CHAPTER ##

THE INTERNATIONAL SELF-REPORT DELINQUENCY (ISRD) STUDY

By

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Background

The self-report method has gained widespread use among researchers, both in the United States and abroad (Junger-Tas and Marshall, 1999; Klein, 1989). The International Self Report Delinquency Study (ISRD) is a large internationally collaborative self-report study of delinquency, victimisation and substance use of 12-15 year old pupils in grade seven, eight and nine. The ISRD project was developed to respond to the need for standardized, internationally comparable data on youth crime. International comparisons of survey data may only be made if all countries use the same (translated) questionnaires, and use comparable methods in questionnaire administration, sample selection, and data coding. The first ISRD study (1991-1992) pioneered the use of standardized international self-report methodology on youth in 13 countries (Junger-Tas et al., 2003). Fifteen years later, the study was repeated, this time with a larger number of countries and an expanded questionnaire (ISRD-2) (Junger-Tas et al., 2010). A third and larger ISRD study is planned for 2011-2012. This chapter discusses the ISRD-2.

ISRD-2

The main objectives of the project are to study cross-national variability as well as international trends in juvenile delinquency, substance use and victimization over time; to improve standardized self-report methodology for comparative purposes, and to generally advance comparative criminological research beyond the constraints of officially recorded crime. Official crime rates do not lead to valid international comparison, due to variations in crime definitions and in prosecution policies. Moreover, unlike official data, self-reports provide background information needed to test criminological theory (Junger-Tas and Marshall, 1999). The ISRD-2 aims to estimate the prevalence and incidence of youthful offending, substance use and victimization, as well as to examine the correlates of youth crime and to test different explanations of crime in 31 countries. The study also collects city and country level indicators.

Methodology
The ISRD has an explicitly comparative design. The standardization of methodology demands that all countries adopt the core ISRD-2 module and survey procedures, comparable sampling designs, and coordinated data management and analysis. That is a challenge, since ISRD-2 includes considerably more countries (31) than ISRD-1, in particular countries from Eastern and Central Europe. Selection of countries was not based on a random sampling of the nations in the world, but on the shared interest from researchers working in universities, research institutes, and government agencies in these countries (Junger-Tas, et al., 2010). The main focus of the ISRD is on Europe, although a number of non-European countries also have participated. ISRD-3 (planned for 2011-2012) will expand the countries to include China, Turkey and Mexico among others.

**Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was collectively produced by the participants in a number of workshops. ISRD-2 has a modular construction of the survey instrument, i.e., a core module with additional modules of questions to fit individual countries’ interests. Most of the questions are closed-ended, often with an ‘other’ open-ended response possibility. Questions focus on social demographic background information (including immigration status), family, neighbourhood, school, leisure activities, and friends. There are also questions about major life events, attitudes toward violence, and (low) self-control. Questions are mostly drawn from social control and opportunity theories. A major part of the survey consists of questions about 12 different types of delinquency (life time and last year prevalence and frequency, co-offending, and social response), substance use (drugs and alcohol), as well as victimization (including bullying). Questions on substance use (alcohol and drugs) are asked, but are not treated as measures of delinquency. A total of sixty-seven questions are included in the core module of the ISRD-2. The ISRD questionnaire is in the English language; each country translated the questionnaire as needed. The questionnaires were usually completed in a classroom setting, using pencil and paper. A few countries (e.g., Switzerland) used computerized administration instead (Junger-Tas et al. 2010)

**Sampling**

The ISRD-2 project is a school-based study, with random samples drawn either at the city level or at the national level. Most of the countries (22) used city-based sampling, averaging about 700 students from a large city or metropolitan area, 700 from a medium size city and 700 from a cluster of small towns, for a total sample size per country of about 2,100. A total of 44,962 surveys were collected in the city-based sample. For a variety of practical and theoretical

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1 Armenia, Aruba, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Canada, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Netherlands Antilles, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Suriname, Sweden, Switzerland, United States, and Venezuela.

