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The concordance of self-reported and officially recorded lifetime offending histories: Results from a sample of Australian prisoners

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examines the concordance of self-reported and officially recorded lifetime offending (prevalence and frequency) for seven offense types among a sample of prisoners in Queensland, Australia.
Methods: Prevalence estimates, kappa coefficients and odds ratios are calculated as measures of concordance. Logistic regression models are used to calculate adjusted Odds Ratios, controlling for the time since last charge. The frequency of official records and the Indigenous-disparity is modelled using Negative Binomial Regression, controlling for self-reported offending and memory-recall effects.
Results: There was satisfactory concordance between the self-reported and officially recorded prevalence of offending, although the strength of concordance varied by offense type. There was no difference in the degree of concordance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous offenders and controls for memory-recall did not substantially improve concordance. For frequencies, self-reported rates were higher than officially recorded rates for some offenses but not others. Indigenous offenders generally had a higher number of official records even after accounting for self-reports and memory-recall effects.
Conclusion: These data provide further evidence that self-reports and official reports are not dissimilar and seem to be tapping similar behavior. In the Australian context, more effort is needed to ensure that self-report methods are culturally appropriate for Indigenous offenders.

Introduction

On a daily basis, practitioners of criminal justice systems are charged with making significant decisions in the interests of preventing crime and promoting community safety. Confronted with a first-time juvenile offender, the probationary constable for example, must make the difficult decision of whether to arrest or caution; a decision between two potentially life-course changing events in a young person's life. The corrections officer, although far removed from the challenges of front line policing, is nevertheless faced with an equally difficult set of decisions as he/she weighs individual rights and community interests in delicate balance. Yet, for all the responsibility vested in those who work at the coalface of the criminal justice system it is sometimes easy to forget that the efficacy of their decision making depends in large part on the research community's commitment to a strong and robust criminological evidence base. As researchers it is particularly important not to overlook our own responsibility to conduct research that improves understanding of the causes and correlates of crime in non-trivial ways—ways that enhance the capacity of criminological theory to offer better prediction and a more refined suite of crime-prevention options.

As has been previously noted (Hirschi & Selvin, 1967; Mosher, Miethe, & Hart, 2010; Osgood, McMorris, & Potenza, 2002; Sellin & Wolfgang, 1964; Sullivan & McGloin, 2014; Sutherland, 1947; Wellford & Wiatrowski, 1975), it is critical that crime and justice researchers recognize and reflect on the weight of their own responsibility to carefully operationalize the concept of crime and develop suitable methodological approaches for its measurement.

In broad terms, the quantitative study of crime has been historically founded on three methodological pillars—the analysis of official records, self-reported offending surveys, and victimization surveys. Official records are those that are recorded in the administrative databases of the police, courts or departments of corrections. At the aggregate level, they are used to paint a portrait of the prevalence and volume of crime, often for a specific location and over a specified time period. In Australia, for example, aggregate official crime records are collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and are produced either as counts of victims, offenders, matters appearing in courts, or prisoners in custody. Although in more recent times these sources have been augmented by advanced qualitative methods and forensic science analysis, they nevertheless remain among the most often used sources of quantitative data sources to provide unique and informative snapshots of crime at both the national and jurisdictional level. Yet despite criminology's reliance on them, as measurement alternatives they are

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necessarily limited to the extent that they do not (1) measure all crime that is committed; (2) control for police, prosecutorial and judicial discretion; nor (3) control for victim decisions to report crimes. In addition, administrative records of crime often fail to (4) account for the differential implementation and use of cautioning and diversion; (5) include all crime types; and (6) systematically deal with variability in data recording practices and legal definitions.[1]

A developing appreciation for these aforementioned limitations saw an early shift in some quarters towards the measurement of crime using self-report offending surveys. For some, the self-report method offered a unique opportunity to quantify both the prevalence and frequency of crime through data that was considered more proximal to the actual behavior of interest (Porterfield, 1943; Short & Nye, 1957). In particular, Short and Nye (1957) argued that the self-report method brought criminologists closer to the study of 'criminality' and that criminality was the more meaningful and policy relevant of the dependent variables in criminological research. Consistent with that early work, the more contemporary self-report studies have also clearly shown that a substantial proportion of an individual's antisocial and criminal activity is absent in official records (Farrington, Piquero, & Jennings, 2013).

Though attractive as an alternative to official data, self-report surveys of offending are not free of limitations. In her critique of the National Youth Survey, Lauritsen (1998) argued that the self-report method, particularly among youth offenders—and especially in samples evidencing wide variation in ages, is subject to important maturation effects whereby the interpretation of self-report questions is likely to change as a person ages. Importantly, Lauritsen's (1998) analysis reminds us that the self-report method relies heavily on the respondent's capacity, and willingness to report with accuracy their own offending—not to mention other important methodological issues such as testing and panel effects (see also Bosick, 2009), instrumentation issues relating to questionnaire wording or survey format, screening, interpretation (especially between different demographic sub-populations), missing data, and longitudinal sample attrition—the latter of which is critical but rarely studied (Brame & Piquero, 2003).

