

AN OVERVIEW OF SELF-REPORTED DELINQUENCY SURVEYS IN EUROPE

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I - INTRODUCTION

A seminar on Self-Reported Delinquency Surveys organized by the CrimPrev network took place in Paris from 17th to 19th January 2007. Seven papers covering twelve countries were presented. The countries included were Belgium, England, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Sweden and Wales. This short article presents a synthesis of these papers and a limited global analysis on the place of self-reported delinquency studies in Europe. In the first part of the article, I have included a short summary of each presentation, while in the second part I have

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tried to combine them in order to give an overview of the general situation in Europe.

Before presenting the national chapters, it seems important to clarify the terminology that will be used. Self-reported delinquency surveys are studies in which people - usually juveniles - are asked to reveal information about their *delinquent* behaviours. However, the terminology may be misleading for two reasons. First of all, because respondents give information not only about delinquency but also about their life-style in general, their attitudes toward different subjects, their families, their school, their friends, and many other socio-demographic factors. Thus one could consider that delinquency is the dependent variable in such surveys, and that people give also a lot of information about independent variables that are supposed to be related to delinquency. The second reason is that the concept of delinquency may also be misleading. Needless to say that delinquency, as any other concept, is a social construct. However it must be mentioned that the concept of delinquency used in the criminological literature is a very broad one. In fact, many of the behaviours included in a self-reported survey are not offences in most European countries. Such behaviours include, for example, running away from home, skipping school or, in countries such as Spain and Italy, consuming drugs in a private context. In this report the term “delinquency” is used in that broad sense, and therefore it includes all sorts of antisocial or deviant behaviour, even if these behaviours are not defined as an offence in the criminal law.

Finally, self-reported surveys on drug use are not included in this report, but it must be mentioned that such surveys are currently taking place in almost all European countries. For example, all the countries presented here are participating in the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD).

II - NATIONAL REPORTS

1 - Finland

The fieldwork for the first Finnish survey on self-reported delinquency took place in 1959 and the results were published in the early 1960s. That survey was part of the Nordic Drafee Research Program which included other Scandinavian countries in which similar surveys were conducted in the 1960s. The technique was seldom used from the mid-1970s to the 1990s. However, since then, several surveys took place. In particular, Finland was the only Nordic country to participate in the first International Self-Reported Delinquency Study (ISRSD) in 1992 and is also participating in the second one. In both cases, the survey is based on a city sample (Helsinki), but in the meantime the country has developed a series of national surveys.

Thus, in 1995, Finland launched the Finnish Self-Report Delinquency Study (FSRD) that is conducted periodically in schools with sam-



ples of 9th grade students. The latest available results refer to 2004 and the FSRD will be conducted again in 2008. Moreover, since 2000/1, the Finnish School Health Survey includes also some questions on self-reported delinquency. This survey is a large-scale one and it includes results at the municipality level.

Apart from that, the country has recently conducted a Young Male Crime Survey (YMCS) based on the same questionnaire that was used in 1962 for the Nordic Draftee Research Program. This survey will allow the researchers to make interesting comparisons about delinquency in the 1960s and in the 2000s. The sample is composed by young males that attend their pre-military screening and therefore are slightly older than the adolescents included in most European samples.

Finland has also participated in the *Mare Balticum Youth Victimization Survey* that took place in 2002-2003. The questionnaire used for that survey included a self-reported delinquency scale. Finally, the country also participates in the ESPAD surveys.

In sum, one can say that self-reported delinquency surveys have been institutionalized in Finland and constitute a usual measure of delinquency. As a consequence, they are playing a role in the development of criminal policies. For example, the Ministry of Justice used self-reported data in its estimation of the crime situation and crime trends in the country. In addition, the results of the FSRD were taken into account by the committees that reformed the law concerning young offenders and for the planning of the Finnish national violence reduction program.

2 - Sweden

Sweden was also among the first European countries to introduce self-reported delinquency studies at the very beginning of the 1960s, in the context of the Nordic Draftee Research Program. The technique was somehow abandoned in the mid-1970s but, since the beginning of the 1990s, the country is conducting regular self-reported delinquency studies.

Thus, in 1995, Sweden conducted a national self-reported delinquency survey and since 1999 that survey is run every second year. The sample varies from 5,000 to 10,000 juveniles attending the 9th grade.

