolfgang, Figlio, Tracy, & Singer, 1985) to weight each item on their scale. Each item's frequency and its seriousness weighting were multiplied, and the sum of all the products divided by the number of offences committed to obtain a total (weighted) delinquency score.

Finally, many studies look at self-reported delinquency by type of crime, dividing delinquent behaviour according to type of act, such as crimes as property, crimes against the person, and status crimes (Cernkovich et al., 1985; Elliott & Ageton, 1980; Elliott & Huizinga, 1983; Hindelang, 1971). Where a good conceptual rationale exists behind such groupings, this strategy can illuminate matters such as whether individuals are "specialists" in certain types of offence. Although it must be remembered that looking at a type of crime can lead to loss and obscuring of information, especially if one particular item swamps the others (Elliott & Huizinga, 1983).

As noted above, only limited research on self-reported offending has been reported looking at the upper limits of delinquent behaviour, that is, with groups of chronic young offenders. One such study by Cernkovich et al. (1985) provides evidence that there exists a distinct group of youths who commit high rates of both minor and major offences as compared to those committing only minor offences (even if this is at a high rate). The present study was designed to fill this gap in the research, using a self-report delinquency measure with persistent young offenders to attempt to reveal something of the true nature of their delinquent behavior. That officially convicted offenders are more persistent and commit more serious offences has been shown in other studies comparing self-reported delinquency scores of officially convicted young offenders and non-offenders (Palmer & Hollin, 1998; 2000). The self-report scale used here was that devised by Elliott and Ageton (1980). Alongside a straightforward count, this scale has the advantage of giving a measure of frequency of offending that is sensitive at the upper end of the scale. In addition, the scale was used to generate a weighed seriousness score, following the method described by Cernkovich and Giordano (1992). These different ways of considering the same information would, it was anticipated, allow a more complete picture to be drawn from the raw self-report data.

METHOD

Sample

The participants were 47 convicted young boys offenders, aged between 13 and 17 years (mean = 15.95, SD = 1.28). Access to the sample was obtained through Buckinghamshire and Coventry Social Services, and contact made at Milton Keynes and Coventry Magistrates' Courts. The participants were known to be offenders prior to questionnaire administration.

Instrument

Self-Reported Delinquency Measure (*SRD*): Self-reported delinquency was measured using the scale developed by Elliott and Ageton (1980). This scale has high reliability (test-retest r = 0.70-0.95), and Huizinga and Elliott (1986) conclude that while it is not error free, it is as good as or better than comparable measures. The items on the SRD are classified into five subscales namely, crimes against the person (assault, rape, and robbery); crimes against property (theft and vandalism); illegal service crimes; public disorder crimes; and status crimes. For this study, one item (having sexual intercourse with a person of the opposite sex other than your wife/husband) was removed from the original scale, as it had no relevance to this sample. The scale could record delinquency first as a total of acts committed, ranging from 0 (low delinquency) to 46 (high delinquency).

Respondents were asked both to indicate which offences they had committed in the past year (the SRD total score), and to give an estimate of how often different offences were committed using the following categories: (i) once a year; (ii) 2-3 times a year; (iii) once a month; (iv) 2-3 times a month; (v) once a week; (vi) 2-3 times a week; (vii) once a day; (viii) 2-3 times a day. Responses to these categories were used to generate an annual estimate of frequency of offending by converting responses to rates per year, then calculating the sum of offences committed in the previous year (SRD frequency score). This estimation of frequency allows a more sensitive measure of offending behaviour than the simple counting of criminal acts. This scale thus has a range from 0 (low delinquency) to 34500 (high delinquency).

A third SRD score was calculated by taking the seriousness of the offences into account. Weightings derived from the National Survey of Crime Severity (Wolfgang et al., 1985) were assigned to each item, ranging from 0.25 for offences such as truancy and cheating on tests to 25.85 for rape. The overall weighed seriousness

score was computed by multiplying each item's seriousness weighting by its frequency, then dividing this product by the number of offences committed. The range for this scale of measurement was 0 (low delinquency) to 3081.20 (high delinquency).

