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Dirk Enzmann · Janne Kivivuori
Ineke Haen Marshall · Majone Steketee
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A Global Perspective on Young People as Offenders and Victims

First Results from
the ISRD3 Study

SpringerBriefs in Criminology

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Foreword

A Global Perspective on Young People as Offenders and Victims is the latest report of research from the International Self-Report Delinquency Study, a bold, imaginative, and innovative collaboration that is providing scientific criminology with basic data about crime and delinquency of considerable importance. The idea that standardized data about the nature of delinquency and victimization could be collected reliably from respondents from countries around the world was a breathtaking idea and one many criminologists would not have thought possible. Differences in language, legal systems, demography, and economic development all cautioned against such an ambitious venture. The meaning of delinquency and adolescence was too variable and too culturally dependent to suppose that a single instrument with common questions about problem behaviors could provide meaningful data, even if an administrative system could be devised to collect the data.

And yet here we are, at the third wave of data collection, and the level of participation, the survey quality, and the significance of the research all continue to increase with each administration. The result is a database with such significance that scientific criminology simply must pay attention. Both the methodological insights and the substantive findings of the ISRD are substantial, and the data are loaded with theoretical and policy significance for criminology.

This monograph, along with the studies being published from the second wave of the project, is a testament to the triumph of a scientific disposition over data-free speculation. The scope of this project is large and ambitious, and the criminological community owes a debt of gratitude to the architects of these surveys: for their determination to overcome the many obstacles to the project, for their contributions to measurement and survey design issues, for their careful descriptions of procedures, for their studies of limitations to the data, and for their realized commitment to making their data publicly available in a short period of time.

The ISRD is an evolving collaboration among a number of scholars, across a long period of time. It is a “learning survey,” such that over repeated administrations the principals carefully preserve aspects of the survey that make administrations comparable while providing mechanisms to allow new issues to be addressed. They balance collection of important socio-demographic respondent characteristics with

a concern for providing information from respondents pertinent to evolving theoretical and policy concerns. And, realizing that many will look to these data for purposes of comparing levels of offending and victimization between countries or over time, they offer appropriate cautions and stress important limitations to the data for those purposes while stressing the overriding value of the survey for the study of correlates and putative causes.

The project deploys a common, well-honed instrument to collect data about delinquency, victimization, and related problem behaviors from samples of adolescents (generally 12–16) around the world. It uses school samples in a cross-sectional design and includes standard etiological questions about family, peer, school, and leisure-time activities. The self-report instrument as well as the set of independent variables has been subject to excellent methods work and the instrument is carefully crafted to allow examination of well-selected policy and theory questions. Remarkably, the authors of the survey routinely build in items and procedures to facilitate methodological study. Individually, some of the samples are relatively large and, in aggregate, provide what is likely the largest and most versatile dataset of self-reported delinquency in existence.

Sample surveys of victimization and crime are one of the major advances in scientific criminology, and these scholars take advantage of substantial research experience using these methods (among these authors are, of course, some of the pioneers of advances in survey techniques in criminology). They show what a large, carefully crafted cross-sectional design focused on an appropriate population (young teens) can provide. As a result, opportunities for causal analysis and useful assessments of public policy issues are substantial in each wave of their survey. (This is especially welcome in an age of small-sample, passive observational designs following subjects past the interesting ages of criminal involvement and fraught with problems of selection bias.)

As a result, the long-term importance of the ISRD is difficult to overestimate. Sample surveys of crime and victimization have taught us many things difficult or impossible to learn by reliance on official data alone (see, e.g., Gottfredson 1986). They teach us about the true nature of ordinary crime and delinquency, about the criminal justice process and how it selects and filters events and people, about the importance of the concept of opportunity and situations as causes of crime in addition to the role of personal characteristics, and about features of delinquency and crime that transcend societies and cultures.

One methodological decision in the design of these surveys that has been of enormous importance to criminology is the adoption of common-sense, incident-based behavioral descriptions of crime and delinquency. This feature (pioneered in the initial victimization surveys) allows flexibility in the creation of dependent variables, strips them from the traditional, narrow focus on legal or moral acts, helps distinguish respondent causes from situational causes, facilitates connections among otherwise seemingly widely disparate problem behaviors, and enables comparisons among groups with differing legal or cultural ideas of delinquency and crime.

From the ISRD surveys, fundamental facts about delinquency and victimization are documented which are substantial and transcend the various societies in the dataset. These common facts about victimization, crime, and delinquency surely must now command the attention of valid scientific explanations. Just a few examples: they underscore the important role of parents, schools, gender, and peers everywhere; they reinforce the image of versatility of problem behaviors, of the victimization/offending connection, and the importance of settings in which delinquency tends to more frequently occur. This monograph shows how cyber-victimization is an important component to adolescent life throughout the world and that excessively harsh parental treatment should command our attention. The authors also show that decisions by adolescents to invoke the authorities as a result of victimization they experience depend on features of the events, such as the extent of harm and the relationship between the victim and offender, more so than attitudes towards authority.

The findings of ISDR3 remind us that crimes and delinquencies are events—that they require for their occurrence both the offender or delinquent (or an individual predisposed to act in ways that facilitates delinquent acts) and also “targets” and opportunities. This distinction, between crime and criminality, made obvious and important by this research, may go a long way in helping to understand the between-society differences found in the data. Because the situational factors necessary for crime—the distribution of goods, victims, opportunities, and services—vary from time to time and across societies, they are likely to be important causes of variation in victimization across societies. Since this distinction is readily built into theories of delinquency causation, these data suggest that the common differentiation among theories as “micro” and “macro” is unnecessary. Time spent outside of adult supervision with peers, the availability of attractive (to teens) goods (such as bicycles and cars) or victims, and the availability of drugs and alcohol are all event-based causes of crime and delinquency that can be explored, along with the individual-level respondent data known to cause delinquency, with data such as these.

Among the very strong design features of ISRD3 is its focus on early adolescence. This is correct for many reasons but includes the fact that the teen years is the period of maximum participation in problem behaviors and will thus result in meaningful distributions on the dependent variable. Young teens are able (and for the most part, willing) to participate in the required survey tasks. Their age is proximate to the time of the most important causal variables for delinquency (and hence crime). They have not yet begun to experience the huge, inexorable decline in crime with increasing age. Because of the school context, large samples that include most of the population are available. This cross-sectional design, with its emphasis on a rich array of independent variables, standard instruments administered in a standard way, samples large enough for meaningful statistical analysis, and close identity in time between causal variables and criterion variables, is perhaps the best nonexperimental method we have to study causation in criminology.

A Global Perspective on Young People as Offenders and Victims carries on the tradition of the ISRD of concern about the measurement properties of the self-report instruments. In this volume are studies of differential response, using innovative

methods to investigate social desirability effects and their impact on country-level uses of the data. Understanding the relations among respondent characteristics and self-report responses has important implications for the use of self-report data for causal study. Differential validity by country, or other respondent characteristics of explanatory interest (say, self-control), provides important information necessary for testing casual arguments with self-report data. A laudable concern for the limitations of the data is a hallmark of this volume and also of previous work by these authors (see, e.g., Marshall and Enzmann 2012).

Publication of the first findings from ISRD3 is an exciting event. This is, of course, only a preliminary sampling of the vast potential of these data. But already the evidence is in: the design and execution of this major research project provides information that will enrich criminology for years to come.

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