# 2 How Is Delinquency Measured?

Now that you know what delinquency is, we want to answer two basic questions about it: How much delinquency is there in the United States, and is delinquency increasing? But before we can answer these questions (Chapter 3), we first have to discuss the different ways of measuring delinquency. As you will see, the way in which delinquency is measured often has a major impact on the conclusions that are drawn about the extent of delinquency and trends in delinquency. You might be groaning a bit right now, thinking, "Oh no, I don't want to read some technical discussion about how to measure delinquency!" But bear with us; this information is important. A lot of what you hear about the extent of delinquency and trends in delinquency is wrong or misleading. This section will help you understand why.

There are **three major ways of measuring the extent of and trends in delinquency:** (1) **"official" statistics** from the police, juvenile court, and juvenile correctional agencies; (2) **"self-report" data** from juveniles, with juveniles being asked about the offenses they have committed; and (3) **"victimization" data,** with people being asked whether they have been the victims of various crimes. This chapter describes each of these methods and their advantages and disadvantages.[1]

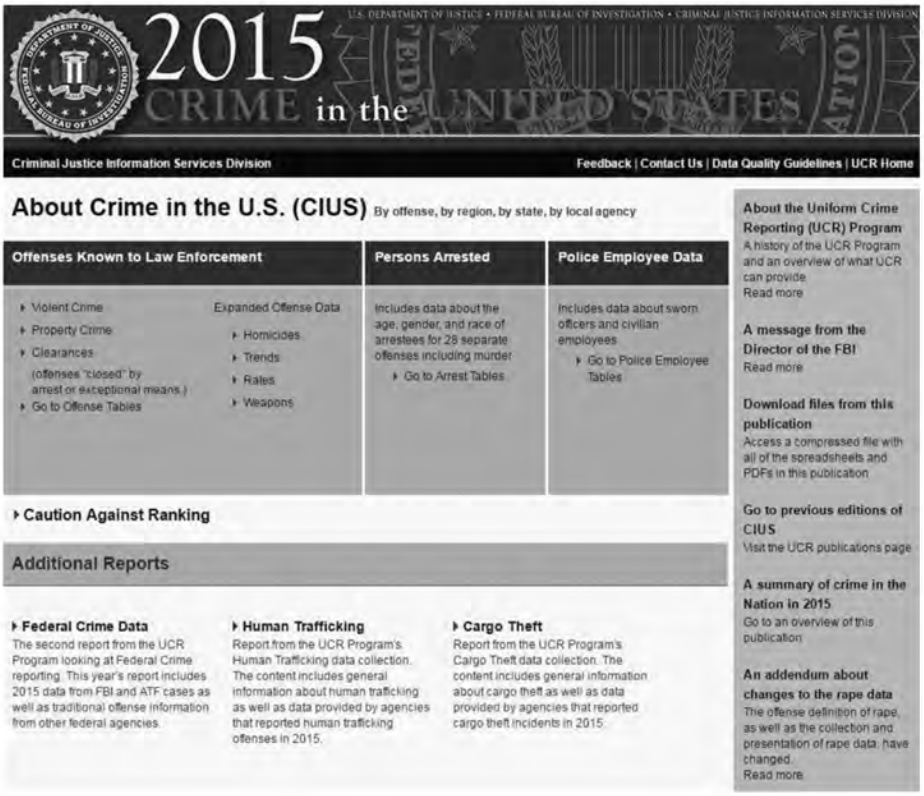
After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Describe the three major ways to estimate the extent of delinquency and trends in delinquency.
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of each method.
- Indicate how these strengths and weaknesses impact estimates of the extent of and trends in delinquency.
- Explain why reports of the extent of delinquency or trends in delinquency are often misleading.

## OFFICIAL STATISTICS—ESPECIALLY ARREST DATA FROM THE POLICE

***Official statistics*** **include data from the police, the courts, and juvenile correctional agencies,** that is, data from the "official agencies" responsible for dealing with juvenile offenders. **The most commonly used official statistics are arrest data from the police.** Because only some of the juveniles arrested by the police are referred to juvenile court, and only some of the people referred to juvenile court are sent to juvenile correctional agencies, arrest data provide a more accurate indication of the extent of delinquency. We, therefore, focus on arrest data in this discussion (data from juvenile courts and correctional agencies are described in Chapter 21).

**Each year the FBI collects data from the police and publishes these data in a report called** ***Crime in the United States: The Uniform Crime Reports.*** The reports are available on the FBI's website at http://www.fbi.gov. Each report is divided into several sections. The first section contains information on the number of ***crimes known to the police.*** As the name implies, these are crimes that the police know about, both crimes that have been reported to the police and crimes that the police have discovered on their own. The second section contains information on the number of ***crimes that have been "cleared" or solved by arrest.*** Contrary to the impression you might get from the media, most crimes are not cleared by arrest. In 2015, less than half (46 percent) of the violent crimes known to the police were cleared by arrest, and only 19 percent of the property crimes known to police were cleared by arrest (see Box 2.1). The third section contains information on the **number of arrests** and the characteristics of the people who were arrested, including the most serious offense they were arrested for and the individuals' age, sex, and race. Note that the number of ***crimes cleared by arrest*** is not equal to the number of arrests. Sometimes




## Box 2.1 Do the Crime, Avoid the Time? The Apprehension of Offenders as the Weak Link in the Juvenile Justice Process

Viewers of television crime shows, such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation,* may be surprised to learn that, in the real world, most crimes that come to the attention of the police go unsolved. Despite recent advances in forensic and other crime-fighting technologies, the arrest and punishment of offenders remains far from certain. Few may appreciate this fact more than the offenders themselves.

In one study, researchers examined young people who self-reported a very high rate of serious offending over a two-year period (specifically, these youths reported 20 or more serious "index" offenses, such as aggravated assaults, burglaries, and auto thefts). It turned out that only 4 percent of these youth had been arrested for an index offense during the period under study (an additional 18 percent had been arrested for something other than an index offense). Apparently, police were unable to solve these index crimes, or perhaps the crimes were never reported to the police to begin with. The more crime an individual commits, the greater the odds of arrest; however, researchers estimate that the "likelihood of arrest is close to zero" until one reports in excess of 20 index offenses (Dunford and Elliott, 1984:81). (In the next chapter, we examine these data more closely.)

