One of the most basic questions in criminology is how to measure the key outcome variable of offending. The two most common measurement methods are to use official records of arrests/convictions or self-reports of offending. These two methods have different advantages and problems. For example, official records include only the ‘tip of the iceberg’ of offending, but the offences are recorded quite accurately and completely for very large samples. Self-reports, on the other hand, reveal more of the ‘dark figure’ of offending but they have problems of exaggeration and concealment and also problems of missing data in interviewed samples compared with target samples. The most delinquent people are often the most difficult to interview (Farrington et al., 1990).

A key question concerns the agreement between official records and self-reports. Although self-reports reveal more offenders and offences, to what extent do the worst offenders according to self-reports coincide with the worst offenders according to official records? And to what extent are risk factors similar for self-reported and official offending? If a risk factor predicts official but not self-reported offending, is it predicting the likelihood of an offender being convicted? (see e.g. Farrington, 1979; West and Farrington, 1973). If a risk factor predicts self-reported but not official offending, is it predicting the likelihood that an offender will admit an offence?

There have been many studies of the validity of self-reported offending in relation to official offending (see Jolliffe and Farrington, 2014). In most cases, officially arrested or convicted offenders admit their arrests or convictions and admit the types of offences that led to these official records; this is termed ‘concurrent validity’. More impressively, self-reports of offending by currently unrecorded persons predict their future arrests or convictions for the same offences; this is termed ‘predictive validity’ (Farrington, 1989). According to commonly accepted psychometric criteria, self-reports of offending are reliable and valid, at least for young males.
Criminal career research aims to advance knowledge about such topics as the prevalence and frequency of offending, ages of onset and desistance, the duration of criminal careers, and whether offending is versatile or specialised (see e.g. Piquero et al., 2003, 2007). Virtually all past criminal career research has been based on official records, because they provide complete information about offending at different ages. One of the main aims of this special issue is to compare information about criminal careers from official records with information from self-reports. More generally, all of the papers in this special issue compare knowledge gained from self-reports with knowledge gained from official records on the same people. Results are presented from seven major longitudinal studies in four countries.

The first article, by Amanda Gilman and her colleagues, presents results from the Seattle Social Development Project, which is a longitudinal survey of 808 males and females from age 10 to age 33 years. Following up earlier research in the juvenile years by Farrington et al. (2003), they present the prevalence and frequency of offending from age 21 to age 33, in self-reports compared with official records. Importantly, whereas prevalence decreased with age according to both measures, the frequency of offending by offenders stayed stable or increased. The researchers also investigated continuity in offending (which was higher in official records) and how the probability of a court appearance varied with the frequency of self-reported offending.

The second article, by David P. Farrington and his colleagues, presents results from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, which is a longitudinal survey of 411 London males from ages 8 to 56 years. They compare not only the prevalence and frequency of offending, but also ages of onset and desistance, and criminal career duration, in self-reports and official records. As expected, they found that, according to self-reports, the age of onset was earlier and the criminal career duration was longer. However, unexpectedly, the age of desistance was generally later according to convictions, leading the researchers to suggest that self-reported ages of desistance may be affected by increasing concealment at older ages (32 and 48 years).

The third article, by Robert Brame and his colleagues, presents results from the Pathways to Desistance study, which is a longitudinal survey of 1354 male and female adolescent offenders in Arizona and Pennsylvania from ages 15 to 22 years. They compare specialisation in offending according to self-reports and official records. Their main conclusion is that there were very few specialists according to either measure, and virtually no offenders who specialised according to both measures. The most common group were versatile offenders (committing two or more offence types out of five or six) according to both measures.

The fourth article, by Delphine Theobald and her colleagues, presents results from the oldest cohort of the Pittsburgh Youth Study: 506 boys followed up from ages 13 to 35 years. They conclude that, on average, 22 offences were self-reported for every one leading to conviction, and that this number increased with age (from 13 to 24 years) and varied with offence type. They also found that 54% of self-reported offenders were convicted, and that this percentage increased with