

ON THE USE OF SELF-REPORTS IN MEASURING CRIME AMONG ADULTS:
METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The history of self-report research concerning the prevalence of crime is a history of discontinuity. It is a history of changing foci of interest and changing populations under investigation. At the beginning the focus was on the prevalence of crime. In later years it shifted towards disentangling the causal patterns of delinquency; questions of prevalence and epidemiology lost importance. At the beginning, interest was in adults. The first self-report study actually centered on adults, who were contacted more or less accidentally and handed a questionnaire to return later to the researcher. Subsequent studies relied on students, then finally almost all on school populations. This partly intentional and partly accidental shift in the population base had advantages: it made it possible to use more systematic frames of sampling, assuring greater representativeness.¹ The shift, however, also meant a loss in comparability and measuring social change via trend studies. Due to the change in population, studies which allow a comparison of the same population over time are scarce. Crime among adults, although always a topic in criminological thinking, did not gain any prominence in self-report research again. Apart from studies on drug use there have been only a few surveys where an adult sample

1. The shift can be discerned for the USA as well as for Germany and other countries. In Germany, the first self-report study was done by Magnus Hirschfeld on homosexuality around the turn of the century. Students and workers were used as the sample (Hirschfeld, 1914:480ff.). In the USA, the first large study on crime of various natures was done among adults in the 1940s by Wallerstein and Wyle (1947); later studies in this realm referred to students and then to the school population. The relatively high prominence of student samples in all countries at the beginning might have had something to do with the ease with which university researchers could collect data from their daily clientele at low cost. Probably many of the early studies, like the first one for Germany, done by Fritz Sack in Cologne in 1964, were never published.

was used -- restricted, moreover, to a city or a region as the basis.² Nationwide studies are lacking.

In the following we shall report on two nationwide, representative studies we did of the adult population in West Germany. Along with questions on drug use, self-reports on selected types of crime were collected. We shall look at them mainly from a methodological point of view: How do the respondents react to such questions; to what extent do they perceive them as an invasion of their privacy; to what extent does the interview situation affect their willingness to admit deviance; and how do our prevalence data compare with anonymous data collected among young adults?

2. METHODOLOGY

The data were collected in face-to-face interviews as part of two omnibus surveys in April-June, 1982 and November-December, 1987. They were administered to representative samples of the West German population (including West Berlin) age 18 years onwards. The surveys were done by professional survey organizations, the first by Infratest and the second by GETAS. In both cases a random sample was used with a response rate of 68% and 70%, respectively. In 1982, 1993 people were interviewed and in 1987, 987. The questions on delinquent behavior ever committed were placed in the context of questions on attitudes towards illegal drug use and deviant behavior.³ In the 1982 survey, respondents had to indicate the frequency of ever committing the offense, while in the 1987 survey only a simple "yes" or "no" response was required. In the 1982 survey, the self-report questions had to be answered by filling in a questionnaire handed to the respondent within the presence of the interviewer. After having done this task the sheet of paper had to be folded and handed back to the interviewer. In the 1987 survey, the response process was more public, requiring the interviewee to respond in the open and verbally.

In both studies the way in which the data were collected opened specific possibilities for methodological research. The procedure in 1982 made it possible to collect observational data. While the respondent was answering the questionnaire, the interviewer assessed the verbal and nonverbal reactions of the respondent to the questions on crime

2. For these studies of the adult population on a regional basis, see Vendrick's study in Groningen, quoted by Junger-Tas (1988) and, on a larger scale, the survey by Charles R. Tittle (1980).

3. The first survey in 1982 was part of a larger study on drugs and was financed by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (USA). The second in 1987, again with special emphasis on drug use, was financed by the Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung (Federal Center for Health Education, Cologne). Both surveys were omnibus surveys with various topics apart from criminological ones. In the 1982 survey the self-report questions were asked in the first third, and in the 1987 survey at the end of the interview schedule.

according to a standardized coding scheme. In the 1987 survey, the situation was different, since probing -- here on the experience of illegal drug use -- was done in a standardized way and coded separately. Consequently, the interviewer had to know the answer explicitly in order to know whether additional questions had to be posed or not.⁴ In both surveys a similar line of introduction was followed, calling the subsequently mentioned behavior widely practiced behavior, thus mitigating its appearance of deviance. In both cases the first behavior question referred to alcohol intoxication as some sort of mild and, in some situations, even required deviation. In 1982 the following questions pertained to hashish use, riding on public transport without a ticket, and shoplifting. In 1987 the subsequent questions were on attending cinema, concerts, sports or other meetings without paying, riding on public transport without a ticket, and hashish use, in that order.

