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Self-reportové studie kriminálního chování

Self-report Studies on Criminal Behaviour

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Abstract

Self-report method is based on an anonymous polling of respondents as to whether in a given period they committed crimes or other forms of socially undesirable behaviour. As a rule, two main objectives are pursued. The first one is to determine the extent and frequency of crime in a certain population. For crime reporting by a respondent it does not matter whether the act was detected and dealt with by the criminal justice system, suggesting that self-reports can penetrate into the area of the dark figure of crime. Therefore, along with the victim surveys it is one of two basic procedures as criminology overcomes deficiencies and distortions associated with the use of official statistics on recorded crime. The second objective of self-report studies is to verify criminological theories of causes of delinquent behaviour, using respondents questioning about the factors which are expected to correlate with the crime (for example, information about the family, friends, leisure time, lifestyle, etc.).

The first self-report studies on criminal behaviour were carried out in the 1940's in the United States and brought quite surprising conclusions challenging then popular theories about the relationship between crime and belonging to lower socio-economic classes. Although such hypotheses had a firm foothold in criminal statistics, the authors like Porterfield, Wallerstein and Wylie were able to demonstrate that members of upper classes offended virtually in the same extent, but were not so often prosecuted in comparison with poorer individuals. At the same time, it became clear that the extent of hidden crime is relatively high because most of the respondents confess committing any of the offenses. These early studies however bear signs of a number of methodological shortcomings. Therefore, it is the work by Nye and Short, 1958, which is considered truly groundbreaking and already significantly more sophisticated work in terms of methodology. These authors managed to document the independence of the crime on the socioeconomic status of the family, from which the individual in question comes, on a large sample of high school students from three different areas (rural, suburban and city), and also groups of persons from

the correctional facilities for juvenile offenders. Also thanks to this study new theoretical methodologies and schools have become to promote themselves in the criminology; these are characterized by the interest in the processes of "labelling" and investigate why someone is labelled offender or delinquent easier than someone else.

Since the 1960's self-report studies have not only been characterized by an interest in establishing a level of a given population group being affected by criminal activities but also in confirming or disapproving many theories attempting to explain the causes of crime. The most important works include the study by Hirschi from 1969, in which, on a basis of extensive self-report survey he formulated his theory of social relationships. His concept has been subsequently empirically verified by several other authors, including Conger, Hepburn or Hindelang. Similarly, self-reports focused also on other theories, such as social learning theory, general strain theory, or the theories associated with the deterrence of potential offenders through the threat of a severe punishment. The method of self-reports has often been used in the area of investigating drug abuse experiences, both within individual countries and international comparative projects. In terms of the methodological development, through which self-reports went through during this and the following period, it is possible to say that, since their inception they have changed significantly especially in terms of the gradual inclusion of wider range of delinquent activities in questionnaires, the inclusion of a more serious types of offenses (first researches focused almost exclusively on petty crime), adding questions on the frequency of offending (i.e. not only the prevalence, but also the incidence of delinquent behaviour) as well as the inclusion of supplementary questions, by which the circumstances of committed offenses are investigated.

For the use of self-reports in criminological research the question of their reliability and validity is crucial. A reliable measurement means such a measurement, which gives identical results under the repeated application of the same conditions. We can also verify the reliability in different ways. The most commonly used methods include repeated measurements (so-called test-retest reliability), measurements of parallel tests or assessment of internal consistency (the so-called bisection test or split-half reliability). In the criminological literature there has been a consensus that with the research of delinquent behaviour the test-retest method, detecting the consistency of repeated measurements, between which certain time will pass (according to some authors one to four weeks seem to be the optimum), seems to be the most adequate method. Consequently, the determination of the degree of reliability is based on the correlation between the results of the first and second rounds, whereas the values of 0.70 and higher are considered to be satisfactory. In the

research, which dealt with the reliability of self-reports, this method appeared to be reliable and in principle no different from other research methods, commonly used in the social sciences (the correlation was usually higher than 0.80). However, some differences were evident with regard to the number or type of a delinquent behaviour, which was included in the questionnaires or the type of scales suggested in answers.