It appears that many young offenders come to appreciate the uncertainty of arrest or apprehension, and this is true even among those offenders who have been arrested

(*Continued*)

(*Continued*)

and punished in the past. In a large survey of incarcerated juveniles, respondents were asked to estimate the likelihood that they would be arrested again should they reoffend. A sizable percentage (39 percent) believed they would **not** be arrested. (However, most believed that, if they were caught, they would be punished, and punished more severely than in the past). As the authors of the survey observe:

> Perhaps these youth feel they will be better at eluding law enforcement in the future, or perhaps they recognize the considerable challenge that officers face in solving crime and apprehending those responsible. Whatever their reasoning, youth's answers [in the survey referred to] suggest that arrest or apprehension is the weakest link in the sanctioning process. (Sedlak and Bruce, 2010:9)

If offenders believe that the overall odds of apprehension are low, then this fact may help explain their attraction to delinquency. Moreover, getting away with delinquency and outwitting the authorities may be rewarding and may increase the likelihood of repeat offending. In the words of one offender:

> The worst thing that can happen to a kid, or a guy—is to go out and do something [a crime] and be successful the first time out. I got a proposition to drive a car in a bank job, so I went. Everything went off good. . . . I was just going to drive a [getaway] car once; I'd give it a try. And it worked out so good, so, like I say, if you're a success, it feels good. So we kept going. (quoted in Laub and Sampson, 2003:181–182)

Furthermore, some offenders may work to develop their apprehension-avoidance skills, as illustrated by the following young man, who was not incarcerated but remained active on the streets at the time of the interview):

> A lot of people look at me, or look at criminals, and we're depicted as dumb folks. . . . But I ain't no dummy, by far, OK? Criminals these days are smarter, man, a lot smarter. Because the more cops come up with the different things, like these cameras on the street corner, there's a lot more challenges you got to get up to. [The offender then described how he reads *Popular Mechanics* and other magazines to stay ahead of new car alarm systems and other crime control technologies.] (quoted in Brezina and Topalli, 2009)

### Questions for Discussion

1. What impressions have you or your classmates received from watching television crime shows, such as *CSI*? Have you been under the impression that most crimes in the real world are "solved," with the persons responsible being arrested? Do you think the average viewer is able to separate fact from fiction?
2. Much crime-control legislation has focused on increasing the severity of punishment, with heavier fines, jail time, or longer prison sentences for various offenses. Do you think these punishments can deter crime if offenders perceive a low likelihood of arrest or apprehension?

multiple crimes might be cleared by a single arrest. For example, an individual may be arrested for several burglaries. And sometimes a single crime is cleared by the arrest of many people. For example, several people may be arrested for a single burglary. Juveniles usually commit their crimes in groups, and it is often the case that several juveniles are arrested for a single crime (see Chapter 16 for further discussion).

**Information on the extent of delinquency and trends in delinquency comes from the clearance and arrest data.** These data (unlike the "crimes known to the police" data) contain information on the age of the offender. So they allow us to estimate such things as the number of crimes committed by juveniles, the number of arrests that involve juveniles, the most serious offense these juveniles were arrested for, and whether juvenile arrests are increasing or decreasing. Most media reports regarding the extent of and trends in delinquency are based on these clearance and arrest data.

**The FBI Crime Reports focus on what are known as "Part I," or "index," offenses and "Part II" offenses.** The ***Part I, or index, offenses*** are eight relatively serious violent and property crimes: ***criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson.*** (Note: Recently, the FBI added human trafficking crimes to the Part I offenses. Because data on these crimes remain limited, we do not focus on them in this chapter.) The FBI reports both "crimes known to the police" and clearance/arrest data on these offenses. The top half of Table 2.1 provides a definition of each of these offenses. Read these definitions and then try to answer the following multiple-choice question:

> Your roommate steals your TV from the living room of your apartment while you are attending class. Is this a:
>
> **a.** burglary
> **b.** larceny-theft
> **c.** robbery
> **d.** all of the above

The ***Part II offenses*** consist of 20 additional offenses as well as a category for "all other offenses." These offenses are listed in the bottom part of Table 2.1. Note that this list includes one status offense: curfew violation. Also, liquor law violations often involve the status offense of drinking under age. Arrests for all other status offenses are included in the "all other offenses" category. The FBI reports arrest data for the Part II offenses only.

**The data from the FBI have several advantages.** They are collected from police departments representing approximately 95 percent of the U.S. population. They have been collected since 1930, so they provide long-term information on trends in crime. And certain evidence suggests that the "crimes known to the police" data provide a moderately accurate measure of the extent of and trends in certain types of serious crime, particularly homicide and serious instances of certain other crimes like robbery, burglary, and motor vehicle theft (see Gove et al., 1985). But at the same time, a number of problems are associated with the FBI data, particularly the arrest data.

## Problems with Arrest Data

**Arrest data greatly underestimate the extent of most forms of delinquency and may sometimes provide misleading information about trends in delinquency.** There are several reasons for this underestimation, including the following.

**Most delinquent acts do not become known to the police.** There are three reasons for this. **First,** the police usually find out about a crime when someone else—usually the crime victim—reports it to them. But surveys of crime victims indicate that only about 40 percent of all crime victimizations are reported to the police. Not surprisingly, serious crimes are more likely to be reported to the police than minor crimes. Serious crimes include those where a weapon is used, the victim is injured, and/or there is a significant financial loss. Crimes involving strangers are also more likely to be reported to the police. And crimes against adults are more likely to be reported to the police than crimes against

## TABLE 2.1 Part I and Part II Offenses

**Part I or Index Offenses**

1. **Criminal Homicide:** (a) Murder and nonnegligent manslaughter: the willful (nonnegligent) killing of one human being by another. Deaths caused by negligence, attempts to kill, assaults to kill, suicides, and accidental deaths are excluded. Justifiable homicides are also excluded. (b) Manslaughter by negligence: the killing of another person through gross negligence. Deaths of persons due to their own negligence, accidental deaths not resulting from gross negligence, and traffic fatalities are not included in the category manslaughter by negligence.
2. **Rape:** The penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.
3. **Robbery:** The taking or attempting to take anything of value from the care, custody, or control of a person or persons by force or threat of force or violence and/or by putting the victim in fear.
4. **Aggravated assault:** An unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury. This type of assault is usually accompanied by the use of a weapon or by means likely to produce death or great bodily harm. Simple assaults are excluded.
5. **Burglary:** The unlawful entry of a structure to commit a felony or a theft. Attempted forcible entry is included.
6. **Larceny-theft:** The unlawful taking, carrying, leading, or riding away of property from the possession or constructive possession of another. Examples are thefts of bicycles, motor vehicle parts and accessories, shoplifting, pocket-picking, or the stealing of any property or article that is not taken by force and violence or by fraud. Attempted larcenies are included. Embezzlement, confidence games, forgery, check fraud, etc., are excluded.
7. **Motor vehicle theft:** The theft or attempted theft of a motor vehicle. A motor vehicle is self-propelled and runs on land surface and not on rails.
8. **Arson:** The willful or malicious burning or attempt to burn, with or without intent to defraud, a dwelling house, public building, motor vehicle or aircraft, personal property of another, etc.