2 Carrying weapon, group fight, assault, extortion, snatching, vandalism, shoplifting, bike theft, theft from car, car theft, burglary, drug dealing.

3 The complete questionnaire may be found at website [http://webapp5.rrz.uni-hamburg.de/ISRD/JDEB](http://webapp5.rrz.uni-hamburg.de/ISRD/JDEB)
reasons, nine countries opted for national samples instead, resulting in 22,921 completed questionnaires. Clearly, city-based and national samples have different advantages and disadvantages and may, strictly speaking, not be directly compared. In order to maximize comparability with the city-based samples, the countries with a national sample tried to oversample – although not always successfully - at least 700 youth from one large or medium city. Important to note is thus that international comparisons of ISRD-2 prevalence rates should be limited to only those respondents who live in large or medium cities (62 cities; n= 43,968; see Figure 1 below). A total of 67,883 students completed the questionnaire between 2005 and 2007.

The ISRD-2 project uses as the primary sampling unit 7th, 8th and 9th grade classrooms (paralleling 12 to 15 year old students), stratified by school type. Most participating countries took great pains to randomly sample schools in the selected cities, followed by a random selection of classes within these schools, resulting in a fair representation of the school attending population in grade 7-9.

Data standardization
In order to ensure that the survey results were treated similarly by all research teams, data were entered by using the EpiData software. Standardized syntax was used to transfer data from EpiData to SPSS for each country, and to create all variables (define, code and check for out of bound questionnaire responses) included in the core ISRD-2 questionnaire. The result of this exercise created 31 SPSS data sets with identical variable names and coding, which were then merged into one master file.

Findings
Simultaneous analysis of the pooled data collected in 31 countries, 128 cities and towns, and 1,375 schools presents many challenges (i.e. weighing, cluster effects, multi-level analysis and so on). As an important general analytic strategy, the initial ISRD analysis uses country clustering, which greatly facilitates describing a large number of countries simultaneously. Six county clusters are used: Anglo-Saxon countries (Canada, Ireland, USA), Northern European countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden), Western European countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland), Mediterranean countries (Cyprus, Italy, Spain, Portugal), Latin America (Aruba, Netherlands Antilles, Suriname, Venezuela), and Eastern and Central European countries (the post-socialist countries of Armenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Slovenia). This clustering is based on Saint-Arnaud and Bernard (2003) and Lappi-Seppälä (2007).

It is too early to report substantive findings, but preliminary analysis of the results (Enzmann et al., 2010; Junger-Tas et al., 2010) shows that significant differences in level and type of offending are found between country clusters, with the Western European and Anglo-Saxon cities generally (but not always) scoring highest, followed by Northern Europe, Latin American and Mediterranean cities, with post-socialist cities at the bottom. Figure 1 below shows the main findings with regard to total prevalence rates. Remember that these rates are based on comparisons of data from the 62 large and medium sized cities only. In order to increase ease of interpretation, the rates are shown with the 95% confidence intervals, which may be used to
estimate the significance of the differences between the countries. The dashed lines in the figures indicate the country clusters discussed above. The sequence of country clusters in Figure 1 follows the expanded scheme of Saint-Arnauld and Bernard (2003) (i.e. Anglo-Saxon, Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, Mediterranean, Latin America, and the Eastern and Central European clusters); within each country cluster, countries are ranked in declining overall delinquency prevalence. Furthermore, comparisons of ISRD-2 offending and victimization rates with those of the other two main sources of internationally available crime statistics (i.e., International Crime Victimization Survey and European Sourcebook data) suggest a moderate level of support for a convergence of different measures (Enzmann et al., 2010). In other words, the ISRD-2 results are quite compatible with other internationally available crime data.

The results for the US component of the ISRD-2 have been reported elsewhere and are generally in line with theoretical expectations derived from social bonding, self-control, social disorganization and life style theories (He and Marshall, 2009; Marshall and He, 2010).