3. REACTION TO QUESTIONS ON SELF-REPORT AND PREVALENCE RATES

Questions on self-reported delinquency do not seem to cause irritation on the part of the respondents to a noteworthy extent. Only 26% conveyed the impression of being more nervous than before. Moreover,

TABLE 1. Reactions to self-report question according to age (multiple responses in %).

Reaction	18-25	26-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Total
Nervous	22	22	24	36	23	30	26
Annoyed	3	1	3	7	6	7	4
Asks for anonymity	5	9	5	7	4	8	6
Other reactions	5	6	6	10	7	12	8
(N=)	294	352	362	308	304	358	1993

Source: 1982 survey. Here, and in the subsequent tables, the unweighted sample is used.

4. For a more detailed discussion about the reactions to the self-report questions and their effects on responses, see Reuband (1988a). A report on the effect of probing is found in Reuband, 1988c. In general, it shows that probing produces some more reported drug use, although less than one might expect on the basis of "losses" in panel interviews (for these losses in admission see also Reuband, 1986:94ff.).

the kind of nervousness it resembled was more often weak or moderate than strong (3% strong, 11% medium, 13% weak). Only 4% seemed annoyed and only 6% needed some kind of reassurance concerning the anonymity of the data. When reactions are tabulated according to age of respondent (Table 1) they tend to be remarkably similar across age, with the elder respondents being affected only slightly more frequently by the special type of questions than the younger ones.

As can be seen from Table 2, the use of public transport without a ticket and the use of public facilities without paying is admitted by roughly 30% of the respondents. Shoplifting has been practiced by 12%, hashish use by 7-9%. When the 1982 and the 1987 figures are compared for the sample as a total and within the respective age groups, no clear cut trend can be discerned to show that the more public response process produces lower figures than the more anonymous one. At least for riding without a ticket, the data even go in the opposite direction, producing higher figures for the less anonymous (more recent) study. It might well be that this difference, especially among the young, reflects effects of interview administration less than real change over time as more busses or trams had no entrance or exit control (as might have happened in this period to some extent). Also, increase of lifetime prevalence might somewhat reflect generational change -- the younger respondents with their higher rates of delinquency grow older, causing a slight increase in lifetime prevalence among the older respondents.

Lifetime prevalence in both surveys turns out to be the highest among youth. Riding without a ticket is admitted by over 50% of the 18-25 year olds, but by slightly more than 10% of those 65 and older. Shoplifting is admitted by 25% of the 18-25 year olds and by 4% of the oldest group. The trends are similar for the other types of deviance. Two reasons could account for this age relationship. First, it might be that the older respondents are less willing to divulge their deviance in the interview than the younger groups. Second, the distribution might reflect real trends in generational experience. The opportunities to engage in these types of crime might have increased over the years.

Both tendencies probably exist. On the one hand, older people are more strongly tied to conventional routes of action and social roles than younger ones. They are more committed to conformity, have more to fear of public disapproval (see Becker, 1960). As a result they will not only engage less in crime but might also be more selective in giving details about their own past deviance in the interview.⁵ The way of answering might reflect the same kind of inclination which is

5. There are some indications concerning the direction of age effects: In a British survey among adolescents, more respondents admitted ever having been before court than among an adult sample (see Blackmore, 1974 vs. Mayhew & Hough, 1982). However, it is doubtful whether a strict comparability of these studies exists. The adolescents were part of a longitudinal survey in which they had been asked about their own delinquency several times before. They might have built up a stronger trust relationship than respondents in the adult survey and therefore were more open.

TABLE 2. Self-reported delinquency according to age and year (multiple responses in %)

Age Year	18-25		26-34		35-44		45-54		55-64		65+		Total	
	82	87	82	87	82	87	82	87	82	87	82	87	82	87
Riding without a ticket	53	51	40	47	27	34	19	26	12	23	10	14	27	31
Shoplifting	25	-	22	-	10	-	8	-	4	-	4	-	12	-
Use public facilities without paying	-	50	-	37	-	35	-	32	-	19	-	19	-	30
Hashish use	16	21	18	16	5	14	1	5	*	3	*	1	7	9
(N=)	(294)	(95)	(352)	(173)	(362)	(176)	(308)	(167)	(304)	(159)	(358)	(217)	(1993)	(987)