The validity can be defined in various ways. Most often such a measurement is considered to be valid, which really measures what we intended to measure, or, which allows the user to derive correct decisions on the basis of the results of measurements. Thus, the validity refers to the appropriateness, meaningfulness and usefulness of the specific conclusions that are made on the basis of the measurement result. At its testing we can distinguish the criterion, content, construct, predictive or concurrent validities. For self-reports particularly criterion validity, comparing the results of the measurement with another adequate source of information on the investigated phenomenon seems to be a natural aspect of quality (such as the official data related to the share of persons prosecuted for the crime in the population). However, finding a reliable source for comparison is not easy because data on recorded crime are distorted by a number of various factors. Still, there are ways how to verify the criterion validity of self-reports. One of the easiest ways consists in comparing the results obtained within the different groups of respondents, with whom we expect that in terms of crime they should differ significantly among themselves (in most studies, it is a case of comparison of results with persons without a record of crime with individuals who were already pending before a court or the police). Similarly, external criteria such as official data on arrest, as well as information from people, who know the respondent (parents, classmates, teachers, etc.) are used. In researches dealing with drug abuse additional options of urine or saliva tests, which reveal their presence, are used. Studies that have been dealing with the criterion validity of self-reports reveal that there is usually a satisfactory degree of correlation between specified data sources. This indicates that the majority of respondents do not tend to conceal their experience related with the crime or otherwise socially undesirable behaviour to researchers.

When verifying the content validity we realize the extent, in which the measurement represents respective characteristics or qualities of the examined phenomenon. With self-reports, this aspect is problematic because it is a subject to a clear and comprehensive definition of the crime, on which there have been quite extensive disputes in criminology since its inception (including those between supporters of the so-called legal and sociological

definition of crime). The early self-report studies dealing with only a limited number of offenses were inadequate in this regard.

Some authors believe that the strongest evidence for the validity of self-reports is provided through the verification of construct validity. It is a question, to which extent the measurements in the expected theoretical level relates to other concepts or constructs. These may be various demographic characteristics of respondents, as well as individual or social factors, which from the point of view of the crime are considered significant by all major criminological theories. It turns out that virtually all relationships between variables that the literature describes have been in fact confirmed within self-reports and consequently this method appears to be valid.

Nevertheless, the validity of self-reports may be endangered by several factors. Experiences suggest that this for example includes the type of offense, for which the respondent is asked (assuming a lower willingness to confide experiences with offenses of a more serious nature), or the fact whether the act was officially recorded. Personal characteristics of a respondent such as his/her age (validity of self-reports is generally higher among young respondents than among adult respondents), ethnicity or frequency of offending as well as prior experience with criminal justice system also play an important role. Similarly, it depends on the processes of data collection (the way of formulating questions, offered variants of answers etc.) as well as the administration of the research instruments. It is well known that various ways of how the data are obtained (e.g., sending or transfer of a questionnaire to a respondent, who consequently fills it in, face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews or the use of computer technology) have their strengths and weaknesses, which must be carefully considered in the preparation of each research project.

So far, two extensive self-study reports have been conducted in the Czech Republic. In both cases, these projects were based on an international cooperation. The research conducted among school children in 1999 in Plzeň, resulted from the collaboration of the Department of Criminal Law Faculty in the University of West Bohemia with the Department of Criminology in the Ernst-Moritz-Arndt University in Greifswald, Germany. 1,270 pupils attending 9-th classes of elementary school and students attending fourth classes of six-year secondary grammar schools in Plzeň (64.7 % of all children, who at a given time studied at this level in Plzeň) participated in the research. Only a part of the questionnaire dealt with delinquent acts committed by the respondents, namely questions about shoplifting, wounding another person, stealing things from a car, endangering another person by a weapon, destruction of someone else's property, humiliation of others, theft of bicycles or other means

of transport, extortion, harassment and robbery. In line with international studies it was found that the delinquent behaviour is not uncommon among the youth. More than half of the respondents admitted that they committed at least one of the investigated acts during their lifetime. These were however less serious acts such as theft in a shop (admitted by 29.7 % of the sample). More serious forms of delinquent behaviour were less frequent - with the exception of harassment, which was admitted by 4.5 % of respondents, the share of affirmative answers did not exceed the threshold of 3 %.

The Czech Republic joined the international project ISRD-2 thanks to the activity of the Department of Sociology of the Faculty of Arts Charles University in Prague. In their effort to obtain representative data on juvenile delinquency in the Czech Republic the authors decided to choose financially and organizationally more challenging selection from the whole population. The research was aimed at pupils of the seventh, eighths and ninths grades of schools (i.e., aged about 12-15). In total the answers of 3,255 respondents were processed. Various forms of delinquent behaviour, from less severe (alcohol, truancy, minor property offenses) through violent acts (assault, robbery) were investigated. At the same time the information about respondents related to the individual and social demographic variables was collected. It was found out that 43 % of children committed at least one of the investigated acts, whereas 27 % committed a crime during the past year. The most common form of delinquency in this research was shoplifting (almost a quarter of children), and a participation in a group fights (a fifth of respondents), vandalism (12 %) and carrying a weapon (10 %). Offenses of more serious occurred quite sporadically as expected. The study pointed out the relationship between the delinquent behaviour and a number of observed factors, particularly age, sex, type of school, interests of parents in the child and parental supervision, the relationship between parents and the child and ways of spending free time. Also the relationships to the self-control and attitude of the respondent to violence have been confirmed. If we compare the research results from Plzeň and ISRD-2 narrowing the sample to pupils of 9-th classes of schools in Plzeň, it becomes obvious that the percentage of respondents who admitted committing selected acts during their life or during the last year significantly decreased between the two periods. Although this finding cannot be overestimated, it can be seen as a confirmation of favourable trends stemming from official statistics of registered juvenile crime.