**Part II Offenses**

Other assaults

Forgery and counterfeiting

Fraud

Embezzlement

Stolen property: buying, receiving, possessing

Vandalism

Weapons: carrying, possessing, etc.

Prostitution and commercialized vice

Sex offenses (except forcible rape and prostitution)

Drug abuse violations

Gambling

Offenses against family and children

Driving under the influence

Liquor laws

Drunkenness

Disorderly conduct

Vagrancy

All other offenses

Suspicion

Curfew and loitering law violations

SOURCE: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016.

juveniles (see Finkelhor and Ormond, 1999; Watkins, 2005). **Second,** crimes like drug use and gambling do not have a "victim" in the usual sense of the word—that is, someone who feels that he or she has been injured. It is unlikely that the participants in these crimes will notify the police. And **third,** it is physically difficult for the police to detect most crimes on their own. Obviously they cannot detect crimes that occur in private, but they also have trouble detecting crimes that occur in public. The police in a patrol car may pass a given spot on their beat once or twice a day, if that often, so they are unlikely to come upon crimes in progress. The police therefore do not even know about the large majority of crimes that occur, especially the less serious crimes. As a result, even the "crimes known to the police" data greatly underestimate the extent of crime, with the exception of homicide and serious instances of a few other crimes.

**Even when crimes become known to the police, the police do not catch the offender in most cases.** As we discuss further in Chapter 20, the police are unlikely to catch the offender unless they discover the offender at the scene of the crime, or unless someone can identify the offender to them; this is one reason why police are more likely to catch offenders who commit violent crimes than those who commit property crimes. Most violent crimes involve people who know one another, so the victim can often identify the offender (or the police have a good idea of who the offender might be). But for nonviolent crimes, which constitute the vast majority of crimes, the police usually do not catch the offender.

**The police do not arrest most of the suspected offenders they catch.** As you will learn in Chapter 20, the police have a lot of discretion over whether to arrest suspected offenders. They exercise that discretion by releasing most of the suspected offenders they encounter. **Several factors influence whether the police make an arrest;** the seriousness of the offense is most important. But other factors also have an impact. The attitude of the victim or complainant is quite important. Does the victim press for arrest? If so, the police will usually make an arrest. If the victim argues against arrest, the police will usually let the offender go. As discussed in Chapter 22, the characteristics of the offender—including race, class, and sex—often influence the likelihood of arrest. The characteristics of the police department may also be important. Some police departments encourage officers to informally resolve criminal matters, while others encourage officers to make arrests.[2] Also, police departments occasionally crack down on certain offenses, like drug crimes, prostitution, curfew violation, and truancy. The police are more likely to search for and arrest individuals committing such crimes during a crackdown. For example, the transit police in the city of Atlanta instituted a crackdown against truancy, and as a result the number of juveniles apprehended for truancy increased by almost 200 percent over a two-year period.

Research has shown that only about 20 percent of the crimes known to the police are cleared by arrest. (As indicated earlier, this percentage varies by type of crime. In 2015, 62 percent of all murders and 54 percent of all aggravated or serious assaults were cleared by arrest, versus 13 percent of all burglaries and 13 percent of all motor vehicle thefts.)

**Police data reported to the FBI are sometimes inaccurate.** On top of all this, the police sometimes report inaccurate data to the FBI. Sometimes these inaccurate reports are the result of unintentional errors on the part of the police, and sometimes the police deliberately distort crime data in an effort to make themselves look good—for example, by ***"unfounding" crime reports.*** The police usually investigate crime reports by citizens to determine whether a crime has occurred and what type of crime has occurred, if any. If they feel that a crime has not occurred, they "unfound" the crime report. And that "crime" does not become part of the "crimes known to the police" data reported to the FBI. Some

police departments have lowered their crime rates by unfounding a large percentage of the crimes reported to them. The police in our hometown of Atlanta were accused of wrongly unfounding a large number of crimes in 1996. An external audit found some support for this accusation. For example, Atlanta reported 392 rapes to the FBI in 1996. This represented an 11 percent decrease in rapes compared to 1995. The external audit, however, concluded that the Atlanta police wrongly unfounded 56 rapes in 1996. If these 56 rapes had been reported to the FBI along with the other rapes, the number of rapes in Atlanta would have increased 2 percent from 1995 (Martz, 1999).

Another common way in which the police distort crime data involves **reclassifying crimes** from more to less serious categories. For example, police officials may reclassify aggravated assaults as simple assaults or burglaries as larcenies. A report in the *New York Times* stated that about one-quarter of the felonies or serious crimes recorded in a New York City precinct in 2002 were improperly downgraded to misdemeanors or minor crimes. As a result of this downgrading, the precinct reported a 7.4 percent drop in serious crime compared to 2001. But when the improperly downgraded crimes were reclassified as felonies, the precinct had a 15 percent increase in serious crime. According to the news report, precinct commanders in New York City were under much pressure to keep crime rates down, and some claim that this occasionally led certain officials to "shave numbers" (Rashbaum, 2003).

**The FBI arrest data report only the most serious offense for which the person is arrested.** For example, suppose a juvenile robs someone while under the influence of an illicit drug. The juvenile may be arrested for both robbery and drug abuse, but only the robbery arrest will be shown in the FBI data. The FBI data on drug abuse arrests indicate only the number of arrests for which drug abuse is the most serious charge. Many additional drug abuse arrests may have been made, but these arrests are not reported by the FBI because drug abuse is not the most serious charge. (Note: The National Incident-Based Reporting System [NIBRS] was designed to provide more complete data on juvenile arrests, but not enough states participate in the program at this time to permit generalizations to the United States as a whole [see Bierie, 2015].)