Source: 1982 and 1987 surveys

* <0.5%

- Not ascertained.

reflected in deviance itself. On the other hand, generational opportunities to engage in the specified forms of deviance have increased as well. In the 1960s, busses or trams had ticket collectors on board. With the removal of the entrance or exit control during the 1970s, the chance for free riding has improved. Similarly, with shoplifting, with smaller shops being gradually replaced by large self-service stores, opportunities for theft have become better than before. Drug use, in forms of hashish use, finally, is a rather recent phenomenon which has basically evolved in connection with the counterculture movements of the 1960s (Reuband, 1988b). Given the fact that introduction into drug use is concentrated in the youth period (BMJFG 1983:54), the earlier generation will not catch up with the subsequent one, resulting in lower prevalence rates.

4. EFFECTS OF THIRD PERSONS

Face-to-face interviews take place in a non-anonymous setting. The responses are made public to the interviewer and sometimes also to other persons present. Although interview regulations advise keeping others from the interview scene, this is not always done and not always possible. Spouses might be present as well as children for whom the respondent has to care and cannot leave alone. Third persons tend to be present in about one quarter to one half of all face-to-face interviews (Reuband, 1984:120ff.).

For the respondent, this might expose otherwise hidden and unknown acts. Moreover, in the presence of children, admitting these acts might mean negating the parents' role, denying for oneself what one enforces in one's children. However, third persons may not always represent a threat to validity of interview data. There might be circumstances in which the respondent has told his spouse about his behavior, but later forgotten about his own acts. The spouse present during the interview might help in remembering the past.

Bias due to third persons' being present might be reduced by letting the respondent fill in a questionnaire handed to him in the interview. In this case the other person will not hear the answer. He could only become aware of it by standing directly behind the respondent, looking at the questionnaire. Using the questionnaire within the context of the face-to-face interview was the strategy we employed in the 1982 survey. In the 1987 survey no such device was employed, and the response had to be given in public. Table 3 summarizes the figures for the analyses. Even under the special situation of private questionnaire administration, there is a tendency among the 18-25 and the 26-34 year olds to admit deviance at a somewhat lower rate when third persons are present. The effect, however, is not always strong and even counterbalanced in one case by a reverse trend. Among the older respondents the effects are minimal, in one case again balanced in the other direction. Whether this is a rather accidental finding, due to sample size, or entails differential response tendencies in these categories

TABLE 3A. Self-reported delinquency according to third persons and age in 1982 (multiple responses in %)

Age Third person	18-25		26-34		35-44		45-54		55-64		65+		Total	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Riding without a ticket	44	58	37	41	31	24	19	20	13	12	9	11	26	27
Shoplifting	23	26	27	20	12	9	8	7	5	3	4	4	13	11
Hashish use	14	17	16	19	5	5	1	2	1	1	-	*	6	7
(N=)	93	201	118	234	118	244	106	202	91	213	95	263	625	1368

Source: 1982 survey

* <0.5%

TABLE 3B. Self-reported delinquency according to presence of third persons and age in 1987
(multiple responses in %)

Age Third person	18-25		26-34		35-44		45-54		55-64		65+		Total	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Riding without a ticket	64	46	31	56	35	33	21	27	17	25	14	15	29	31
Use public facilities without paying	55	48	31	40	32	36	40	29	17	19	18	19	31	30
Hashish use	23	21	12	18	7	18	6	4	3	2	-	1	8	9
(N=)	22	73	61	112	68	108	47	119	35	124	44	173	277	709

Source: 1987 survey

cannot be determined.⁶

In the 1987 survey, where no self-administered questionnaire was employed, the results tend to be similar although not identical; where third persons are on the scene respondents indicate less deviance than when nobody else listens to the interview. As expected, the less anonymous situation tends to produce somewhat stronger effects in the specified direction where identical offenses are compared. In case of riding without a ticket, third persons have a 25 percentage points effect among the 25- to 34-year-olds in the less anonymous situation, i.e., in the more anonymous situation the effects result in four percentage points only. There is an exception to this pattern however: among the 18- to 25-year-olds, more deviance is admitted whenever somebody is present. Given the relatively small number of respondents in the respective categories, this finding might be more accidental than substantive.