ISRD project can be as one of the most important self-report studies also assessed in terms of the worldwide research. The need for a comparative investigation, allowing to compare crime in different countries of the world, has been discussed among the experts since

the late 1970's. Thanks to the initiative of the research center of the Dutch Ministry of Justice (WODC) a meeting of important research experts from thirteen, mostly European, countries took place in 1990 and consequently a working group was established, which began the preparation of the first version of the questionnaire. Four basic thematic areas, on which the research focused, were selected – namely the prevalence and frequency of the delinquent behaviour, circumstances of committed acts and social reactions to them, the living conditions of respondent and – to a limited extent – also the variables associated with social control. The reliability of the questionnaire was successfully tested by pilot studies. The research finally took place in thirteen countries (a total of 10,858 questionnaires), including five countries with national representative samples. In all countries, the researches confirmed that delinquent behaviour among adolescents is relatively common, albeit mostly these were less serious acts. Significant differences were found between individual states.

As many as 31 countries both from Europe and from other continents joined the continuation of the (ISRD-2) project. Based on the experience from the first round much attention was paid to the methodology and the actual implementation of the research, including data processing standardization process. Also the selection procedure, which could be either a selection of cities or national selection, was unified. Most questions were due to the possibility of the temporal comparison taken over from the original questionnaire. The extension consisted mainly in the completion of questions, mapping other factors, which are expected to have an influence on delinquency. On the whole, responses were obtained from 71,400 respondents within ISRD-2. Differences between countries were again significant. The rate of lifetime prevalence of examined delinquent acts ranged from 13.8 % to 40.1 %. Again the experience was confirmed that most adolescents, who commit crime, only commit less serious acts. A significant relationship was found between the offending and victimization, which can be explained by a certain life style of particular individuals. More often than not, teenagers, who spend a lot of time with their peers, become offenders. The research was based on theoretical models assuming a relationship between the delinquency and the low self control. It was confirmed that these factors have a strong influence, as well as factors related to the family, peer relations, and links to the school or environment, in which the respondent lives.

The self-report method offers great utilization possibilities in the field of developmental criminology, where it forms one of the pillars of longitudinal studies of criminal careers. Their aim is to identify the essential characteristics of development of offending during various stages of the offender's life, risk and protective factors that have a

significant effect on the onset of the criminal career and life events, which in turn can “divert” offenders, who had already embarked on the criminal career, from this career (so-called turning points). Most longitudinal researches are based on a continuous monitoring of criminal or otherwise problematic behaviour in large groups of people, usually born in the same period. It can be either a prospective or retrospective approach. Data on crime and other important phenomena are obtained not only through self-reports, but also from official sources (criminal records, police records, etc.). Their mutual combinations and comparisons can result in greater reliability of the whole investigation. The most important longitudinal researches include the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, continuously running since the early 1960’s as well as the Gluecks’ study from the 1950’s, the Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study (USA), the Delinquency in a Birth Cohort (Philadelphia, USA), the National Survey of Health and Development (U.K.), the Dunedin Multi-disciplinary Health and Human Development Study (New Zealand), the Pittsburgh Youth Study (USA), Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime (U.K.), the Dutch National Crime Study, the Peterborough Youth Study (U.K.) and a unique Swedish "Stockholm Life Course" project.

It can be assumed that self-reporting studies will be even in the future together with victim surveys considered the main way for criminology to obtain relevant information on the actual level of crime and its various types. Similarly, this method will be indispensable in the research, which focus on the validation of various criminological theories on the causes of crime, as well as in studies examining the effectiveness of various measures of crime control. Yet researchers face several challenges, both methodological, concerning the further verification and the improvement of reliability and validity of self-reports, both conceptual, relating, inter alia to possibilities to map crime also with other groups than children and youth, or to focus on other types of offenses than the "classic" property and violent crime. For the Czech Republic, it applies that the method of self-reports is still waiting for its actual “enforcement”, which is unfortunately indicated by a rather weak response of professional public to this large ISRD-2 project, which is so valuable in terms of knowledge.

Translated by: Aspena