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# It's Official: Predictors of Self-Reported vs. Officially Recorded Arrests

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ABSTRACT

*Purpose:* The study of the distribution and correlates of arrest is widely recognized as an important topic, for the purposes of contributing to changes in police policy and training, which in turn increase the fairness of U.S. policing. Despite agreement that this area of research is an important one, there remains variation in the way arrest is measured. The current study compares two common measurements of arrest, official records and self-reports, for National Youth Survey Family Study (NYSFS) respondents across four time periods.
*Methods:* The sample was divided by those who reported severe offending and those who did not. Crosstabs, correlation coefficients and logistic regression models were run, to examine the extent to which self-reported and officially recorded arrests are related, and whether there are commonalities in the predictors of self-reported and officially recorded arrests.
*Results:* While the agreement between the two measurements of arrest is over 80%, the majority of that agreement is comprised of respondents who were not arrested.
*Conclusions:* Overall, there were more instances of a self-reported arrest but no official arrest, than the reverse. There does not appear to be a pattern in frequencies or correlation coefficients based on the severity of reported offending.



## Introduction

The examination of predictors of arrest is an important topic that has been heavily studied at times in American history (the 1960s for example), and also studied with some consistency throughout time, in order to examine potential changes (Boydstun, 1975; McEachern & Bauzer, 1967; Penn, 2006; Pollock, Oliver, & Menard, 2012; Shannon, 1988). These studies identified a variety of predictors of arrest in addition to criminal offending, and have contributed, and indeed continue to contribute to changes in police policy and training, designed to improve the fairness of U.S. policing. Despite agreement that the topic is an important one, there has been wide variation in the measurement of arrest. Measures of arrest range from direct observations of arrest (Smith & Visher, 1981) to official records of arrest (D'Alessio & Stolzenberg, 2003; Fagan & Davies, 2000), to self-reports of arrest (Pollock et al., 2012).

There are strengths and weaknesses to using each of these measures of arrest. Observations, for instance, allow for a more complete view of many of the variables involved in the incident, including the demeanor of both the officer and the suspect. Unfortunately, the use of this measure often is not practical for a representative sample, and it may also limit researchers to one relatively small geographic region, due to the high cost and time investment involved in traveling to observe arrests. Official arrest records at the local level are not subject to recall error and arguably contain reliable information on arrests, as well as demographic variable information such as race or ethnicity (the latter term is generally used here in preference to race), gender, and age, but little information on other possible predictors of arrest such as involvement with delinquent peers and socioeconomic status (SES).

Despite being publicly available and possibly more representative, official data from sources such as the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) or the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS) suffer from some of the same problems. Even with the more detailed information that can be obtained from NIBRS, the data are focused on details of the arrest event and little information is collected on the suspected offender, outside of demographic variables such as gender and age. In addition, not all states participate in NIBRS, so the data will be necessarily limited to those states that do participate (www2.fbi.gov/ucr/faqs, 2014). The UCR is required by all states but information on arrests is available only at more aggregate (city or state as opposed to the individual) levels of measurement (fbi.gov, 2014).

Finally, self-report measures have the advantage in that their use allows researchers to examine respondents longitudinally, examine valuable potential predictors of arrest such as delinquent peer involvement, crime participation, and SES, and they allow for larger more representative samples (Pollock et al., 2012). On the cautionary side, there have long been concerns regarding the accuracy of both

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self-report and arrest data, including deliberate concealment and recall error in self-reports, and deliberate or inadvertent inaccuracies in recording arrests (for reviews and empirical evidence, see Elliott, 1995; Menard & Elliott, 1990).

The current study will compare self-reported and officially recorded arrest, as well as comparisons of predictors of both measurements of arrest, for National Youth Survey Family Study (NYSFS) respondents across four time periods. Arrests will be analyzed separately for respondents who report severe levels of offending as well as for those who do not. If there is a reasonable relationship between the two measures of this outcome and consistency in the predictors of both, it will further support the use of self-reported arrests for the study of this important topic. If not, it will require an understanding of why this difference is occurring, and possibly more research on which measure is best suited for what research objective.

## Self-report and official arrest data

As described in Elliott, Huizinga, and Menard (1989), self-report measures of crime and delinquency were initially developed as an alternative to clinical, police, and court records of illegal and other problem behavior. In the earliest self-report study, Porterfield (1943) compared self-reports of college and non-college adolescents and found more similarity in their offending than would be suggested by their different rates of arrest. Wallerstein and Wyle (1947), citing Porterfield's work, similarly found more similarity among different social classes of adults than might be expected from police and court records. These and subsequent studies suggested that arrest data, in particular, are problematic as measures of illegal behavior, because an arrest is but one of several possible responses to a criminal offense.