Sweden is also participating in the second ISRD. Apart from that, local or regional self-reported delinquency surveys are conducted regularly with relatively large samples of high school students.

All in all, Sweden is another country where self-reported delinquency surveys are institutionalised and represent currently a typical measure of crime. As a consequence, results from national surveys are used in the political debate on crime and crime prevention. Their influence on public policies can be seen mainly at the local level.



3 - United Kingdom and Ireland

Since the early 1960s, thirty major self-reported delinquency studies - collecting data on more than 140,000 individuals - have been conducted in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Apart from that, there have been several local and regional studies. Northern Ireland, England and Wales have participated in the first ISRD, and Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland are participating in the second one.

The majority of the self-reported studies took place in the United Kingdom and probably the most well known is the Cambridge Study on Delinquent Development which spans over a 40 year period (1961-2004). In recent years, new longitudinal studies have been started such as the Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development Study, the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions to Crime, and the Belfast Youth Development Study. In this context, it must be mentioned that even if the samples used in the United Kingdom and Ireland are composed mainly by adolescents, there are a few important exceptions of samples composed by adults.

Although, self-reported delinquency surveys have been used more or less constantly since the 1960s, there has been a clear increase in the number of studies conducted since the 1990s. In the United Kingdom, this increase may be due to the fact that the Central Government - that is the main provider of financial support for such studies - changed its attitude towards crime with campaigns such as “tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime”. The idea was to develop an “evidence-based” approach and, in that context, empirical data was clearly needed.

All in all, the number and diversity of self-reported delinquency surveys in the United Kingdom is impressive. The information provided by the available surveys is a clear source of inspiration for public policies. Thus, the Cambridge Study on Delinquent Development had a strong influence on policy makers and inspired partially the reform of the juvenile justice system putting the accent on the early detection of problematic behaviours and ineffective parenting practices. Apart from that, self-reported delinquency studies conducted in the United Kingdom have often been used for testing the validity and reliability of this measure of crime, as well as for the development and testing of criminological theories.

4 - Germany

In Germany, the first self-reported delinquency surveys were conducted in the late 1960s and the early 1970s with local or regional samples.

Like in most countries, the vast majority of the German research based on self-reported delinquency surveys, focuses on adolescent populations. However, since 1980, the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) is conducted every two years and, from 1990 on,



that survey includes four items on self-reported delinquency. As the survey is based on a national sample of the German population, the respondents are mainly adults. Following the Swiss model, the self-report technique has also been used with adults for the evaluation of the involvement in delinquency of the participants in heroin prescription programs.

As the first self-reported delinquency surveys were conducted in different regions and using different methodologies, their results were not easily comparable. Nevertheless, during the 1990s, the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony (KFN) developed a self-reported delinquency questionnaire that has been used since then in many German cities. Moreover, in some of these cities, the KFN survey is being used on a regular basis.

Germany is also one of the few European countries where longitudinal studies based on self-reported delinquency surveys are available. Such studies are taking place at the local level in different cities, and some of them include comparisons with official data. Most of these studies started in the 2000s but between 1977 and 1996 a longitudinal survey followed a group of 399 children from 13 to 25 years old. Finally, Germany is also participating in the second ISRD.

In sum, Germany has a long tradition of self-reported delinquency studies but the technique is not institutionalized yet. Surveys are organized at the local or regional level and, although the German Ministry of Interior has recently funded a big survey, not all the German States took part on it. Given the federal organization of the country, it is difficult to foresee if national surveys will be conducted in the future. As it happened in Switzerland, the positive results of the heroin prescription programs, measured through self-reported delinquency surveys, had a strong influence on the German drug policy. Apart from that, self-reported delinquency surveys did not have a strong impact on criminal policies yet, although they are regularly quoted in the Periodic Security Reports published by the German government.

5 - The Netherlands

The first self-reported delinquency surveys were conducted in the Netherlands during the 1970s and quite a few surveys were conducted in the following years.

Currently, the Scientific Research and Documentation Center (WODC) conducts systematic self-reported delinquency surveys studies with representative samples of Dutch adolescents. The survey is called the WODC monitor and it takes place every second year. Apart from that, the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) and the Dutch Institute for Budget (NIBUD) are also financing self-reported delinquency studies.