4 The confidence intervals represent asymmetrical Maximum-Likelihood-Estimates, which take into account design effects (resulting from the interviewing of entire classrooms) as well as the stratification of the sample by grade levels. For Canada no raw data were available because of concerns for the confidentiality of the data; therefore, the confidence intervals for Canada were estimated by averaging the design effects of the other countries (Enzmann et al., 2010)
Figure 1: Prevalence rates in % (last year) of total self-reported delinquency (Enzmann et al., 2010)
Challenges

A project such as the ISRD faces tremendous challenges. Three are worthy of mentioning. First, it is hard to obtain enough funds to do this type of project. The ISRD is not funded by a central funding agency; each country had to obtain its own funding (with the exception of 6 Central and Eastern European countries which were funded by the EU). Encouraging is, however, that most countries were able to complete the study with a very modest budget, because of researchers’ dedication and willingness to donate their time and skills. Second, working with a large number of foreign collaborators (more than 100) creates many problems related to language, cultural misunderstandings, and logistic and practical issues (organizing meetings, standardization of sampling, data collection- and coding). Fortunately, regular workshops (about twice yearly, starting in 2003) succeeded in building an enthusiastic international research team, which - guided by the small (6 member) ISRD Steering Committee – helped to overcome many of these obstacles. An important tool was the agreed-upon research protocol, including use of standardized sampling design (which could be adjusted to the local situation by the Survey Manager), and standardized data coding and –entry (EPIDATA). Third, most countries faced some problems with regard to executing the classroom-based sample plan. Often, needed data were not available (i.e. lists of classrooms and schools), permission was not granted by the authorities, or parental consent was not given or severely limited the response rates. Each country prepared a technical report documenting how these problems were solved.

Conclusions

The ISRD-2 study offers the benefits of both standardized methodology and flexibility of culture-specific investigations. It appears that so-called “flexible standardization” (Junger-Tas et al, 2010) may be the most realistic approach to comparative survey research. Like all matters international, reasonable compromises are often the better solution. Experiences with ISRD-1 and ISRD-2 have shown that it is possible to assess both the convergence and the divergence of self-reported delinquency in a large number of nations and to acquire more knowledge about the correlates of crime. The first two sweeps of the ISRD study have paved the way for repeated studies in the future (comparable to the ICVS), which will allow the measurement of international trends in youth delinquency over time.

Study Questions

1. What are the major advantages and disadvantages of conducting repeated international self-report studies of juvenile delinquency?
2. In what ways can self-report delinquency studies be used to inform official crime data (and vice versa)?
3. List the strengths and weaknesses of the current ISRD study design?
4. What are the major obstacles in extending this study to non-western countries?
5. What are the incentives and disincentives for local school districts (including community leaders, school administrators, teachers, parents, and students) to cooperate in such studies? Why?
6. How to maximize the utility of self-report delinquency study on public policy?
References


About the Authors

Dr. Ni He is an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice in the College of Criminal Justice, Northeastern University (Boston, MA). He received his law degree (LL.B.) from Xiamen University (PRC) in 1988 and his Ph.D. in Criminal Justice from the University of Nebraska-Omaha (USA) in 1997. Dr. He’s primary teaching and research interests include comparative criminology, criminal justice, and quantitative methodology. He was a Co-Principal Investigator (with Dr. Ineke Haen Marshall) for the U.S. portion of the 31-nation International Self-report Delinquency Study funded by the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice (2006-2008). More recently Professor He and Professor Lanying Li (School of Law, Xiamen University) were awarded a joint international grant from the MacArthur Foundation (2009-2011) to study Chinese criminal courts in Fujian Province. Dr. He’s scholarship can be found in a variety of refereed professional journals. He is the author of Reinventing the Wheel: Marx, Durkheim and Comparative Criminology (1999) and Policing in Finland (2006).

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