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Criminal Recidivism after Imprisonment Among Sex Offenders and Violent Offenders: A Comparison between Self-reported and Officially Recorded Reoffending Behavior

One of the key issues in criminology is the investigation of criminal recidivism. Reoffence rates are used inter alia to examine the effects of criminal sanctions, to evaluate the effectiveness of reintegration measures, to analyse the development of crime rates, and to map criminal careers. In so doing, the study of reoffending behaviour largely depends on officially recorded criminal sanctions. Thus, the analysis of reoffence rates is, in most cases, restricted to crimes that authorities have become aware of. This paper examines the proportion of officially recorded reoffences and self-reported crimes among a sample of sex offenders and violent offenders who participated in a longitudinal study evaluating the impact of correctional treatment on criminal recidivism. In addition, it is investigated whether the discrepancy between officially recorded and self-reported criminal recidivism is influenced by individual factors such as age, impulsivity, self-esteem, and intelligence. The study is based on a sample of 140 sex and violent offenders for whom officially recorded reoffence data was collected. Data was also collected at follow-up (on average, 1.5 years after prison release) when offenders were asked to complete a self-reported delinquency questionnaire.

Keywords: official records, self-control, self-reported delinquency, sex offenders, violent offenders

Rückfälligkeit nach der Inhaftierung von Sexual- und Gewaltstraftätern: Ein Vergleich zwischen selbstberichtetem und offiziell registriertem Rückfallverhalten

Eines der Hauptanliegen in der Kriminologie ist die Untersuchung von Rückfällen. Rückfallquoten werden unter anderem zur Untersuchung der Auswirkungen strafrechtlicher Sanktionen, zur Beurteilung der Wirksamkeit von Wiedereingliederungsmaßnahmen, zur Analyse der Entwicklung der Kriminalitätsraten und zur Abbildung krimineller Karrieren verwendet. Dabei hängt die Untersuchung des Rückfallverhaltens weitgehend von offiziell erfassten strafrechtlichen Sanktionen ab. Die Analyse von Rückfallquoten beschränkt sich daher in den meisten Fällen auf Straftaten, die den Behörden bekannt geworden sind. In diesem Aufsatz werden das offiziell registrierte Rückfallverhalten und die selbstberichtete Delinquenz bei einer Stichprobe von Sexual- und Gewaltstraftätern untersucht, die an einer Längsschnittstudie teilnahmen. Darüber hinaus wird untersucht, ob die Diskrepanz zwischen offiziell registriertem und selbst berichtetem Rückfall durch individuelle Faktoren wie Alter, Impulsivität, Selbstwertgefühl und Intelligenz beeinflusst wird. Die Studie basiert auf einer Stichprobe von 140 Sexual- und Gewalttätern, für die offiziell registrierte Rückfalldaten erhoben wurden. Zudem wurden Daten zur selbstberichteten Delinquenz in einer Nachuntersuchung von im Durchschnitt 1,5 Jahre nach der Haftentlassung erhoben.

Schlagwörter: Offizieller Rückfall, Selbstkontrolle, selbstberichtete Delinquenz, Sexualstraftäter, Gewalttäter

1. Introduction

Sex offences and violent crimes, above all offences committed by formerly convicted sex offenders and violent offenders, routinely cause a public outcry. Thus, the reoffence patterns of these offender groups are of particular interest. When investigating reoffence rates, scholars usually rely on officially recorded crime data. It is a widely acknowledged phenomenon, however, that official crime statistics do not reflect actual crime rates (Furby, Weinrott & Blackshaw, 1989; Jennings et al., 2016). In particular, little is known about the actual reoffending behaviour of serious offenders such as sex offenders and violent offenders. Usually, research on the dark figure of crime stems from surveys conducted with a general population or specific target samples, e. g., youth or victim surveys. However, these data are of limited informative power with regard to the real dimensions of reoffending behaviour. Therefore, comparing self-reported delinquency with official records might be crucial to further understanding the criminal recidivism of convicted offenders, especially individuals who have committed serious offences.¹ This paper studies the discrepancy between officially recorded reoffence rates of convicted sex offenders and violent offenders and self-reported delinquency, the latter taking place during follow-up 1.5 years after prison release on average. The main aim of this paper is to compare self-reported delinquency with officially recorded reoffence patterns. Furthermore, it is examined whether the discrepancy between the self-reported and the officially recorded information is influenced by specific parameters. It was hypothesised that the discrepancy between self-reported and officially recorded recidivism will systematically vary, depending on certain demographic (e. g., age) and personality-related factors (e. g., impulsivity).