There are two ways in which arrest data can be compared to self-report data: whether they produce similar estimates of the amount and distribution of illegal behavior, and whether they identify the same individuals as being engaged in particular patterns of illegal behavior. With regard to the first question, rates of offending and rates of arrest, Elliott (1995) reported that the probability of arrest per self-reported serious violent offense (as opposed to less serious, potentially trivial offenses, for which the likelihood of arrest is even lower) was approximately 2% for the general population, but higher for African American males. With regard to prevalence, fewer than 10% of the most serious violent self-reported offenders (again in contrast to less serious offenses and offenders) were ever arrested for a serious violent offense. This problem is exacerbated in data sets such as the FBI Uniform Crime Reports data by the reporting of only the most serious offense, and the exclusion of all other offenses from the report. By contrast, comparing self-reported arrests with officially recorded arrests, the self-reports typically capture approximately 80% of the officially recorded arrests in both American (Hardt & Peterson-Hardt, 1977; see also the review in Elliott et al., 1989) and international (for example, Enzmann et al., 2010) populations. On a related note, Farrall (2005) found that there was approximately 70% agreement between self-report and official records of offending while individuals were on probation. "Of the remaining 30% or so, three quarters of cases involved the probationer admitting to offending of which the officer was unaware" (p. 129). Elliott (1995) also found that, when confronted with their officially recorded arrest records, approximately one-fourth of those with an arrest record contested the record, and he cites other evidence regarding the inaccuracy of arrest data, particularly arising out of the recording process.

With regard to the second question, whether self-reported offending and official arrests identify the same individuals involved in particular patterns of offending, for example, low or high frequency offenders, estimates of the correlations between the frequency of self-reported illegal behavior and officially recorded arrests are typically in the range of .60 for both U.S. and international samples (Enzmann et al., 2010; Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1981), although Elliott (1995) found the correlation between frequency of self-reported offending and officially recorded arrest to be only .30 to .38, and it should be noted that Hindelang et al. (1981) used local, unrepresentative samples. None of these correlations is within the range generally considered acceptable for two different measures of the same phenomenon. Also, as detailed in Elliott (1995) and Elliott et al. (1989), self-reported offending data and officially recorded arrest produce different estimates of the extent to which illegal behavior is associated with sociodemographic characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Self-reports and official arrest data have also produced different trends over time, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, with self-report data (and also victimization data) indicating stable or declining rates of illegal behavior, but arrest data (and also data on crimes known to the police) indicating increasing rates of officially recorded crimes and arrests over time (Menard, 1987). Officially recorded crime but not self-reported crime is susceptible to change as a result of policy (presumptive arrest, recording practices), as opposed to actual changes in criminal or delinquent behavior. It seems likely that the relationship between self-reported crime and delinquency and officially recorded arrests may be similar to that described between victimization and crimes known to the police by Menard and Covey (1988): illegal behavior is one influence on arrests, but there are other influences, including the likelihood of detection and the likelihood of official action if detected. Although the two measures are positively related, as we would expect, the two cannot reasonably be regarded as measures of the same phenomenon, and it is self-reports, not arrests, that provide the more complete picture of illegal behavior.

## Predictors of arrest

In order to examine the consistency of predictors between self-reported and officially recorded arrests, it is important to briefly review research on predictors of arrest, using the different measures. Though there is some variation in significant predictors across time and context, the most consistently studied predictors of arrest include ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic status (SES), substance use, illegal behavior, criminal history, and to a lesser extent, delinquent peers, and IQ (for an extensive review of police contact literature through time see Pollock et al., 2012).

### *Studies utilizing observational measures of arrest*

While the research findings reported in this article do not include observational measurements of arrest, previous studies that do use this measure are relevant here, as they most fully examine various aspects of the arrest event and suggest appropriate predictors of the outcome (Black & Reiss, 1970; Brown, 1981; Brunson, 2007; Chambliss, 1994; Piliavin & Briar, 1964; Werthman & Piliavin, 1967). As stated previously though, directly observing arrests often limits sample sizes as well as the representativeness of the sample.

Piliavin and Briar (1964) observed 66 police contacts with juvenile suspects, while riding with officers from the juvenile bureau in a metropolitan city of approximately 450,000 people. They found that African American individuals were given more severe sanctions (including arrest), when stopped by police, than were White individuals. Werthman and Piliavin (1967) interviewed gang members and observed police officers in Oakland and San Francisco for 18 months. Where ethnicity was concerned, police justified targeting African American individuals for stops and arrests because they claimed they were more likely to cause disturbances than were White individuals. They also found that prior police contact, the socioeconomic status of the parents and of the neighborhood increased the likelihood that the individual would be arrested as opposed to released.

Smith and Visher (1981), along with several trained civilians, rode on 900 patrol shifts with 24 police departments in metropolitan St. Louis, MO, Rochester, NY, and Tampa-St. Petersburg, FL (Smith