Procedure

Each participant was seen individually as most required some help in completing the questionnaire. All data collection forms were coded to retain anonymity and the participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. The purpose of the study was explained to each young person before the interview, which took place in a private interview room. Interviews lasted for an average of 40 minutes. The respondent's consent was obtained, and their right to terminate the interview at any time pointed out. Due to non-completion of the scale by two participants, 45 satisfactory responses were gathered.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

The means for the three SRD scores are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Scores for Self-Reported Delinquency Measure (*N*=45)

Variable	*Mean (SD)*	*Median*	*Range*
SRD Total	20.22(8.21)	20.00	3-33
SRD Frequency	2428.07(2608.67)	1483.00	23-9885
SRD Weighted	306.78(362.90)	135.48	3.76-1420.33

Note: *Possible Range: SRD total: 0-46; SRD frequency:0-34500; SRD weighted: 0-3081.20*

The basic count of offences committed had a range of 3 to 33 different crimes committed in the previous year, with slightly more responses in the upper half of the distribution. The frequency scores had a much wider range, from 23 acts per year to 9885 acts per year, showing the diversity of levels of delinquency within this sample. The distribution of scores was positively skewed, with the majority of these scores at the lower end of the range. A similar pattern was found

for the weighted scores, where there was a range of scores from 3.76 to 1420.33.

Table 2

Number of respondents Committing the 46 Items and the Mean Frequency of Committal per Year ($N = 45$)

S.No.	Items	*N*	*Mean Freq/year*	*Weighting**
1.	Damaged family property	18	12.04	2.88
2.	Damaged school property.	21	56.18	2.88
3.	Damaged public property.	28	65.56	2.88
4.	Stolen a motor vehicle.	23	91.07	8.05
5.	Stolen goods worth over £50.	36	133.22	3.59
6.	Bought/sold/held stolen goods.	33	119.84	5.00
7.	Thrown objects at people or cars.	18	23.04	1.14
8.	Runaway from home.	17	13.56	0.85
10.	Carried a hidden weapon.	26	82.71	4.64
11.	Stolen goods worth less than £5.	22	45.51	1.73
12.	Attacked someone with intent to harm.	21	13.60	6.17
13.	Prostitution.	0	0.00	2.07
14.	Gang fights.	31	25.16	11.74
15.	Sold marijuana.	17	96.07	8.53
16.	Cheated on school tests.	14	3.60	0.25
17.	Hitchhiked.	5	0.53	0.25
18.	Stolen from family members.	14	2.13	0.95
19.	Hit a teacher at school.	27	46.49	1.47
20.	Hit parents/guardians.	10	32.04	1.47
21.	Hit peers.	42	126.51	1.47
22.	Disorderly conduct.	30	111.57	1.14
23.	Sold hard drugs.	5	35.84	20.65
24.	Joyriding.	24	109.96	4.45
25.	Provided alcohol for a minor.	18	25.71	5.50
26.	Rape.	1	0.07	25.85
27.	Unarmed robbery: peers.	10	4.24	5.12
28.	Unarmed robbery: teacher.	0	0.00	5.12
29.	Unarmed robbery: stranger.	6	9.67	5.12
30.	Avoided paying for things.	35	105.24	2.17
31.	Been drunk in a public place.	37	59.64	1.75
32.	Stolen goods worth between £5 - £50.	30	80.16	2.88
33.	Stolen something at school.	11	15.07	3.08
34.	Broken into a building.	29	51.00	3.22
35.	Begged for money from strangers.	3	3.47	0.31

Table 2. continued.

S.No.	Items	*N*	*Mean Freq/year*	*Weighting**
36.	Truancy.	32	173.53	0.25
37.	Failed to return wrong change.	18	5.31	1.87
38.	Been suspended from school.	23	6.89	0.25
39.	Made obscene telephone calls.	2	16.73	1.87
40.	Used alcohol.	42	77.69	1.06
41.	Used marijuana.	36	253.38	1.42
42.	Used hallucinogens.	18	27.91	6.54
43.	Used amphetamines.	20	37.38	6.54
44.	Used barbiturates.	5	3.76	1.48
45.	Used heroin.	7	25.11	6.54
46.	Used cocaine.	7	0.47	6.54

**Weightings from Wolfgang et al. (1985)*

The three scores were all significantly correlated, with $p<0.001$: basic count/frequency score r (45) = 0.68; basic count/weighted score r (45) = 0.55; frequency score/weighted score r (45) = 0.90.

Item analysis revealed that the acts most commonly committed by participants were hitting peers (93.3%); using alcohol (93.3%); lying about one's age to buy something or gain entrance (84.4%); being drunk in a public place (82.2%); stealing goods worth over £ 50 (80%); and using Cannabis (80%); These figures are shown above in Table 2.

For each item, the SRD frequency score for all the respondents were summed, and then divided by the total number of respondents to give a mean frequency of committal per year for an individual (see Table 2 under mean frequency/year). The acts committed most frequently in the previous year showed a degree of overlap with those acts committed most commonly.

Using cannabis was the most frequently committed act for an individual (253.4 times a year on average), followed by lying about one's age (174.7), truancy (173.5), stealing goods worth over £50 (133.2), hitting peers (126.5), and handling stolen goods (119.8). At the other end of the scale, acts such as illegal hitchhiking, using cocaine, and indecent assault/rape were reported very infrequently, or, in the cases of obtaining money/goods by force from a teacher and prostitution, not at all.