Of course, the limitations of both official and self-reported crime data are well known among criminological scholars; however, a discussion of their implications is often relegated to a brief qualification in published research. Further, in an environment of limited funding and high fatigue among research participants and data custodians, more often than not researchers opt for an 'either/or' approach to operationalize and measure crime because one source of data is better than no data at all. In many cases, this is a satisfactory and appropriate response to the broader limitations of our field; yet as Sullivan and McGloin (2014) suggest, in order to test existing theory or build new theories some effort is required to triangulate and simultaneously explore our multiple, but imperfect, data sources—a practice which, to date, has been relatively rare in the scholarly literature (Maxfield, Weller, & Widom, 2000) and for which there have been recent calls for further research (Auty, Farrington, & Coid, 2015; Piquero, Schubert, & Brame, 2014).

In this article, we address the question of concordance between self-reported and officially recorded offending using previously unanalyzed data from the Queensland component of the Australian Institute of Criminology's (AIC) Drug Use Careers of Offenders (DUCO) study. In doing so, we make two unique contributions to the literature. First, our analysis is one of only a handful of studies to examine lifetime prevalence and lifetime frequencies of offending across seven separate offense types. We do so with the expectation that previous estimates for aggregated measures of offending will mask important offense-specific variability. Our interest is in the concordance of self-reported and officially recorded estimates for different offense types because, as Thornberry and Krohn (2000) note, "the similarity of results from different measurement strategies heightens the probability that the various measures are tapping into the same underlying concept of interest" (p. 52). Second, a unique contribution is made by this study in its comparative analysis of concordance measures for a representative sample of Australia's Indigenous offender population. In conducting this contrast, we reply directly to Piquero et al.'s (2014) call for more comparative analysis across different demographic groups and provide analyses that extends our understanding of concordance among minority populations that are different from the Black or Hispanic comparisons which have thus far dominated this literature.

Prior research

Much of what is known about the limitations of officially recorded data were drawn together by Hindelang (1974) in a detailed descriptive analysis of Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). In all, 14 key issues were identified, contributing to what Sellin and Wolfgang (1964) earlier described as the 'dark figure' of unknown crime. At the individual-level, this 'dark figure' represents the fraction of an individual's actual criminal offending which does not result in an official report or record. At the aggregate-level, the 'dark-figure' is the sum total of these unknowns.

Of the factors that contribute to under-recording, perhaps the single largest is the willingness of victims and witnesses to report crimes to official agencies or authorities. Since much of the work of police is reactionary (R. R. Johnson, 2015), this willingness and propensity to report is crucial and varies from person to person (Berg, Slocum, & Loeber, 2013; Bosick, Rennison, Gover, & Dodge, 2012), as well as by location (Bosick et al., 2012; Estienne & Morabito, 2015) and for different crime types (Bosick et al., 2012). Yet, even if all crimes were reported to the police, official databases would still undercount specific crimes, or the crimes of specific individuals, because such factors will likely depend largely on the differential composition of laws, organizational ideologies, arrest policies, and data capture and recording procedures within local jurisdictions. Even the number and type of resources allocated to frontline and operational policing duties can significantly influence what events are attended, how these matters are prioritized, and what efforts are taken to pursue matters to apprehension, arrest, and conviction. In some cases, but particularly for young offenders, there is also an active effort in some jurisdictions to use cautioning and other informal procedures so as to specifically avoid (for the benefit of the offender) formal processing (Jason L. Payne, Kwaitkowski, & Wundersitz, 2008). It is this complex constellation of factors, both within and between jurisdictions, which makes individual offenders differentially vulnerable to acquiring a formal record and thus raises important questions about the validity of official data as a measure of crime and as an indicator of individual criminality (Weis, 1986).

In an effort to quantify the 'dark figure' of crime, criminologists regularly turn to self-reported offending and victimization surveys in the hope that offenders and victims will paint a more detailed picture of their experiences. Indeed, early use of the self-report method confirmed this prediction (Short & Nye, 1957), with contemporary efforts continuing to demonstrate just how much an individual's criminal behavior is absent from official records (Farrington et al., 2013). Though it is generally accepted that self-report methods capture more information, exactly how much of the 'dark-figure' is illuminated through the self-report, or whether, indeed, the self-reported information is a more accurate measure of offending, remains a matter of some conjecture.

In much of the literature that concerns the validity of self-reported data, the issue of memory recall is an often cited limitation (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visher, 1986), fueled, in part, by evidence from the early psychological literature on memory formation and the impacts of dissociative and selective amnesia in forensic cases (Christianson, 1997). Research on violence, for example, demonstrated that memory impairment was not only common for all those involved in violence, but more pronounced for perpetrators than for victims or witnesses (Kopelman, 1995; Porter, Birt, Yuille, & Hervé, 2001; Schacter, 1986). In their seminal review of the criminal career literature, Blumstein et al. (1986) concluded that memory recall was affected by