

SELF-REPORT STUDIES

"There is a theoretical crisis in criminology. It began when self-report questionnaire studies uncovered an unexpected amount of middle-class delinquency. These studies, as Empey (1982:118) later observed, "hit like a bombshell." They indicated that delinquency cuts across class lines to a greater degree than police statistics suggest. The self-report studies therefore contradicted theories explaining delinquency on the basis of lower-class conditions. They also lent credence to Tittle and Villemez's (1977) extraordinary claim that social-class relationships have nothing to do with criminal behavior. The debate over the self-report studies has reached an intensity unprecedented in theoretical criminology." (1985, p.xi)

Thus Herman and Julia Schwendinger introduce their book, Adolescent Subcultures and Delinquency. All criminologists since Quetelet have been aware the difficulty of interpreting the official statistics on crime and delinquency, both quantitatively - the extent of the 'hidden' figure - and qualitatively, particularly in terms of the class, gender and racial composition of the official statistics. For this reason criminologists have turned to alternative measures of crime which are generated by social scientists themselves, rather than by police and court officials. The two major alternative sources are victimization studies, which ask the victim - and self-report studies, which ask the offender. Since the 1960's a plethora of self-report studies have occurred in very many advanced industrial countries. (See the survey of those studies in Box 1981, pp.65-87). Very many of these surveys have shown little or no correlation between social class and delinquency (e.g. Tittle et al, 1978; Gold, 1970). Indeed, and relevantly, they have suggested only a slight or negligible 'real' difference between black and white delinquency rates (e.g. Hirschi, 1969; Chambliss and Nagasawa, 1969) and a much lower differential between males and females (e.g. Johnson, 1979).

Such findings, if true, would have considerable impact on all of those theories which relate crime to inequality, including, of course, the anomie tradition. Indeed, they have fuelled both sides of the political spectrum: left idealists and control theorists in their attack on anomie and relative deprivation theory. Elliott Currie puts this well:

"The implication was that only the biases in a criminal-justice system deeply imbued with middle-class prejudices accounted for the overrepresentation of poorer kids in the official figures. This conclusion was warmly received by both liberals and conservatives. To liberals it offered useful ammunition for attacking the (often real) class biases of the criminal-justice system and the hypocrisy of a society that came down hard on the crimes of the poor while ignoring the crimes of the affluent. To conservatives, it seemed to lend some support to the idea that crime was less influenced by the stock villains of traditional liberalism, like inequality and poverty, than by their own social pathologies of choice - like defective character and faulty upbringing.

Thus, in a controversial review of the evidence published in 1978, Charles Tittle, Wayne Vellemez and Douglas Smith argued that criminologists should abandon once and for all what they called the "myth of social class and criminality," a myth they attributed to "the tendency of sociologists, criminologists, and laymen to begin with the preconceived notion - the prejudice - that lower-class people are characterized by pejorative traits such as immorality, inferiority, and criminality." Farther to the Right, Travis Hirschi and his colleagues similarly announced in 1982 that 'the class issue is a diversion the field can no longer afford.'" (1985,pp.156-7)

It is worth noting here that it is precisely such a belief in the lack of differentials in the crime rates which informs those on the left who maintain that the overwhelming reason why there is such a disproportion of blacks in prison is the prejudices of the criminal justice system. (See Lea and Young, 1993). For, rather than inequalities in the structure of society being paramount, inequalities in the administration of justice becomes

central.

Much rests, therefore, on the reliability of these findings. As Box puts it: "It is...imperative that we consider very seriously this research technique because so much hangs on its validity. If it is reasonably valid...then we can safely conclude that we now have a more reliable portrait of the social distribution of crime and delinquency and, from that secure foundation, we can proceed properly to examine theoretical accounts of such behaviour." (1981,p.66)

It is my contention that self-report studies are riddled with problems, and that their use demands very careful interpretation. This is, of course, true of all measures of crime, all of which share similar problems of bias, but that this is particularly evident in this instance. Indeed, the rush to accept their unexplicated findings is an example of theory seeking its validation rather than being realistically tested against the findings of research. Let me summarize the major criticisms and their implications for interpreting the survey results:

(1) Sample Frame

The vast majority of these studies focus on school students. They therefore omit those kids who simply do not turn up to school and who are, in all probability, the most delinquent. They focus on the school not on the street (Hagan, 1992). Furthermore, many of the earlier studies were carried out on rural or small town adolescents whose differentials are probably not so great as in the metropolis. Lastly, they are very rarely conducted on adults (i.e. 18 years and above), and one might expect this to lower differentials.

(2) Non-Response.