Since the middle of the 1980s, self-reported delinquency studies have been used to test different criminological theories including



differential association, social disorganization theory, strain theory and social bonding theory. The effects of poverty, peers and neighbourhood were also studied. Apart from that, some researchers have tested the reliability and validity of self-reported delinquency studies and their use with adult samples.

As one can see, self-reported delinquency surveys are institutionalized in the Netherlands and are having some influence not only in the academic field but also in the development of public policies.

6 - Belgium

In Belgium, the first self-reported delinquency survey was conducted in 1976 with a local sample. In the 1980s two other surveys were conducted in both linguistic areas of the country. The country has participated with a city sample (Liège) in the first ISRD in 1992 and is also participating in the second one with samples from both linguistic regions.

Since the 1990s no systematic large-scale representative self-reports have been conducted, but there is research usually based on urban samples. Thus, two surveys based on large scale samples have been conducted in the Flemish region and in Brussels in the 2000s. However, the recent creation of a platform on adolescent research by three institutions may lead to a more systematic implementation of self-reported delinquency studies.

In sum, self-reported delinquency studies are not yet institutionalized in Belgium and, apparently, they are not playing a major role in the development of criminal policies. Nevertheless, they have been used to test and develop criminological theories.

7 - Italy

Leaving aside a small self-reported delinquency survey (N=198) in one city that was published in 1980, the history of self-reported delinquency surveys in Italy is strongly related to the ISRD project. The country participated in the first ISRD in 1992 with a sample of three cities, and the questionnaire was used again in one of these cities in the mid 1990s. Currently, Italy is participating in the second ISRD.

Research on bullying has been conducted in different cities and regions since the middle of the 1990s using self-reported surveys. In this context, sometimes the ISRD questionnaire was combined with a specific questionnaire on bullying.

In sum, self-reported surveys are not institutionalized in Italy and their findings are mainly used by the scientific community. As a consequence, they do not play a role in the development of national public policies; nevertheless, there is evidence that they have been used at the local level in the city of Sienna.

8 - France

Among the countries included in this overview, France was the latest to introduce self-reported delinquency studies. The first study of this kind was conducted in 1999 - and published in 2001 - with a sample of two cities. The questionnaire was based on the one used for the first ISRD. In 2003, a second survey was conducted using the same methodology in one of the two cities surveyed in 1999. Currently, the country is participating in the second ISRD.

Violence at school has also been measured using the self-report technique since the mid-1990s. In that case, the survey was based on a questionnaire focused on victimisation, but it included also some questions on self-reported violence. The same questionnaire was later used in other countries, providing thus the possibility of performing some cross-national comparisons. A recent research is based on open questions about violence at school which are later recoded by the researcher.

One can easily see that self-reported delinquency studies are not at all institutionalized in France. The findings from the very few surveys available are used by the scientific community, but they do not play a role in the development of public policies. The only exceptions are surveys on drug abuse which were quoted in the new law on crime prevention introduced in 2007.

III - GENERAL OVERVIEW

1 - Historical overview

In the criminological field, the first use of the self-report technique to measure delinquency can be traced back to the work of Porterfield in the United States in the 1940s. The technique was improved during the 1950s and a major step was done when Short and Nye developed the first delinquency scale constructed on the basis of self-reported delinquency surveys, in 1957.

Scandinavian countries and the United Kingdom were the first European States to introduce self-reported delinquency studies. In the United Kingdom, the technique was adopted in 1961 by the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (1961-2004), which was the first European longitudinal study of this kind. In the following years, quite a few surveys took place and, since the late 1990s, the number of such surveys conducted in the United Kingdom has really exploded. In Scandinavian countries, the first self-reported delinquency studies were part of the Nordic Drafter Research Program (1961-1964). Their design allowed cross-national comparisons and they led to a whole series of publications until 1974 but, after that, the technique was seldom used until the 1990s.

In fact, research based on self-reported delinquency study was seldom used during that period, with the exception of a few studies in



Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, and the ones already mentioned in Great Britain.

The situation changed drastically at the beginning of the 1990s. Since then, the use of self-reported delinquency studies has been multiplied across Europe. Several reasons may explain this change and they will be presented in the conclusion of this article.