## Summary

**Arrest data, then, vastly underestimate the extent of delinquency.** This underestimation is **especially true for minor delinquency,** which is less likely to become known to the police and is less likely to result in arrest. Further, **arrest data may provide misleading information on trends in delinquency.** Suppose, for example, that arrest data show an increase in juvenile delinquency over time. This increase could be due to a number of factors. Perhaps victims have become more likely to report crimes to the police (e.g., the percentage of violent crimes reported to the police increased from 43 percent in 1993 to 49 percent in 2009—see Truman and Rand, 2010). Perhaps complainants have become more likely to press for arrest (e.g., stores have become more likely to press for arrest in shoplifting cases). Perhaps police departments have become more likely to encourage officers to make arrests (e.g., some police departments have adopted zero-tolerance policing, where even minor violations of the law may result in arrest). Perhaps the police have cracked down on certain types of crime, like drug use or gun-related crimes. Perhaps the police are turning in more accurate crime reports (data suggest that crime reports have become more accurate in recent decades). Or perhaps juvenile delinquency really is increasing. It is sometimes the case that we cannot tell which factor or factors are responsible for a change in arrest rates.

## SELF-REPORT DATA

Given the problems with arrest data, criminologists have tried to develop alternative ways to measure the extent of delinquency. The major alternative they have developed is ***self-report data***. Self-report data are obtained by asking juveniles about the extent of their delinquency. Sometimes the juveniles are interviewed, and sometimes they fill out questionnaires. Most self-report surveys focus on delinquency committed during the previous year, to minimize problems with memory. In almost all cases, self-report surveys are anonymous, or respondents are assured that their answers are confidential. A popular self-report measure of delinquency is shown in Table 2.2. Take a few minutes to answer the questions in this measure (although you should not record the answers in this book in case it is lost or borrowed).

Self-report surveys of delinquency did not come into wide use until the 1960s, but they are now the major method criminologists use to measure delinquency. The major advantage of self-report data is that they provide an estimate of all delinquency committed by juveniles, regardless of whether that delinquency is known to the police or has resulted in arrest. As a consequence, self-report data indicate that delinquency is far more extensive than arrest data suggest. But before we continue our discussion of self-report data, let us address a question that we know is on your mind.

## HOW DO WE KNOW THAT JUVENILES ARE TELLING THE TRUTH?

Most people have the same reaction to self-report surveys: How do researchers know that juveniles are telling the truth? They are asking juveniles whether they have engaged in a range of illegal behaviors, some of which are strongly condemned and subject to severe punishment. It is reasonable to think that many juveniles will underreport their delinquency. Researchers have tried to estimate the accuracy of self-report data in several ways. None of these ways are perfect, but taken together they provide a rough estimate of the accuracy of self-report data (see Thornberry and Krohn, 2000, for an excellent overview of this issue).

1. **Official record comparisons.** Most commonly, researchers compare the self-reported delinquent acts of respondents with their police or court records. They determine whether respondents report the offenses for which they have been arrested or convicted.[3] The failure of respondents to report such offenses suggests that self-report data are inaccurate. Reporting such offenses suggests that self-report data may be accurate. It does not, of course, prove that self-report data are accurate. People may admit to offenses for which they have been arrested or convicted but fail to report other offenses.

2. **Comparisons with peer, family, or school reports.** Certain researchers have estimated the accuracy of self-reports by determining whether respondents report the delinquent acts that their friends, parents, and/or teachers attribute to them (e.g., Gold, 1966). Failure to do this suggests that self-report data are inaccurate. If respondents do report acts mentioned by others, that suggests that self-report data may be accurate.

3. **Lie-detector tests.** Certain researchers have used lie-detector tests or the threat of lie-detector tests to estimate the accuracy of self-report data (e.g., Clark and Tift, 1966; Hindelang et al., 1981). For example, juveniles in one study were interviewed about the extent of their delinquency. They were then interviewed again, but this time they were

## TABLE 2.2 A Popular Self-Report Measure of Delinquency

**How many times in the last year have you**

1. Purposely damaged or destroyed property belonging to your parents or other family members?
2. Purposely damaged or destroyed property belonging to a school?
3. Purposely damaged or destroyed other property that did not belong to you (not counting family or school property)?
4. Stolen (or tried to steal) a motor vehicle, such as a car or motorcycle?
5. Stolen (or tried to steal) something worth more than $50?
6. Knowingly bought, sold, or held stolen goods (or tried to do any of these things)?
7. Thrown objects (such as rocks, snowballs, or bottles) at cars or people?
8. Run away from home?
9. Lied about your age to gain entrance or to purchase something (lied about your age to buy liquor or get into a movie)?
10. Carried a hidden weapon other than a plain pocketknife?
11. Stolen (or tried to steal) things worth $5 or less?
12. Attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting or killing him/her?
13. Been paid for having sexual relations with someone?
14. Had sexual intercourse with a person of the opposite sex other than your wife/husband?
15. Been involved in gang fights?
16. Sold marijuana or hashish ("pot," "grass," "hash")?
17. Cheated on school tests?
18. Hitchhiked where it was illegal to do so?
19. Stolen money or other things from your parents or other members of your family?
20. Hit (or threatened to hit) a teacher or other adult at school?
21. Hit (or threatened to hit) one of your parents?
22. Hit (or threatened to hit) other students?
23. Been loud, rowdy, or unruly in a public place (disorderly conduct)?
24. Sold hard drugs, such as heroin, cocaine, and LSD?
25. Taken a vehicle for a ride (drive) without the owner's permission?
26. Bought or provided liquor for a minor?
27. Had (or tried to have) sexual relations with someone against their will?
28. Used force (strong-arm methods) to get money or things from other students?
29. Used force (strong-arm methods) to get money or things from a teacher or other adult at school?
30. Used force (strong-arm methods) to get money or things from other people (not students or teachers)?
31. Avoided paying for such things as movies, bus or subway rides, and food?
32. Been drunk in a public place?
33. Stolen (or tried to steal) things worth between $5 and $50?
34. Stolen (or tried to steal) something at school, such as someone's coat from a classroom, locker, or cafeteria, or a book from a library?
35. Broken into a building or vehicle (or tried to break in) to steal something or just to look around?
36. Begged for money or things from strangers?
37. Skipped classes without an excuse?
38. Failed to return extra change that a cashier gave you by mistake?
39. Been suspended from school?
40. Made obscene telephone calls (calling someone and saying dirty things)?