All surveys face a problem of non-response. If this were random it would make no difference to the probabilistic basis of statistical analysis, but there is clear evidence that this is not the case in self-report studies. As Jurgen-Tas, a strong advocate of such studies, admits:

"Another bias may be introduced by the fact that prior contacts with the juvenile justice system do influence the willingness of young people to participate in self-report delinquency studies. For example Junger-Tas et al (1983) conducted a SRD study among a random sample of about 2000 12 to 18 year old juveniles, in order to get information on delinquency, police contacts and prosecutor contacts in a 'normal' youth population. Two years later (Junger-Tas et al, 1985, 1988) a stratified sample was drawn from the original one, to be reinterviewed. It was found that contacts with the juvenile justice system did have a serious impact on response rates. The response rate in the second study among those who earlier said not to have committed any offense was 60% and among those who had reported one offense but no police contact it was 55%; but among those who admitted to have committed offenses **and** to have had police contacts the response was 43%, whereas in the group that had **recorded** police contacts, response was only 34%. Another Dutch researcher drew a large random sample from the male adult population (aged 15 to 65) in a northern city of Holland (Veendrick, 1976). He also found that non-response was related to being known to the police, especially among those aged 15 to 27: 5.5% of the non-response group had a police record versus only 2% of the response group. Non-response was also related to age: the older the persons approached, the more non-response or incomplete returns." (1991, p4).

(3) Response but Lying

The delinquent is faced by the middle class interviewer, often actually in the official setting of the school. This is an optimum socially structured situation for fabrication. As Victor Jupp put it: "First of all there is the obvious point that with sensitive matters of crime there must be

doubts as to whether subjects will tell the truth. Second, it is extremely likely that admissions to certain crimes are over-represented and that admissions to other crimes are under-represented. For example, there may be a tendency to report fully on trivial offences about which the police are unlikely to do anything, and an unwillingness, despite assurances about anonymity and confidentiality, to admit to serious offences." (1989, pp.102-3). Victimization studies, in contrast, have much less chance of the subjects lying but note, even here, there is no doubt that sexual and violent occurrences are concealed from all but the most resolute and sensitive interviewers (see Mooney, 1993).

(4) The Level of Seriousness

One of the most repeated criticism of these studies is the extraordinary mixture and range of delinquencies which the questionnaires encompass (e.g. Hagan, 1992). Thus Elliott Currie, amusingly notes:

"These studies curiously lumped together a few serious offenses with an enormous number of trivial ones. The bulk of the questions had to do with what might best be called youthful hijinks - many, in fact, weren't even violations of the law, much less serious ones. In many of these studies, it was thus quite possible for relatively insignificant acts to be counted as "serious" delinquency, thus ensuring that nearly every youth from whatever background could have been considered a serious "unofficial" delinquent - and therefore stacking the deck from the outset. For example, as John Braithwaite has noted in an incisive critique, one self-report questionnaire used by Travis Hirschi in a study published in the late sixties asked youths if they had ever "taken little things worth less than \$2 that did not belong to you" or "banged up something that did not belong to you on purpose." Braithwaite points out that a child who takes a schoolmate's pencil and breaks it in a moment of anger is guilty of both "offenses" and, in this study, would have been placed in the most delinquent category. Most of these studies were overloaded with questions asking young people to report whether they had ever disobeyed their parents or told lies or gotten into fistfights - all activities that nearly any moderately honest youth would have had to acknowledge.

Hence, at best, the self-report studies were more or

less accurately recording the fact that American youths of all backgrounds sometimes acted up and got out of hand - a conclusion that was surely true, though hardly surprising to any parent or teacher to warrant the commotion it caused. The studies simply were not about serious crime, for the most part, and the attempt to stretch their unremarkable findings about the prevalence of youthful misbehavior to encompass the much more disturbing issue of criminal violence was bound both to fail and to discredit the larger social and theoretical vision that lay behind it." (1985,p.157)

It is obvious that the wider the range of delinquencies covered the less the difference will be found between different social groups. Yet such a practice persists in self-report studies: only recently, for example, a survey of class differentials in delinquency amongst adolescents in Northern Ireland included drinking alcohol between the age of X and illicitly recording audio-cassettes (XXXX).

Yet, of course, when frequency and seriousness of offending is taken into consideration clear differences reappear. Thus studies by Hindelang et al (1976) and by Elliott Currie and Huizinga (1980) show clear differentials between lower and middle class youth.

(5) The Problem of Different Values

A recurrent problem, both of self-report and victimization surveys is the differential interpretation which the respondents gives to the questions. In victimization studies, for example, whereas what constitutes being burgled is fairly unambiguous, what actually consists of "being hit" depends very much on the violence tolerance levels of particular groups of people (e.g. it is a very different evaluation for young men compared to elderly women). For this reason some researchers have suggested

that much comparative victimization research on violence is next to impossible (Hough, 1986), whilst others have suggested that such surveys must first establish the definitions of violence held by the sub-groups in the population before proceeding to analyse rates (see Mooney, 1993, Young 1986). This concern is at the heart of criminological theory: it is the basis of the long-standing debate centring over the definition of suicide rates (e.g. Douglas, 1967; Atkinson, 1971), and is the reason why left realists have consistently pointed to the dyadic nature of crime and delinquency (see Chapter X).