5. EFFECTS OF INTERVIEWER CHARACTERISTICS

Survey interviews are usually collected by professionally trained interviewers. They are trained not to indicate their attitudes and behavior and not to give any evaluations of the respondent's answers. But even if they keep to these rules, they cannot avoid conveying unwillingly an image of what they might think on various issues. Respondents tend to ascribe attitudes and beliefs to the interviewers on the basis of their visible social characteristics, such as age and sex. Given their basic interest in a smooth form of interaction, they give answers which minimize dissonance and potential conflict with the interviewer (c.f. Hyman et al., 1954; Steiner, 1984; Reuband, 1986b). They tend to reply similarly to people with the same characteristics as the interviewer.

In view of the fact that delinquency is widely practiced in youth, but is later reduced with increasing age (Kaiser, 1979:183ff.; Farrington, 1986), one should expect effects of interviewer age on self-reports on the basis of this reasoning: older interviewers should elicit less deviant behavior than younger ones in order to minimize conflict. In case of drug use, this has, in fact, already been shown for youth and young adult respondents (Reuband, 1985, 1986a). Whether it applies equally to other types of crime in the general population is not known. In Table 4 we have tabulated responses according to age of interviewer and respondent. The result replicates the findings for drug use mentioned above: in both the 1982 and 1987 surveys, a higher rate of Cannabis experience is obtained when interviewers are young. This applies above all to younger respondents, but can also be discerned among the older ones. What stands out further is that similar effects can be seen for riding on public transport without a

6. A general problem in assessing the effects of third persons is that presence and selection effects cannot be separated clearly. Possibly selection and presence effects together make up for the observed effects (see Reuband, 1987, on this problem).

TABLE 4A. Delinquency according to respondents' and interviewers' age - 1982 (in %)

Interviewers' Age	Respondent's Age						Total
	18 - 24	25 - 34	35 - 44	45 - 54	55 - 64	65+	
RIDING WITHOUT A TICKET							
18 - 34	64 (89)	42 (113)	25 (87)	18 (79)	11 (76)	9 (80)	30 (526)
35 - 49	45 (122)	36 (144)	28 (183)	20 (136)	12 (130)	10 (161)	25 (880)
50+	37 (78)	42 (88)	24 (87)	14 (89)	14 (97)	11 (114)	24 (557)
SHOPLIFTING							
18 - 34	25 (89)	22 (113)	10 (87)	4 (79)	5 (76)	4 (80)	13 (526)
35 - 49	28 (122)	20 (144)	12 (183)	8 (136)	3 (130)	4 (161)	11 (880)
50+	20 (78)	24 (88)	7 (87)	10 (89)	3 (97)	4 (114)	11 (557)
HASHISH USE							
18 - 34	20 (89)	23 (113)	6 (87)	3 (79)	3 (76)	- (80)	10 (526)
35 - 49	16 (122)	15 (144)	4 (183)	1 (136)	- (130)	- (161)	5 (880)
50+	13 (78)	15 (88)	7 (87)	1 (89)	1 (97)	1 (114)	6 (557)

Source: 1982 survey

TABLE 4B. Delinquency according to respondents' and interviewers' age - 1987 (in %)

Interviewers' Age	Respondents' Age						Total
	18 - 24	25 - 34	35 - 44	45 - 54	55 - 64	65+	
RIDING WITHOUT A TICKET							
18 - 34	62 (42)	56 (83)	38 (64)	15 (46)	16 (43)	18 (62)	34 (310)
35 - 49	43 (30)	39 (83)	31 (68)	33 (73)	33 (66)	16 (81)	31 (401)
50+	39 (23)	54 (37)	34 (44)	25 (48)	16 (50)	10 (74)	26 (76)
USE PUBLIC FACILITIES WITHOUT PAYING							
18 - 34	50 (42)	40 (53)	38 (64)	26 (46)	9 (43)	19 (62)	30 (310)
35 - 49	53 (30)	34 (83)	34 (68)	41 (73)	29 (66)	22 (81)	33 (401)
50+	44 (23)	41 (37)	32 (44)	25 (48)	14 (50)	15 (74)	25 (76)
HASHISH USE							
18 - 34	31 (42)	26 (53)	22 (64)	4 (46)	- (43)	- (62)	14 (310)
35 - 49	13 (30)	10 (83)	9 (68)	7 (73)	5 (66)	3 (81)	7 (401)
50+	13 (23)	14 (37)	9 (44)	2 (48)	2 (50)	- (74)	5 (76)

Source: 1987 survey

ticket. The effect is, however, restricted to the 18-25 year olds; among the older respondents, the effect is less clear-cut.