2 - Methodology

The samples used in European self-reported surveys are usually adolescents and many surveys were conducted at schools. However, one can find a few exceptions of surveys conducted with adults - especially in the case of longitudinal studies - and special samples, such as drug users or prisoners.

The validity and reliability of this measure of crime has been tested in a few European countries. In that context, it must be mentioned that surveys have been conducted using different administration techniques. Thus, one can find paper-pencil questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, computer-assisted personal interview, computer based surveys and a combination of these techniques, such as the use of the sealed-envelope technique combined with a personal interview.

3 - Self-reported delinquency surveys and criminological theory

Self-reported delinquency surveys are a major tool for the development and testing of criminological theories, in particular of those that try to explain juvenile delinquency. In fact, since the 1960s, most theories in criminology have been developed on the basis of the results of self-reported delinquency surveys. Paradigmatic examples in the United States are Travis Hirschi's control theory and Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi's general theory of delinquency. In Europe, these surveys played a major role in the development of David Farrington's integrated cognitive antisocial potential theory, and Per-Olof Wisktröm's Situational Action Theory. Apart from that, self-reported delinquency surveys are regularly used for testing existing theories. For example, the first ISRD questionnaire was inspired mainly by control theory, and the second one includes different theoretical approaches. The later approach - a combination of different theories - is used by the majority of the contemporary studies, including the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime, the Belfast Youth Development Study and the KFN surveys. Sometimes the results of self-reported delinquency surveys are counterchecked against official measures of crime, such as police, court or conviction statistics, but these measures provide far less information about offenders - especially about their personal history and lifestyle - than the surveys.

4 - Self-reported delinquency surveys and criminal policies

At a national level, the influence of self-reported delinquency surveys



on criminal policies is clearly related to the influence of this indicator in each country. In countries with a weak tradition of self-reported delinquency studies, it seems that these studies are not playing a major role on the development of criminal policies or are having only some influence at the local level (e.g. Italy). On the other hand, when this crime measure becomes part of the criminological scene, it is often taken into account for such policies. This is the case mainly in the United Kingdom, where the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development has inspired some legal reforms. In countries such as Finland, Germany, Germany and the Netherlands, self-reported delinquency surveys are also playing a role in the political debate on crime and crime prevention.

IV - CONCLUSION

The national reports summarized in this article show that in countries such as Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden, self-reported delinquency surveys have been institutionalized and national surveys are run on a regular basis that allows the development of time series. The United Kingdom and Ireland have also a strong tradition of self-reported delinquency studies and, although there are no national periodical surveys, an impressive number of studies - including longitudinal ones - are taking place. Germany is also running longitudinal as well as cross-sectional regional and local surveys on a more or less regular basis. Finally, in Belgium, France, Italy, self-reported delinquency surveys are not institutionalized but surveys are taking place punctually and the three countries are taking part in the second ISRD.

This report also shows that the use of self-reported delinquency studies has clearly increased since the 1990s. In my opinion, the main reason for that increase is that a majority of policy makers, criminologists, and the general public, were convinced that delinquency had increased during the second half of the twentieth century, even if the tendency to report offences had increased too. As a consequence, public funds - which are the main source of financing for these surveys - were made available. The political climate of the 1990s, that in many countries included a tendency to an evidence-based approach in the development of public policies, has also played a role. Also, it cannot be ignored that technical developments have simplified the task of entering and analysing data. Nowadays, a researcher needs only a small personal computer and the appropriate software to analyze a sample of thousand of individuals. At the same time, the positive experience of the first ISRD in 1992 - in which eleven of the fourteen participant countries were European - showed that it was possible to develop joint and comparable research and provided a common questionnaire that was later used in many studies. Finally, the creation of the European Society of Criminology (ESC) in 2000 provided a forum where European criminologists could meet and



develop joint projects. Thus, the meetings for the preparation of the second ISRD took place during the annual meetings of the ESC and twenty-six European countries are currently participating in the survey.

In brief, not only self-reported delinquency surveys seem to have found their place in European criminology as a major measure of juvenile delinquency, but it seems also clear that their use will probably increase in the future.



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Crimprev info n° 9^{Bis} - 12 May 2008

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- Design : CampingDesign