In the case of self-report studies no such allowances for differential evaluation have been made. This problem has been picked up by several of the more perceptive critics (including Braithwaite (1981) cited in the quote from Elliott Currie above). Witness Downes and Rock:

"Since control theorists make so much of the strength of their case empirically, it is worth nothing that in certain respects Hirschi's data strain credulity - a pleasant change from theories producing that effect. His definition of serious delinquency is weak in the extreme: any two or more of six offences - theft of under \$2; theft of \$2 to \$50; theft of over \$50; joy-riding; 'banging up something that doesn't belong to you'; and, not counting fights with a brother or sister, the beating up or hurting of anyone on purpose. How is it that over 50 per cent of Hirschi's Californian sample White boys are non-delinquent by these standards throughout adolescence? Presumably they put their own interpretation on minor vandalism and fighting, in which case we need to know what implicit standards they are employing. This, needless to say, is the major problem with self-report studies of this kind. (Another reason may be that school drop-outs did not fill in the questionnaire." (1988, p.237n)

And Victor Jupp: "What is more, self-report studies have failed

to utilize social theories to take account of subjects' perception of what is criminal and therefore worth reporting, and of the way in which these perceptions relate to sub-cultural norms and values. For example, violent acts at soccer matches can have serious consequences for the victims but can be seen as orderly and normal by the perpetrators." (1989, p.103)

A sub-cultural group of young men with macho-values and a propensity to violence will obviously have very different definitions to that of a group of middle class school-oriented pupils. This will result not only in an underestimation of violence by certain groups, but an overestimation of violence with others. Indeed, Gold (1970), one of the most meticulous of self-report researchers, discovered that there was considerable variation in the behaviour adolescents perceived as delinquent. He found that: 'half of the acts of property destruction, one quarter of the confidence games, and one-fifth of personal assaults to which (his) sample initially admitted could not conceivably be called chargeable offences.' (p.30) (See Box's commentary, 1981, pp.71-2). He was consequently forced to distinguish between 'actual delinquent behaviour' and 'perceived delinquent behaviour.'

(6) Parallel Findings with Regard to Black-White Differentials

Self-report studies, as I have mentioned, suggest much smaller differences between black and white crime rates than do official data. This parallel finding to those of class similarly undermines inequality theories of the genesis of crime as blacks are palpably worse off on average than whites. Once again, similar processes of overcounting trivial offences and undercounting serious offences, as outlined above, have been uncovered. (See Hindelang et al, 1979). Furthermore, although class of the offender cannot be reliably inferred by victims, colour of skin can readily

be done so for a range of offences where the offender confronts the victim. (e.g. interpersonal violence, theft, street robbery, etc). Victimization studies indicate a clear disproportionality in black-white offenders values which, if not as great as that presented in the official figures, do not suggest that discrimination on the level of the criminal justice system is the major explanation of the higher black crime rate. (Hindelang, 1978; Blumstein, 1982; Lea and Young, 1993). Furthermore, the homicide statistics, which are by far the most reliable of the official statistics, show clearly that in the United States there is a wide discrepancy between death by homicide between blacks and whites. Between the ages of fifteen to twenty-four black men are five times more likely to be murdered than white men, and the majority of killings is intra-racial (Currie, 1985, p.153).

(7) The Complexity of Class

One thing of certainty is that the class structure is extremely complex: the notion of a homogeneous working class - or middle class for that matter - is certainly not characteristic of the present and, indeed, was never so in the past. Witness the present post-modernist discussions on the restructuring of the working class and the past distinctions between the aristocracy of labour and the unskilled working class, proletariat and lumpen proletariat, the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor etc. It is not my intention here to enter into the controversies over class composition (see Marshall et al, 1989; Giddens, 1981). It is important, however, to stress the diversity, for example, of class position which occurs in advanced industrial societies: 'middle class' can mean white collar workers, professionals, small farmers and landowners; 'working class' can mean highly skilled workers, unskilled manual workers and the structurally unemployed. Each of these groups - and many other sub-divisions - experience

different market conditions, and widely different possibilities for social mobility. The most obvious distinction is between the structurally unemployed and the rest of the working class, although this is by no means the only big difference in terms of life prospects. Witness the difference between the 'white collar' middle class and professionals or overall between those working in the primary labour market (which offers a steady career and prospects of promotion), and those in the more capricious secondary labour market (see Giddens, 1981). What this means in practice is that many of the groupings collate groups which may well have high and low delinquency rates and thus tend to obfuscate real differences.