**How often in the last year have you used:**

41. Alcoholic beverages (beer, wine, and hard liquor)?
42. Marijuana or hashish ("grass," "pot," "hash")?
43. Hallucinogens ("LSD," "mescaline," "peyote," "acid")?
44. Amphetamines ("uppers," "speed," "whites")?
45. Barbiturates ("downers," "reds")?
46. Heroin ("horse," "smack")?
47. Cocaine ("coke")?

SOURCE: Elliott and Ageton, 1980.

told that their answers would be evaluated using a "psychological stress evaluator" that detects dishonest responses. They were then asked a variety of questions, including the same questions they had previously been asked about the extent of their delinquency. The researchers then determined whether the juveniles changed their answers in the second interview.

4. **Comparisons with drug tests.** Researchers have estimated the accuracy of self-reports of drug use by comparing such reports to estimates of drug use obtained from analyses of urine, saliva, or blood (e.g., Akers et al., 1983).

5. **Comparisons between groups known to differ in their level of delinquency.** Researchers have also estimated the accuracy of self-reports by comparing the self-reported delinquency of groups known to differ in their level of delinquency. For example, they have compared the self-reported delinquency of institutionalized delinquents to that of high school students (e.g., James Short and Nye, 1958). If there is little difference in self-reported delinquency between these groups, that suggests that self-report data are inaccurate. If the institutionalized delinquents have a higher level of self-reported delinquency, that suggests that self-report data may be accurate.

Again, none of these methods is perfect, but taken together they allow researchers to form a rough estimate of the accuracy of self-report data. **Overall, they suggest that self-report data provide a moderately accurate estimate of the extent of delinquency.** Most juveniles are reasonably honest in their responses, although there is some underreporting (and even a little overreporting) of delinquency. Data suggest that this underreporting is greatest for serious offenses. That is, juveniles are more likely to conceal serious offenses than minor ones. Underreporting may be especially likely to occur among individuals who possess low self-control or various cognitive limitations (e.g., forgetfulness or inability to concentrate). For example, one recent study finds that underreporting is more common among young people who suffer from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD (Sibley et al., 2010). Other individuals may be uneasy about revealing personal information, or they may worry about the possibility of contributing to racial or ethnic stereotypes. Certain data suggest that black males are more likely to underreport the extent of their delinquency, although findings here are somewhat mixed.[4]

## Problems with Many Self-Report Surveys

While self-report surveys appear to provide a moderately accurate estimate of the extent of delinquency, they do have some problems (see Thornberry and Krohn, 2000, for a full discussion). One problem is that there are **very few long-term, nationwide self-report surveys of delinquency.** While the federal government collects data from police departments on an annual basis, the government has no comparable program for the collection of self-report data. Most self-report surveys are administered by university professors (who may receive government funding for their research). Their surveys usually focus on the extent of self-reported delinquency in a single city or region at one point in time. Only a few national self-report surveys have been done. As a result, estimates of the extent of self-reported delinquency in the United States and trends in such delinquency are somewhat limited.

A second problem is that **many self-report surveys underestimate the extent of serious delinquency.** One reason for this has already been indicated: data suggest that respondents sometimes underreport serious delinquent acts. Three additional reasons for the underestimation of serious delinquency are described next. (Some of the more recent self-report surveys, however, have taken significant steps to obtain better estimates of serious delinquency. These steps are described in the following section.)

**Many self-report surveys employ measures of delinquency that focus on minor offenses and employ vague response categories.** The early self-report surveys and some recent self-report surveys employ questions identical or similar to the ones in Table 2.3. Take a moment to examine these questions. You will immediately notice that the questions focus on minor forms of delinquency. There is a reason for this. Most self-report surveys, especially the early surveys, examine samples of only a few hundred juveniles. Serious delinquent acts, like serious assaults and rapes, are not common, so only a small number of juveniles will report such acts in a sample of a few hundred. As a consequence, there are too few instances of these acts to allow for any meaningful analyses. Many self-report researchers therefore focus on the more frequently occurring minor offenses.

Further, notice the response categories for each delinquency question ("no," "once or twice," "several times," "very often"). Respondents who commit an act 10 times will probably select "very often," but so will respondents who commit an act 100 times. The response categories do not distinguish offenders who commit an act a few times from those who commit an act scores or even hundreds of times. This lack of precision is a serious problem. Recent data indicate that there is a small group of high-rate offenders, each of whom commits hundreds of delinquent acts per year. These offenders account for a majority of all delinquent acts in some studies. But the response categories used in the survey shown in Table 2.3 do not provide an accurate count of the number of delinquent acts committed by these offenders. So not only do some self-report surveys focus on minor delinquency, but they often also provide an imprecise estimate of the extent of delinquency.

**Juveniles often report trivial acts on self-report surveys—acts that would probably not be considered delinquent by law enforcement officials.** Examples of trivial acts would be sipping a little wine at the dinner table with your parents' permission or playfully shoving one of your siblings. While juveniles might report these as underage drinking and minor assault, it is quite unlikely that law enforcement officials would see them as such. Trivial events are most likely to be reported in response to questions about minor delinquent acts. In one study, over 75 percent of the minor assault reports were classified by the researcher as trivial (Elliott et al., 1989:15). Trivial events, however, are sometimes reported when respondents are questioned about serious delinquent acts like aggravated assault.

**TABLE 2.3 An Early Self-Report Measure of Delinquency**

Have you ever:

1. Driven a car without a driver's license or permit?
   No _____
   Once or twice _____
   Several times _____
   Very often _____
2. Skipped school without a legitimate excuse?
   (Same response categories as above.)
3. Defied your parents' authority (to their face)?
4. Taken little things (worth less than $2) that did not belong to you?
5. Bought or drunk beer, wine, or liquor (include drinking at home)?
6. Purposely damaged or destroyed public or private property that did not belong to you?
7. Had sexual relations with a person of the opposite sex?

SOURCE: Nye, 1958.

**Most self-report surveys tend to undersample the most serious delinquents.** Self-report surveys are usually based on school or household samples. For example, a researcher might try to survey a sample of students from several schools in a city. Or a researcher might try to survey juveniles from a sample of households in a city. The researcher first selects the juveniles to survey and then tries to obtain their permission to conduct the interview or to elicit their agreement to complete the questionnaire. It is usually necessary to obtain the permission of their parents or guardians as well.