2. Illuminating the Dark Figure of Crime

In 1957 already, Nye and Short introduced a self-reported delinquency questionnaire to measure criminal behaviour, revealing that respondents admitted a higher number of crimes than officially recorded (Nye & Short, 1957; Short & Nye, 1958). Since then, self-reported delinquency questionnaires have advanced as an important tool by which to estimate the real extent of criminal behaviour. This method is mainly used in adolescent samples, because delinquent behaviour most frequently occurs in exactly this age group (e. g., Egli et al., 2010; Loeber et al., 2008; Mak, Heaven & Rummery, 2003; Pechorro et al., 2019; Sibley et al., 2010). Moreover, it is relatively convenient to collect classroom-based data. There are also a number of prospective longitudinal studies that include the periodic collection of self-reported delinquency data (e. g., Babinski, Hartsough & Lambert, 2001). Gathering data on self-reported delinquency is associated with several methodological limitations. The major points of criticism pertain to the potential for deliberate deception and the respondents' limited ability to recall incidents and their temporal accuracy properly (Huizinga & Elliott, 1986). Furthermore, some scholars raise the objection that individuals might be reluctant to reveal negative information about themselves, even in an anonymous survey context (Babinski et al., 2001). However, several authors examining the validity and reliability of self-reported delinquency concluded that self-reports

¹ The term serious offences is used to distinguish offences with a major and possibly traumatizing impact on the victim's physical and psychological integrity from less severe crimes such as petty offences, property crimes, and drug offences, even though they might also be associated with long-term consequences for the victim.

are reliable and valid (Auty, Farrington & Coid, 2015; Dubow et al., 2014; Jennings et al., 2016; Pechorro et al., 2019). In addition, official criminal records also have their limitations and do not represent criminal behaviour that remains unreported. Thus, it is of particular interest to compare official rearrest records to self-reported crimes, specifically with regard to the target group of sex offenders and violent offenders. In so doing, it is possible to further illuminate the discrepancy between official criminal records and self-reported reoffence data. Several scholars have used self-reports and official records to study specific aspects associated with these two measures. In general, self-report measures indicate a higher level of criminal involvement on the part of the respondents than specified in official records (e. g., Pollock et al., 2015). In a study by Farrington et al. (2007), for instance, 82 % of the male respondents reported having committed at least one offence during adolescence, whereas only 35 % of the respondents exhibited an official criminal record. Furthermore, scaling-up techniques, i. e., scaling up from the self-reported offence data, may be used to estimate how many offences are committed in relation to the official data. Theobald et al.'s investigation (2014), for example, resulted in a scaling-up factor from convictions to self-reported offences of 22 (respectively 9 after truncation²) in a male sample of 13- to 24-year olds for a retrospective 12-month period.

3. Personality-related and group-based differences in self-reported delinquency and the discrepancy with official data

Self-reported delinquency, the discrepancy between self-reported and officially recorded offences, and hence scaling up, may vary, however, between subgroups of individuals and with regard to offence type.

In a study of Australian youth, self-reported delinquency was predicted by psychoticism and the identity of being a “rebel” (Mak et al., 2003). An international student survey conducted in Belgium, Canada, and Switzerland (Egli et al., 2010) showed that self-reported involvement in property offences and violent offences was best predicted by a low level of self-control and a supportive attitude towards violence in all three countries. Lifestyle characteristics also played a role (e. g., drug use, delinquent friends), which – according to the authors – are linked to self-control and attitudes towards violence. According to Dubow et al. (2014), both self-reports and official records could be predicted by indicators such as parents of the offenders having a lower education level and many children and the offenders themselves being more aggressive and less intelligent compared to non-offenders. Pollock et al. (2015) attempted to identify whether self-reported and officially recorded crimes share the same predictors, such as involvement with criminal peers and severity of reported offending, but were unable to find a pattern. The discrepancy between self-reported and officially recorded delinquency might be systematically influenced by certain demographic features of the respondents. In a study by Krohn et al. (2013), male subjects were more likely to overreport than females. Once the amount of previous arrests was taken into account, however, this effect disappeared. In the above-cited study by Dubow et al. (2014), the willingness to self-report officially recorded offences increased with age. Babinski and colleagues (2010) found that the consistency between self-reported delinquency and official criminal records varied, depending on the seriousness

² In order to minimize the influence of outliers, the authors truncated the number of self-reported offences after a certain number of self-reported offences, in this case after nine self-reported offences, i.e., only nine offences were counted, although a subject might have reported a higher number.

of the offences and the intensity of the individual's deviant behaviour. Subjects who were more frequently convicted were more likely to correctly indicate the committed offences in a self-report instrument. Moreover, both less serious crimes and more serious crimes were less readily revealed than crimes of medium severity. In a study on self-reported sexual assault in convicted sex offenders and community men, Widman, Olson and Bolen (2013, p. 1529) found that "promiscuous sex and hostile masculinity were significantly associated with the frequency of self-reported sexual assault perpetration."