Types of Offence

To investigate whether the persistent offenders in this study tended to specialize in a particular type of offence, or were more diverse in

their choice of acts, analyses were carried out on the five subscales of SRD measure. The five subscales are: (1) crimes against the person (assault, rape, and robbery); (2) crimes against property (theft and vandalism); (3) illegal service crimes; (4) public disorder crimes; (5) status crimes. Most of the sample had committed acts from several subscales. Crimes against property and status offences had been committed by everyone, while all except a few participants had committed crimes against the person and public disorder offences. Illegal service crimes were the only exception to this pattern, with 50% of the participants having committed one of these offences. Further analysis revealed that these particular offenders were typically those scoring high on the SRD seriousness score. These findings suggest that diversity of offending behaviour is the norm among this group of offenders rather than specialization in one type of criminal activity.

As the number of items making up each of the subscales was different, to investigate which type of criminal behaviour was most prevalent within offenders, the proportion of crimes committed in each of the categories was calculated and then compared for each offender. In the majority of cases this was predominantly status crimes, however, among the 10 most delinquent offenders (as assessed by the seriousness score) property crimes were more prevalent (see Table 3).

Table 3

Prevalence of Types of crimes Among the Ten Most Delinquent Offenders (As Assessed by the Seriousness Score)

Seriousness Score	Most Prevalent	Types of Crime	Property as % of Total
1420.33	Public disorder	Status	30
1137.22	Property	Person	36
948.54	Property	Public disorder	45
947.84	Property	Illegal service and status	46
940.52	Property	Person	35
806.41	Property	Public disorder	33
753.36	Status	Property	33
723.35	Illegal service	Person and status and public disorder	29
656.23	Status	Property	39
636.59	Status	Property	32

Note: *Public disorder=Public disorder crimes; Status=Status crimes; Property=Crimes against property; Person=Crimes against the person; Illegal service=Illegal service crimes.*

As the items on the status crimes subscale (such as running away from home, lying about age to gain entrance or buy something, truancy, cheating, suspension from school, and drinking alcohol) are those that are unlikely to result in official legal sanctions, the second most prevalent offence scale was also examined. This revealed property crimes to be the most prevalent offence, and overall property crimes were either the first or second most prevalent type by proportion in 73% of the sample. Further analysis of the property crimes subscale to examine whether theft or vandalism were committed with varying frequencies suggested that the majority of offenders were engaged in both offences.

Alcohol and Drug Use

Alcohol and drug use habits were also examined, revealing that alcohol and soft drugs (cannabis) were widely used. Regular use of alcohol was reported by 77.8% of the respondents, while 93.3% had used it at least once in the previous 12 months. Cannabis use was reported by 80% of the participants, with 71.1% using it regularly. Harder drugs were used less often, with hallucinogens and amphetamines being used regularly by about one-third of the sample. Only two people reported regular use of barbiturates and heroin, while a few offenders said they had tried them just once. There were no regular users of cocaine, although seven offenders said they had tried this drug.

DISCUSSION

Previous research using SRD measures have tended to use the data as a variable against which to correlate other social and psychological constructs such as personality variables (Furnham & Thompson, 1991; Hindelang, 1971), socioeconomic class (Elliott & Ageton, 1980; Nye, Short, & Oslon, 1958), and race (Elliott & Ageton, 1980; Elliott & Huizinga, 1983). This research strategy has led to some neglect of what self-report data itself can say about delinquent behavior. Where offending has been considered, there has been a tendency to concentrate on officially non-delinquent populations (e.g., Graham & Bowling, 1995). With some exceptions (e.g., Cernkovich et al., 1985), the behaviour of persistent young offenders is rarely studied. The present study has attempted to redress the balance by taking a more detailed look at self-reported delinquency in a sample of persistent young offenders.

The three scores of self-reported delinquency show the usefulness of employing frequency categories large enough to cope

with the high frequency of offending in this group. By lifting the 'ceiling' often imposed by early forms of self-reporting, greater differentiation among the offenders was possible. This greater diversity was reflected in the different distribution of scores for the basic count of offences and the frequency score. Furthermore by weighting the items, the seriousness of offences allowed the influence of high frequency-low seriousness items to be minimized, while retaining the extra information from the frequency counts.

However, one important point that needs to be borne in mind when interpreting the self-reported delinquency scores is the fact that the Elliott and Ageton (1980) scale was developed in America, leading to questions of whether it is representative of English criminal behavior. However, comparison of the items in it with recent self-reported delinquency measures used in England show a large degree of similarity (e.g., Furnham & Thompson, 1991; Graham & Bowling, 1995). An issue of greater concern is the use of the weightings, as they were derived from a survey of American citizens. Cross-cultural differences in the perception of offences may exist that could jeopardize the validity of this seriousness scale with a British sample.