These strategies have the advantage of reaching broad samples of juveniles—both those who have been arrested and those who have not. These strategies, however, tend to undersample the most serious delinquents, including those who commit the most offenses and those who commit very serious offenses. If you sample school students, you miss students who have dropped out of school, are suspended, or are truant. These students tend to be the more serious offenders. This undersampling is a less serious problem if the researchers sample households; but even here they are likely to miss juveniles who live on the street or spend a lot of time on the street. Such juveniles tend to be more serious offenders (see Hagan and McCarthy, 1997a, 1997b). Furthermore, there is reason to believe that the more serious offenders (and their parents) are less likely to agree to participate in the survey (Brame and Piquero, 2003). In fact, it is often the case that 30 percent or more of the juveniles who are selected in the initial sample refuse to participate in the survey or cannot be reached. As a consequence, data suggest that most self-report surveys undersample serious delinquents (see Cernkovich et al., 1985).

In sum, there is reason to believe that **many self-report surveys underestimate the extent of serious delinquency.** This underestimation occurs because (1) serious offenses are more likely to be underreported, (2) measures of delinquency often focus on minor offenses and employ vague response categories, (3) respondents often report trivial acts, and (4) most self-report surveys tend to undersample serious offenders.

## Recent Self-Report Surveys Have Made Much Progress in Overcoming the Preceding Problems

Criminologists have made much progress in overcoming the preceding problems. As a consequence, contemporary self-report surveys often provide much more accurate information about the extent of delinquency, including serious delinquency (see Thornberry and Krohn, 2000, 2003). Criminologists have overcome the preceding problems in several ways.

**New methods of administering self-report surveys** have been developed, methods **that appear to substantially reduce the amount of underreporting.** One of the most promising of these methods is the ***audio computer-assisted self-administered interview.*** This rather long name basically refers to a technique whereby juveniles are interviewed by a personal computer. The computer screen presents the juveniles with questions, including questions about the extent of their delinquency. They also hear these questions over a headset at the same time they are presented on the screen. The juveniles then respond to each question by striking the appropriate key on the computer. As Thornberry and Krohn (2000:62–63) point out, this approach has several advantages. Among other things, it overcomes the reading problems that sometimes arise when a respondent is asked to fill out a questionnaire. Also, "the respondent does not have to reveal potentially embarrassing behavior directly to another person," as happens in interviews (also see C. Turner et al., 1998).

Another promising method involves the use of a ***life event calendar.*** Before reporting any delinquent offenses, survey respondents are first asked to plot important life events and circumstances on a calendar that covers, for example, the previous year. For instance, the respondent may indicate where they were living during various time periods or where

they went to school. They then fill in the calendar by recalling specific life events, such as a birthday celebration, a concert or sporting event, meeting a new friend, or working at a new job. In the end, the calendar provides a framework for the respondent's memories and experiences, thereby enhancing the recall of delinquent behavior, such as involvement in a fight or illicit drug use at a party (see N. Morris and Slocum, 2010).

Many recent self-report surveys also **employ better measures of delinquency.** In particular, they **obtain accurate counts of the number of delinquent acts committed.** Further, they **focus on both minor and serious offenses** (such surveys collect larger samples of juveniles, which allows them to examine the less frequently occurring serious offenses). The self-report delinquency measure in Table 2.2 is an example of a measure that focuses on both minor and serious delinquency and that tries to accurately measure the number of times delinquent acts have been committed. This measure was developed by Elliott and associates and has served as a model for measures in many recent self-report studies (see Elliott and Ageton, 1980).

Further, certain of these recent surveys **make an effort to eliminate trivial acts from their delinquency counts.** Researchers ask respondents a series of follow-up questions about the delinquent acts they report, which allows them to classify such acts as trivial or nontrivial. The trivial acts are then excluded from the estimates of delinquency.

Finally, certain of these surveys **make a special effort to include serious offenders in their samples.** For example, they oversample juveniles in neighborhoods that have high delinquency rates. Also, they screen juveniles before including them in the survey, making a special effort to detect and recruit serious offenders in their survey (see Thornberry et al., 1995; Thornberry and Krohn, 2003).

These recent self-report studies are not free of problems. For example, researchers still encounter some difficulty in recruiting the most serious offenders, and there may still be some underreporting of delinquency. Nevertheless, these surveys represent a major improvement over earlier self-report surveys, and there is good reason to believe that they provide reasonably accurate estimates of the extent of delinquency—serious and minor—in most groups.

## VICTIMIZATION DATA

The problems with police data have also motivated criminologists to develop another way of estimating the extent of crime and delinquency: ***victimization data***. **Victimization data are obtained by asking people to report on their experiences as crime victims.** Several victimization surveys were conducted in the 1960s, and the federal government started compiling victimization data on an annual basis in the early 1970s through the administration of the ***National Crime Victimization Survey***. Each year people ages 12 and older in approximately 90,000 households throughout the United States are asked about their experiences as crime victims. These households are selected so as to be representative of all households in the United States. Data from the National Crime Victimization Survey allow researchers to estimate the total amount of crime and delinquency in the United States. These victimization data are published annually in a report titled *Criminal Victimization* (see Truman and Morgan, 2016; also look for victimization data on the website of the Bureau of Justice Statistics: http://www.bjs.gov).

The respondents in the victimization survey are asked if they have been the victims of crime, including aggravated assault, simple assault, rape/sexual assault, robbery, burglary, motor vehicle theft, and larceny. (They are not, of course, asked if they have been the victims of homicide.) If they reply that they have been the victim of one of these crimes, they are asked a number of questions about this victimization. For example, they are asked

whether they reported the victimization to the police, and if not, why not. In 2015, less than half of all victimizations were reported to the police (47 percent of violent crime victimizations and 35 percent of property crime victimizations). Prior research indicates that the most common reason for not reporting is that the victimization is a private or personal matter. Respondents are also asked if they saw the person(s) who victimized them. If so, they are asked about the age, sex, and race of this person(s), among other things. On the basis of their responses, researchers can estimate the number of people who have been victimized by young people and trends in such victimization over time.

**Like self-report data, victimization data provide information on both crimes that have come to the attention of the police and crimes that have not.** They also provide much information on the experiences and characteristics of crime victims.

## Problems with Victimization Data

There are, however, problems with using victimization data to estimate the extent of delinquency (see Cantor and Lynch, 2000, for an excellent overview).