In regards to scaling up, several groups of authors analysed data from the Pittsburgh Youth Study *PYS*. In the study by Theobald et al. (2014), the scaling-up factor proved to be higher for white boys (24; after truncation: 10.45) compared to black boys (20; after truncation: 8), indicating the higher probability of black individuals being prosecuted and convicted (see also Farrington et al. 1996). In addition, the scaling-up factor increased with age and differed depending on offence type, e. g., it was highest for moderate thefts (36; after truncation: 16) and lowest for serious theft (7; after truncation: 5). Relying on data from the Pittsburgh Girls Study *PGS*, Ahonen et al. (2017) found higher scaling-up factors in earlier adolescence as compared to later adolescence in a sample of girls, "indicating that female offenders at a young age were more likely to stay undetected by the police" (Ahonen et al., 2017, p. 761). Like the *PYS*, the scaling-up factor for black girls was lower, i. e., black girls were more frequently charged by the police in comparison to white girls. Therefore, not only black males but also females are affected by racial differences, with both groups having "more contacts with the police and justice system" than white individuals (Ahonen et al., 2017, p. 763).

In sum, only a few authors have studied the difference between self-reported and officially recorded delinquency, and only very few scholars have further explored this discrepancy. Moreover, self-reported data are rarely used to get a more accurate picture of the criminal recidivism of released offenders. In order to further our understanding of official criminal recidivism and self-reported delinquency, the present paper examines following research questions: (1) How does criminal recidivism in a sample of formerly convicted sex offenders and violent offenders differ when comparing the officially recorded with the self-reported reoffences? (2) Which (personality) factors help explain the discrepancy between officially recorded and self-reported delinquent behaviour?

The willingness to report negative aspects about oneself and hence to reveal reoffending behaviour that has remained undetected so far, may depend on a person's *self-esteem*. It was hypothesised that *self-control* has an impact on the discrepancy between self-reported and officially recorded delinquency. Two aspects of self-control in accordance with Gottfredson & Hirschi's General Theory of Crime (1990) were considered for the purpose of our analysis. First, individuals with a high level of *impulsivity* might disclose more self-reported offences, because they are either less likely to reflect on the consequences of their behaviour or they exhibit a higher level of deviant behaviour – which would correspond to the theoretical assumption that a low level of self-control is associated with a higher rate of deviant behaviour. Second, respondents with a higher level of *risk-seeking behaviour* might be more willing to provide information about deviant behaviour. Moreover, risk-taking might be associated with actually committing a higher number of delinquent acts. In addition, it was assumed that *intelligence* might have an influence on the above-mentioned discrepancy, with individuals having a higher level of intelligence being less willing to indicate crimes that have not yet been officially recorded. It was also of interest whether this discrepancy could be associated with *antisocial personality*. It is possible that respondents exhibiting antisocial personality traits

display deviant behaviour more frequently or a lack of fear of admitting deviant behaviour, with both dynamics resulting in a higher number of self-reported crimes. Lastly, *age* was included in the analyses, as several scholars have found evidence for age-related discrepancies between self-reports and official records.

4. Method

4.1. Background of the Study

The current study is based on data from the prospective longitudinal project “Sex offenders in the social therapeutic institutions in the Free State of Saxony/Germany” that aims to analyse recidivism amongst sex offenders and how it is related to correctional treatment. Thus, the overall goal of the study was to analyse whether and under which conditions correctional treatment of sex offenders reduces recidivism and to investigate additional factors associated with reoffending such as biographical factors, personality risk factors, and context factors. Another leading question was whether the growing focus of correctional treatment on the target group of sex offenders is legitimate, as the majority of recidivist sex offenders does not commit the same type of offence for which they were once convicted. Therefore, a crucial aspect of the study pertained to the comparison of sex offenders and violent offenders from different perspectives in order to better understand offence-type specific dynamics of sex offenders.

4.2. Sample

To this end, data of convicted sex offenders but also of violent offenders³ were collected in several waves of data collection. At the beginning of the subject’s incarceration (wave 1) a biographical interview was conducted and a psychometric test battery on criminogenic personality factors such as emotional instability, aggressiveness, anxiety, self-control, and self-esteem was administered. These tests were repeated at the end of the prison sentence (wave 2) with the aim to explore whether a therapeutic change took place during the inmate’s prison stay. At this time, the prison files were analysed and data on correctional treatment and release preparation were gathered. In wave 3, a follow-up interview with released or reincarcerated offenders was conducted, on average 1.5 years after prison release. At this time, the participants completed a self-reported delinquency questionnaire. Furthermore, selected psychometric tests that had already been administered in waves 1 and 2 were conducted. In wave 4, the Federal Central Criminal Register data on officially recorded crimes were requested. Final data collection of these records for all subjects took place in 2017. The study was conducted in five prisons in the Free State of Saxony, Germany. It included subjects who underwent correctional treatment (social therapy completers) during their prison stay, regular prison inmates (who did not receive any particular treatment), and social therapy drop-outs.