The item analysis reflected the high delinquent nature of the sample by showing their high participation rates in all types of offending. Of the 46 items, 16 were committed by at least two-thirds of the sample, which is consistent with other research into the delinquent activities of young people (both officially and non-officially delinquent) (Elliott, Dunford, & Huizinga, 1987; Farrington, 1997; Graham & Bowling, 1995; Junger-Tas et al., 1994; Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, Moffitt, & Capsi, 1998; Riley & Shaw, 1985; Wolfgang, Thornberry, & Figlio, 1987). The overlap of the offences committed by the greatest number of respondents with those committed most frequently was to be expected. A greater number of people carrying out a certain offence is likely to lead to a higher frequency over a specified time period.

The young offenders in this sample are involved in a number of different types of criminal behaviour, rather than specializing in one or two activities. This finding replicates previous research into the nature of juvenile offending (Bursik, 1980; Elliott et al., 1987; Farrington, Snyder, & Finnegan, 1988; Klein, 1984; Rojek & Erickson, 1982; Smith & Smith, 1984; Wolfgang et al., 1987). This diversity of offending could be a function of the age of the respondents, with specialization only occurring as offenders get older and progress further in their criminal careers (e.g., Blumstein, Cohen, & Moitra, 1988), although studies with adult offenders only find low

levels of specialization amid more general, diverse behaviour (e.g. Kempf, 1987; Stander, Farrington, Hill, & Altham, 1989; Wolfgang et al., 1987). Another possibility is that with increasing age individuals commit more serious acts rather than becoming specialists, something that has been found in a number of longitudinal studies in America (Elliott et al., 1987; Farrington et al., 1996; Loeber et al., 1998; Wolfgang et al., 1987). However, while these studies show that the age of onset for less serious offences is lower than that for more serious ones for individual offenders, there is little evidence of overall seriousness increasing significantly. Instead, offenders tend to continue to commit less serious offences throughout their criminal careers alongside more serious ones (Wolfgang et al., 1987), with the Pittsburgh Youth Study found the severity of offending to be significantly associated with the number of offences (Loeber, DeLamtre, Keenan, & Zhang, 1998; Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1998). Further longitudinal study is required, following individuals through adolescence and into adulthood, to establish whether such patterns also exist among British offenders.

A notable finding, however, was the lack of illegal service crimes among the less delinquent respondents as assessed on the seriousness score. This finding probably reflects the nature of the crimes in this subscale, i.e., selling/providing drugs, alcohol, and sexual relations. Nonviolent crimes, typically property and status crimes were the most prevalent offences rather than violent crimes against the person.

The findings concerning the use of alcohol and drugs confirm previous research in this area, as also noted by Hagell and Newburn (1994). Alcohol and cannabis use are widespread, with only three respondents claiming never to have used alcohol. The figure for Amphetamine and Hallucinogenic use are also similar to those found by Hagell and Newburn (1994), as are the low prevalence of Barbiturate abuse, and use of Heroin and cocaine. It is widely accepted that many offenders commit crimes whilst under the influence of either alcohol or drugs (Hollin, 1994), a claim that these figures support. An American longitudinal study reported by Dembo, Williams, Schmeidler, and Christensen (1993) with juvenile offenders showed that cocaine use, as detected through urine samples, was related to subsequent property offences, suggesting that substance abuse is associated with patterns of anti-social behaviour. If this is the case, then signs of substance abuse could be used as an early indicator

of juvenile delinquency, signaling a point where interventions should be aimed.

In total, this study has thrown up some new findings, with some promising directions for future research. The diverse nature of the delinquency exhibited by this group is interesting. However, the small nature of the sample means that any conclusions that are drawn must be viewed with caution. Further studies with larger samples are required to investigate the existence of patterns of criminal behaviour in order to explore what patterns exist, when changes occur, why they happen, and who exactly undertakes these changes, and how these relate to demographic variables such as race and socio-economic status. These patterns of change may, in turn, may be linked to the continuation or ending of criminal careers into adulthood. Longitudinal studies show a number of variables that are predictive of persistence such as having low intelligence at age 8-10 years, spending little leisure time with fathers at age 12 years, being heavy drinkers at age 18, and being frequently unemployed (Farrington & Hawkins, 1991). Kempf (1988) in a study of 18-26 year olds noted that those who became adult offenders by the age of 26 years were more likely to have had more serious adolescent criminal careers. However, more detailed study of the links between adolescent offending behaviour and future adult criminal activity is needed to fill in the gaps of the current knowledge in this area.

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