(8) The Evidence from Homicide and Inequality Studies

(9) The Evidence of Areal Victimization Studies

A whole host of victimization studies has shown that there is considerably greater crime rates in working class areas than in middle class areas (e.g. Jones et al, 1986; Sampson and Costellano, 1982). As John Braithwaite pithily put it: "It is hardly plausible that one can totally explain away the higher risks of being mugged and raped in lower class areas as the consequence of the activities of middle class people who came into the area to perpetrate such acts." (1981, p.?)

(10) What Sort of Crime Are We Talking About?

The relationship between class and crime was cast into doubt from the publication in 1940 of Edwin Sutherland's article, 'White Collar Criminality'. For in this and subsequent studies, he clearly showed that great deal of crime and of

far greater impact than what is conventionally viewed as crime, was committed by corporate executives and those with white collar jobs. In this article he summarily dismissed the relationship between poverty and crime:

"The theory that criminal behavior in general is due either to poverty or to the psychopathic and sociopathic conditions associated with poverty can now be shown to be invalid for three reasons. First, the generalization is based on a biased sample which omits almost entirely the behavior of white-collar criminals. The criminologists have restricted their data, for reasons of convenience and ignorance rather than of principle, largely to cases dealt with in criminal courts and juvenile courts, and these agencies are used principally for criminals from the lower economic strata. Consequently, their data are grossly biased from the point of view of the economic status of criminals and their generalization that criminality is closely associated with poverty is not justified.

Second, the generalization that criminality is closely associated with poverty obviously does not apply to white-collar criminals. With a small number of exceptions, they are not in poverty, were not reared in slums or badly deteriorated families, and are not feebleminded or psychopathic. They were seldom problem children in their earlier years and did not appear in juvenile courts or child guidance clinics. The proposition, derived from the data used by the conventional criminologists, that "the criminal of today was the problem child of yesterday" is seldom true of white-collar criminals. The idea that the causes of criminality are to be found almost exclusively in child similarly is fallacious. Even if poverty is extended to include the economic stresses which afflict business in a period of depression, it is not closely correlated with white-collar criminality. Probably at no time within fifty years have white-collar crimes in the field of investments and of corporate management been so extensive as during the boom period of the twenties.

Third, the conventional theories do not even explain lower class criminality. The sociopathic and psychopathic factors which have been emphasized doubtless have something to do with crime causation, but these factors have not been related to a general process which is found, both

in white-collar criminality and lower class criminality and therefore they do not explain the criminality of either class. They may explain the manner or method of crime - why lower class criminals commit burglary or robbery rather than false pretenses." (Sutherland, 1940, reprinted in C Bersani, 1970, pp.32-33).

Sutherland is in pursuit of a general theory of crime; he attempts to encompass both conventional and white collar crime in the same equation. It cannot be poverty and inequality that leads to crime because white collar criminals are ipso facto rich. He ends up, therefore, with his famous theory of differential association: crime, whether of the rich or of the poor, is produced by a learning process in which the individual encounters an excess of definitions favourable to crime over those unfavourable. The startling tautology of this 'theory' has little to commend it, apart from the fact that it stands over against those theories which see crime as a lack of socialization (individual positivism), or lack of social attachment (social control). But it is their mirror image. For it shares with these theories the inability to explain why people are motivated to commit crime or, indeed, how definitions favourable to crime arise in the first place (I. Taylor, et al, 1973, pp.126-133). Nor does it attempt to link together what might be common patterns of motivation to commit crime at both ends of the social structure (see Braithwaite, 1991 and the discussion in Chapter X). But the last sentence in Sutherland's pronouncement lets the cat out of the bag: "they may explain the manner or method of crime - why lower class criminals commit burglary or robbery rather than false practices." Indeed they might! For the bottom line is: does inequality and poverty lead to 'conventional' crime: burglary, robbery, serious assault, and theft? The existence of crime elsewhere in the social structure does not invalidate this causal claim.

Overwhelmingly, of course, self-report studies have not, in fact, examined the wide gamut of crime. Indeed, Steve Box is critical of them for precisely this reason: "the obsession with juvenile self-reported delinquency and the limited number of items in the one adult self-reported crime study have resulted in rendering invisible the massive contribution of crime by government and corporate officials; this is ironic, considering that one purpose of such studies was to make good the deficiencies of the official statistics" (1981, p.87). This is evidently so, but the claims of the advocates of self-report studies have centred around the class composition of those committing conventional crimes. They have argued that there was an artificial bias in the official statistics at this level and hence denied the causal link between inequality and conventional crime. And, as we have seen, this claim that there is no association between class and conventional crime is for a multitude of reasons unproven. Rather than the association between the working class and crime being an artifact of the official statistics, the lack of association between class and crime indicated by self-report studies is an artifact of a flawed methodology.

Note on the Supposed Lack of Association between Class and Conventional Crime in the Official Statistics