1. **Victimization data focus on only a few violent and property crimes committed against individuals ages 12 and older.** They do not provide any information on crimes such as drug use and on status offenses. They do not provide any information on crimes committed against businesses—like shoplifting at department stores. And they do not provide any information on crimes committed against people younger than 12 years of age.
2. **Certain groups with high rates of criminal victimization are undersampled, such as homeless people, transients, and institutionalized persons.**
3. **There is evidence that many crime victims do not report their victimizations to the interviewers.** There are a variety of reasons for this nonreporting, including memory loss and embarrassment. Data suggest that victimizations by family members, friends, and acquaintances are often not reported to the interviewer. There have been some attempts to increase reporting; for example, the wording of the survey has been changed to better prompt respondents to report certain kinds of victimization. To illustrate, respondents are now encouraged to report crimes by friends and family members with the following prompt:

> People don't often think of incidents committed by someone they know. Did you have something stolen from you OR were you attacked or threatened by (a) someone at work or school, (b) a neighbor or friend, (c) a relative or family member, or (d) any other person you've met or known?

Such prompts and other changes have substantially reduced the extent of underreporting, but there is reason to believe that much underreporting still occurs for certain crimes (see Cantor and Lynch, 2000; Mosher et al., 2002).

4. **The victim often does not see the offender and so cannot estimate the offender's age.** This is especially likely for property crimes. One study found that the victim saw the offender in only 6 percent of all burglaries and motor vehicle thefts and in 4 percent of all household larcenies (Hindelang, 1981). The victim, of course, does see the offender in most violent crimes. The victim, however, can only make a rough estimate of the offender's age. In particular, it is often hard to distinguish older juveniles from young adults.

For these reasons, victimization data are somewhat limited in the information they provide about the extent of and trends in delinquency. The discussion in Chapter 3 therefore draws primarily on arrest and self-report data. However, we will note certain relevant findings from victimization data. And we will also briefly discuss the extent to which juveniles are crime victims, as well as offenders.

## SUMMARY

There are three major ways to measure the extent of delinquency and trends in delinquency: arrest, self-report, and victimization data. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. With the exception of homicide, arrest data vastly underestimate the extent of delinquency and may provide misleading information on trends in delinquency. Arrest data are especially likely to provide misleading information on minor crimes, since these crimes are the least likely to be reported to the police and the least likely to result in arrest. Self-report data provide a better estimate of the extent of delinquency since they focus on all offenses, both those that have come to the attention of the police and those that have not. Many self-report surveys, however, tend to focus on minor offenses committed in the general population. Such surveys provide less accurate estimates of the extent of serious delinquency. Several recent self-report surveys, however, likely provide reasonably accurate estimates of both minor and serious delinquency. Victimization data also attempt to measure both crimes that have come to the attention of the police and those that have not. But victimization data suffer from several problems; most notably, they focus on a small number of crimes, and victims usually have not seen the offenders who committed the crime—with the exception of violent crimes.

As you can see, measuring delinquency is not a simple matter. It is easy to produce estimates of the extent of delinquency and trends in delinquency, and we are exposed to such estimates on a regular basis in the media. Most estimates, however, are problematic for the reasons indicated here. The situation is not as bad as it might appear, however. We can often use our knowledge of these data sources to judge which provides the best estimate of the extent of delinquency or trends in delinquency in a particular situation. And it is sometimes the case that the three data sources agree with one another. We can, of course, be more confident in the conclusions we draw when this is the case.

## TEACHING AIDS

### A Challenge

A criminologist is asked to estimate the extent of delinquency in City X. The criminologist decides to interview all the high school students in the city, asking them the questions shown in Table 2.4. Eighty percent of the high school students and their parents agree to participate in the interviews (returning consent forms to the criminologist). The interviews are conducted during school hours on a certain day. Ninety percent of those who agreed to participate in the survey are in school that day and complete the interviews. Based on their responses to the questions in Table 2.4, the criminologist produces

**TABLE 2.4 A Self-Report Measure of Delinquency**

Respondents are asked whether they engaged in the following offenses in the prior year, with the response categories for each offense ranging from "never" to "five or more" times.

1. Taken something not belonging to you worth under $50?
2. Taken something not belonging to you worth over $50?
3. Got something by telling a person something bad would happen to them if you did not get what you wanted?
4. Got into a fight?
5. Used marijuana?
6. Consumed alcohol?
7. Skipped a day of school without a real excuse?

SOURCE: Adapted from Gold, 1966.

an estimate of the extent of delinquency in City X. Is this estimate accurate? If not, list all of the reasons why accuracy has not been achieved. (These reasons are listed after the Key Terms for this chapter.)

## Practical Advice: Three Things to Beware of When Others Discuss the Extent of and Trends in Delinquency (and a Challenge)

We often hear a lot about delinquency from family members, friends, the news media, and politicians. Unfortunately, a lot of the information that is presented is misleading or wrong. The following is a list of three things you should be wary of when others are discussing delinquency. These are not the only things you should be wary of, but they are among the more common ways that misleading information is conveyed about the extent of and trends in delinquency. **Your challenge:** Draw on this chapter and the next three chapters to expand this list (also see Mosher et al., 2002).

1. **The sensational case.** The news media, politicians, and others will often focus on a sensational crime, such as a crime committed by a famous person, a gruesome crime, and/or a crime with many victims. There will be much discussion of this crime, and the impression will be given that this type of crime (or crime in general) is more extensive or is increasing faster than is actually the case. School shootings represent a well-known example. The media devoted major attention to school shootings from the 1990s to the present, often implicitly or explicitly suggesting that school violence was common and that it was increasing. But as we discuss in Chapter 15, school violence, especially of a serious nature, is quite uncommon. Further, such violence has been decreasing. This is not, of course, to claim that all media reports focusing on sensational crimes are misleading. Rather, it is to suggest that you should be cautious in generalizing from one or a few crimes to crime. If possible, examine what official, self-report, and victimization data say about the type of crime being discussed.
2. **The reliance on one data source.** Reports on crime are usually based on a single data source, often official statistics from the FBI's *Uniform Crime Reports*. But, as indicated in this chapter, each data source has some major disadvantages (and advantages). We should therefore be cautious when we hear a report based on a single source. In particular, we should keep the advantages and disadvantages of that source in mind. We should also ask what other data sources say about the same issue. If the different data sources are in agreement, we can be more confident about the information presented. If the data sources disagree, we need to delve into the possible sources of this disagreement. Mosher et al. (2002:1–2) present a good example of this point. The FBI *Uniform Crime Reports* that were released in 2001 indicated that crime rates had increased for the first time in many years. The news media reported headlines such as "Decade-Long Crime Drop Ends," and commentators were trying to make sense of the increase. Two weeks later, data from the National Crime Victimization Survey were released, and they indicated that the crime rate had decreased by 15 percent. A subsequent headline read "Crime Is: Up? Down? Who Knows?"
3. **Percentage changes based on a small number of cases.** Others will sometimes report that there has been a large percentage increase or decrease in crime. So, for example, drawing on the *Emory Campus Annual Security Report*, someone might report that there was a 63 percent increase in drug law arrests from 2013 to 2014. This might lead you to think that drug abuse had become much more common on the Emory University campus in the space of a year. In fact, the number of drug law arrests increased from eight in 2013 to thirteen in 2014. When you are dealing with a small number of cases, a small change in raw numbers can produce a large change in percentages. This, in turn, can convey a misleading impression about trends in crime. It's quite unlikely that there was actually a