Perhaps it matters that lifetime experience is asked for. Except for hashish use (which is a rather recent and still youth-centered phenomenon), the other types of delinquency have been practiced by the members of the older generation as well. Under these circumstances the middle-aged interviewer might be seen by the respondents as a person with a somewhat similar biographical background. The less is his need for adaptation -- except among the youngest who, still being treated as youth by many adults, might see the older interviewer not only as a representative of certain experiences but above all as authority. Representatives of adult authority deal with youth educational aims in mind; they preach conformity and enforce it. The young respondents might take this into consideration when responding. If they do so they do it regardless of the way the questions were administered - whether given on a list for self-handling or by means of orally addressed questions.⁷

6. COMPARISON WITH OTHER DATA

The validity of our data are difficult to assess. We do not have other data on adults against which we can compare our results. What we can do, however, is to take studies among young adults into consideration; these have been based mostly on anonymous questionnaires, administered in group settings. Such interviews are treated in the literature as having the highest validity. They seem especially apt to elicit information on deviant and nonconforming attitudes and behavior (Hyman et al., 1954:182ff.; Sudman & Bradburn, 1974:40f.). The studies on young adults available for Germany have been mainly restricted to students and freshly recruited soldiers. Both samples have their biases: whereas lower educated people are naturally excluded among students, higher educated are somewhat under-represented among soldiers. Still the studies on soldiers are probably the best approximation for generalization, the more so since they include the rural areas and people with education like the average citizen. Two questions are of special importance in the following: Can we discern trends over time in these data similar to those among the survey respondents on a generational basis? And how similar are the prevalence figures to those reported earlier; how great is the bias of using non-anonymous, face-to-face interviews?

We have drawn together the available evidence on self-report

7. Since we used a random sample, there is little likelihood that the effect of interviewer characteristics are due to a selection process. What cannot be ruled out altogether, however, is the possibility that third factors, such as regional location, partially make up for the observed effects. If in certain regions with certain traditions in behavior younger interviewers are more often used than in others, the effects would theoretically take place. Only a strict random allocation of the interviewer to the respondent can resolve this problem.

among young adults referring to lifetime crime and delinquency in Table 5.⁸ The kind of region and the kind of population varies. Middle-sized and large cities and students in law school and sociology students are over-represented. No study is representative for a field of study, student body, or general population. Under these circumstances the only possibility of a comparison lies in looking at the range of variation and remembering the built-in biases when interpreting the data. According to the data, riding free by bus, tram, or subway is a rather widespread behavior in which a majority of men and women have engaged. Among students the rate for males is well above 80%, among females usually above 70%! In large cities (like Cologne and Hamburg) the rate is even higher, and in populations residing in more rural areas the rate is lower. The reason might lie in differential opportunities: in smaller regions where transport by bus rather than tram is common, entrance into the bus is often only possible by showing the ticket to the driver or buying it from him. In larger cities people have to obtain their ticket themselves in ticket machines. Given these differential opportunities, comparisons over time can only be made on the basis of the same locality and population.

Comparisons over a long time period can be done for a few types of offenses. The situation is best for shoplifting and drug use, less for riding without a ticket, or use of public facilities without paying. Shoplifting according to our overview has been committed by 42% to 45% of the men and by 29% to 35% of the women in surveys of the 1970s and 1980s. When compared with data from the sixties, the more recent data document an increase of prevalence (see no. 7 vs. 1, 5 vs. 2). In the mid-sixties the rate for theft was still about a quarter of the population. Data for the 1970s and 1980s turn out to be relatively stable.

Riding free without a ticket seems to have stayed equally stable during the 1970s with roughly 80% of the male students and more than 70% of the female students having engaged in it. The biggest increase might have taken place in the 1960s when in many cities the entrance and/or exit control in busses or subways was removed. Cannabis use has increased according to the overview since the sixties and has stabilized in the 20-30% range in the seventies and eighties (see also Reuband, 1988b). The above-mentioned generational data in our cross population surveys thus seem to reflect real changes to some extent.

Turning now to a comparison of these data with ours, there can be no doubt that non-anonymous interview situations lead to some underestimation of delinquency. Concerning riding without a ticket, the lowest rate for young adults in the 1970s is well above 50%; in the 1982 and 1987 surveys the rate in the respective age group is almost 50%, while in the subsequent age group (which should be the most similar to the ones covered in the 1970s surveys) it is even lower. It is only when

8. There are a few other studies which are not listed here because they ask for delinquency within the last year only. These kinds of studies probably provide better and more reliable results, but are beyond the scope to be discussed here. For one of the more recent notable studies on delinquency using a shorter time frame, see Villmow and Stephan (1985).

