Prevalence, frequency, onset, desistance and criminal career duration in self-reports compared with official records

DAVID P. FARRINGTON¹, MARIA M. TTOFI¹, REBECCA V. CRAGO¹ AND JEREMY W. COID², ¹Institute of Criminology, Cambridge University, Cambridge, UK; ²Violence Prevention Research Unit, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Aim The main aim of this article is to compare prevalence and frequency, ages of onset and desistance, and criminal career duration, according to self-reports and convictions.

Method In the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, 411 London males have been followed up from age 8 to age 48, in interviews and criminal records.

Results Virtually all males admitted at least one of eight offences, compared with about one third who were convicted. In self-reports, the number of offences was over 30 times greater, the age of onset was earlier and the career duration was longer, compared with convictions. However, the age of desistance was generally later according to convictions.

Conclusions Self-reported ages of desistance may be affected by increasing concealment with age. The gap between the first self-reported offence and the first conviction provides an opportunity for early intervention. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

Surprisingly little is known about the duration of criminal careers, and almost all prior research on this topic has been based on official records of samples of delinquents or criminals. Piquero et al. (2004) reviewed research on career duration and found that it was typically between five and 15 years for offender samples. Unusually, LeBlanc and Frechette (1989) compared career
duration in official records and self-reports in their Montreal Study and concluded that (between adolescence and the early twenties) duration was longer in self-reports. Because official records are only the tip of the iceberg of offending, it might be expected that, in self-reports, the age of onset would be earlier, the age of desistance would be later and the duration of criminal careers would be longer. It would also be expected that the prevalence and frequency of offending would be higher according to self-reports.

In the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD, described later), criminal career duration based on convictions has been measured several times. When convictions were studied up to age 40, the average conviction career began at age 18.6, ended at age 25.7 and lasted 7.1 years (Farrington et al., 1998). When the follow-up was extended to age 48, the average career began at age 19.1, ended at age 28.2 and lasted 9.1 years (Farrington et al., 2006). When the follow-up was extended to age 56, the average career began at age 19.7, ended at age 29.5 and lasted 9.8 years (Farrington et al., 2013b).

The age of onset has been studied in self-reports compared with official records. LeBlanc and Frechette (1989) in Montreal found that the average age of onset was 10.8 in self-reports and 14.6 in official records (up to the early twenties). Loeber et al. (2003) in Pittsburgh reported average onset ages of 11.9 and 14.5, respectively, whilst Farrington et al. (2003) in Seattle reported corresponding ages of 12.7 and 15.1. In the CSDD up to age 32, Kazemian and Farrington (2005) discovered that, for males with both self-reports and convictions, average self-report onset ages ranged from 10.7 to 15.2, whilst average conviction onset ages for the same offences ranged from 16.8 to 22.7

The main aim of the present article is to compare criminal career features, and especially career duration, according to convictions and self-reports, in the CSDD up to age 48. There has been no previous comparative study of career duration in convictions and self-reports beyond the twenties. The key questions addressed in this article are:

1. How does the duration of criminal careers according to self-reports compare with the duration of criminal careers according to convictions?
2. To what extent is a man’s career duration according to self-reports related to his career duration according to convictions?
3. How do prevalence, frequency, ages of onset and ages of desistance compare in self-reports and convictions?
4. How does the order of committing different types of offences compare in self-reports and convictions?
5. What is the probability of a self-reported offence leading to a conviction?
6. What is the probability of a conviction offence being self-reported?