63 percent increase in drug abuse on the Emory campus from 2013 to 2014. So be sure to look at the raw numbers involved when you hear others talk about what percentage crime increased or decreased. (Note: This illustration also shows the dangers of relying on one data source. Arrest data are clearly a poor way to estimate the extent of or changes in drug use in this case. Most drug abuse incidents do not result in arrest, and the number of drug arrests may be influenced by many factors in addition to the actual extent of drug abuse. Can you list several such factors?)

### Web-Based Exercise: Measuring the Extent of Rape

As noted in this chapter, the National Crime Victimization Survey generally reports more crime than the police data presented by the FBI, since the Victimization Survey picks up many crimes not reported to the police. But this should not be taken to mean that the Victimization Survey provides an accurate measure of all crime. Most notably, it has been charged that the Victimization Survey greatly underestimates the extent of rape. For a discussion of why this may be the case, see the article by Emily Bazelon (2013) titled "We've Been Measuring Rape All Wrong" at http://www.slate.com. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), which oversees the Victimization Survey, is now examining ways to more accurately measure the extent of rape and sexual assault. For a brief description of what they are doing, along with their publications on rape and sexual assault, visit their information webpage at http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=317. Alternately, visit the BJS website, at http://www.bjs.gov. Click on "Crime Type," hold the cursor over "Violent Crime," and click on "Rape and Sexual Assault."

## TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF THIS CHAPTER

1. What are the three major ways of estimating the extent of and trends in delinquency?
2. Why is it important to know something about these methods, including their advantages and disadvantages?
3. What are "official statistics"? Why are arrest data the main source of official data on the extent of and trends in delinquency?
4. What are the major types of information you would find in the FBI's report in *Crime in the United States: The Uniform Crime Reports?*
5. List the eight Part I, or index, offenses. List any four Part II offenses.
6. Why is it that the number of crimes "cleared" by the arrest of juveniles usually does not equal the number of arrests that involve juveniles?
7. What are the major advantages and disadvantages of arrest data? Why do arrest data vastly underestimate the extent of delinquency?
8. How have researchers tried to estimate the accuracy of self-reports of delinquency (i.e., how do they estimate whether juveniles are telling the truth on self-report surveys)? What conclusions do researchers draw about the accuracy of self-report surveys?
9. Many self-report surveys suffer from a number of problems that cause them to underestimate the extent of serious delinquency. What are these problems?
10. How have researchers tried to overcome these problems?
11. What are the major advantages and problems with victimization data?

## THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. City X experienced a 30 percent increase in the juvenile *arrest* rate. List all the possible reasons for this increase *other than a real increase in the rate of delinquency* (e.g., the arrest rate may have increased because crime victims have become more likely to report crimes to the police).
2. We state that none of the methods for estimating the accuracy of self-reports is perfect. Is it possible to develop a method that would precisely estimate the accuracy of self-reports of delinquency? If not, why not?
3. Describe how you might best estimate the extent of delinquency or crime on your campus (indicate the method or methods of data collection you would use and the steps you would take in employing these methods).

## KEY TERMS

- Official statistics
- *Crime in the United States: The Uniform Crime Reports*
- Crimes known to the police
- Crimes cleared by arrest
- Part I, or index, offenses
- Criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson
- Part II offenses
- Unfounding crime reports
- Self-report data
- Audio Computer-Assisted Self-Administered Interview
- Life event calendar
- Victimization data
- National Crime Victimization Survey

## ANSWERS TO THE CHALLENGE

The criminologist would not produce an accurate estimate of the extent of delinquency in City X because:

1. Only high school students were interviewed, so the delinquency of juveniles not in high school (e.g., high school dropouts, middle school students) is not estimated.
2. Twenty percent of the high school students did not agree to participate in the survey, so their delinquency is not estimated. The more serious delinquents may be more likely to be in this missing group.
3. Ten percent of the students who agreed to participate in the survey were not present on the day of the interviews, perhaps because they were truant or cutting class, so their delinquency is not estimated. Again, the more serious delinquents may be more likely to be in this missing group.
4. Many juveniles may underreport their level of offending, especially serious offending, since a face-to-face interview is used (versus a technique like the Audio Computer-Assisted Self-Administered Interview).
5. The measure of delinquency in Table 2.4 tends to focus on minor offenses and employs vague response categories.
6. No effort was made to distinguish trivial from nontrivial acts and to eliminate the trivial acts from the delinquency count.

## ENDNOTES

1. For fuller discussions, see Bernard, 1999; Cantor and Lynch, 2000; Cernkovich et al., 1985; Elliott, 1982; Elliott and Ageton, 1980; Elliott et al., 1989; Farrington et al., 1996; Gove et al., 1985; Hindelang et al., 1979, 1981; Huizinga and Elliott, 1986; Patrick Jackson, 1990; Maxfield, 1999; Mosher et al., 2002; O'Brien, 2000; Reiss and Roth, 1993; Rutter et al., 1998; Sullivan and McGloin, 2014; Thornberry and Krohn, 2000, 2003; Weis, 1986; E. Wells and Rankin, 1995.
2. See David Smith, 1984; J. Wilson, 1976; also see Chappel et al., 2006.
3. See Farrington et al., 1996; Hindelang et al., 1981; Huizinga and Elliott, 1986; Paschall et al., 2001; Piquero et al., 2014; Thornberry and Krohn, 2000.
4. See Farrington et al., 1996; Hindelang et al., 1981; Huizinga and Elliott, 1986; Mosher et al., 2002; Piquero et al., 2014; Thornberry and Krohn, 2000; Weis, 1986.