TABLE 5. Lifetime delinquency among young adults (in %).

Study				Riding without a ticket				Shop-lifting		Drug use		Use of public facilities			
Study		Year of research		M		F		M		F		M		F	
Nr.	Population	Location	Author	N ¹											
<u>STUDENTS</u>															
1	Sociology	Cologne	Sack	40/17	1964	-	-	20	24	3	6	-	-	-	-
2	Law	Giessen	Quensel/ Quensel	-83-	1967	-	-	-24-	-	-4-	-	-61-	-	-	-
3	Law	Göttingen	Schwind/ Eger	226/64	1971-73	85	72	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4	Diverse [*]	Hamburg	Diekmann	114/68	1974	-93-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5	Law	Giessen	Kreuzer	296/132	1976-78	83	77	43	29	25	28	-	-	-	-
6	Law	Giessen	Kreuzer	191/159	1981-82	81	63	42	36	27	23	43	-	-	25
7	Sociology	Cologne	Reuband	68/64	1983	93	95	65	51	51	44	-	-	-	-
8	Law, Soc., Econ.	Giessen	Kreuzer	755/595	1984-86	78	76	45	35	28	22	-	-	-	-

Table continued on next page.

TABLE 5. (continued)

Study				Year of research	Riding without a ticket				Shop-lifting				Drug use				Use of public facilities without paying					
Nr.	Population	Location	Author		N ¹	M		F		M		F		M		F		M		F		
<u>OTHER POPULATIONS</u>																						
9	General population* age 19-23	Hamburg	Gipser	-/125	1970-71	-	78	-	24	-	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10 ²	
10	School population	Hamburg	Kreuzer	360/253	1973	84 ³	72 ³	48	21	45	22	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
11	General population age 19-22	Bad.-Württ.	Schöch	103/-	1971-73	54 ³	-	18	-	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
12	Soldiers age 20-30/34	Bad.-Württ.	Schöch	256/-	1974	66 ³	-	42	-	10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
13	Soldiers	Hessen	Kreuzer	727/-	1978	73	-	45	-	14	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	

M = Male Respondents, F = Female Respondents, - = Not ascertained.

If not otherwise stated, anonymous self-administered questionnaires were used in a group setting:

* = self-administered questionnaire for individual response;

** = face-to-face interview;

*** = self-administered questionnaire in individual interview setting.

1 First number indicating number of male respondents, second number of female respondents.

2 Attending cinema without paying.

3 Hiding without a ticket and use of public facilities without paying.

we take the social characteristics of the interviewer into consideration and refer to data where younger people did the interviewing that the rate approximates the one in anonymous interviews. The situation seems to be even worse for shoplifting, but not in the case of drug use. The survey data in that case resemble closely the data from other sources. Comparisons with other kinds of data on drug use among youth confirm this impression (see Reuband, 1986a:92).

Perhaps it is the kind of delinquency which matters. Drug use is a type of delinquency where nobody is harmed (except the deviant actor, if so). Riding free on public transport entails an offense against public amenities that cater to all and is also funded indirectly by all (including the deviant actor himself). Shoplifting on the other hand, though it might mean somewhat anonymous offending -- especially in self-service stores -- still entails a victim. It could be that this characteristic of the act makes for differential proneness to admit deviance. The act itself can be constructed by the actor in a way that allows for legitimacy. It entails differential possibilities of verbal or nonverbal disapproval by the interviewer.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In our paper we have reported on one of the first nationwide surveys on self-reported delinquency among adults. We have done so from a methodological point of view and tried to assess its problems. The analysis has shown that the general social desirability and the situation of the interview both affect the results -- leading to some underestimation of prevalence rates. Whether questions are handled in a verbal way or by recourse to a questionnaire thus does not make any difference. It could well be, however, that the use of other procedures improves the situation. One could, for instance, let the respondent seal the envelope and then hand it over to the interviewer. Or one could hand him a questionnaire to be answered in private and then let him send it to the institute. Only further methodological research can find out.

At present, unfortunately, two positions prevail in the literature: on the one hand a rather uncritical attitude towards the validity of self-report, and on the other, an outspoken doubt about the use of such data. However different they are, neither position implies an interest in further, methodological research. But it is only by finding out the limitations and sorts of biases which allow for improvement in design and interpretation. Self-report studies, regardless of populations investigated, need more systematic research than has been the practice in the past (especially so in Germany, but also in most of the other European countries).

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