³ Subjects were categorised as sex offenders if they had been imprisoned for child sexual abuse, rape, or child pornography when contacted in wave 1 of data collection. The sample of violent offenders comprised individuals who were incarcerated for offences causing bodily harm, e. g., robbery, bodily injury, murder, or manslaughter.

A total of 403 sex offenders and violent offenders volunteered to participate in the first wave. Due to sample attrition, a common phenomenon in longitudinal studies (Furby et al., 1989), the present paper is based on the data of the 140 subjects who were still willing to participate in wave 3 of data collection. In addition, basic data from wave 1 (biographical data) and wave 2 (prison files) were used (e. g., year of birth, educational background, information on offences, previous convictions, and prison type) as well as wave 4 data on officially recorded reoffending behaviour.

4.3. Instruments and Procedure

Data collection in wave 3 consisted of a semi-structured interview on the social and personal situation of the released offenders after their release from prison. After the face-to-face interview, the subjects completed a self-reported delinquency questionnaire (anonymous sealed-envelope method). Each subject was assigned a code at the beginning of the project, and the subjects were informed that only the code was being used to match the information from different waves of data collection. The interviews were conducted at neutral locations, e. g., conference rooms in a hotel close to the subject's residence or in the office of the probation service. Participation was voluntary and the subjects were compensated for their participation in the third wave of data collection (50 € per follow-up interview). If the offender had been incarcerated again, the interview took place inside the prison facility. The interview was conducted by an independent researcher familiar to the participant from previous waves of data collection. The items in the *self-reported delinquency questionnaire* were dichotomous items asking the subject to indicate whether he⁴ committed the indicated offence or not (yes-no format). The offences were described in everyday language. This approach was chosen to help counter the potential difficulty of accurately counting the incidents of deviant behaviour and to facilitate the respondents' understanding of the queried behaviour – both aspects being of particular importance in a sample of formerly convicted individuals. With regard to the *official criminal records*, only those official records were taken into consideration that were included in the follow-up period at which we collected data on self-reported delinquency.

In addition, selected paper-and-pencil psychometric test results were used to examine whether the discrepancy between the self-reported and the officially recorded data were influenced by certain personality-related factors.

Self-esteem was measured with the *Multidimensional Self-Esteem Scale* (Multidimensionale Selbstwertkala MSWS, Schütz & Sellin, 2006). This standardised test includes several subscales capturing different aspects of self-esteem such as physical self-esteem, social self-esteem, or performance-related self-esteem. In addition, it is possible to calculate an overall self-esteem score which was used in the analyses presented here.

Self-control was operationalised using a German translation (Ortmann, 2003) of Grasmick et al.'s (1993) Low Self-Control Scale consisting of 24 items that are to be rated on a 4-point Likert scale covering the subscales impulsivity, simple tasks, risk-seeking behaviour, physical activities, self-centeredness, and temper.

The *Multiple-Choice Vocabulary Intelligence Test* (MWT-B, Lehrl, 1999) was administered to determine the individual intelligence quotient (IQ), an efficient instrument that is considered

⁴ The sample comprised male subjects only.

a valid instrument of general intelligence. Respondents are confronted with 37 combinations of words and asked to identify the correct word in each combination. The resulting raw scores are then transformed into estimated full-scale IQ-scores.

Antisocial personality was operationalised by the test results of the Structured Clinical Interview II conducted in wave 2 (SCID-II, German version: SKID-II, Wittchen, Zaudig & Fydrich, 1997).

4.4. Data Analysis

In a first step, the self-reported information and the officially recorded information for each respondent were categorised into “yes, reoffended” and “no, no reoffence”. In a second step, each reoffence was categorised as follows: 1=homicide (murder, manslaughter), 2=sexual offences (sexual abuse, rape), 3=violent offences (bodily harm, robbery), 4=property crimes, 5=road traffic offences, 6=drug offences, and 7=violation of supervision of conduct. A new conviction was categorised as reoffence regardless of the type of sanctioning recorded in the officially reported crimes.

In order to examine the discrepancy between self-reported and officially recorded reoffences, two indices demonstrating this difference were calculated. First, the sum of all officially recorded crimes was subtracted from all self-reported crimes, both for all crimes and for the different categories of crimes (*simple discrepancy index*). In a second step, a discrepancy index was calculated taking into consideration the seriousness of different offence categories (*weighted discrepancy index*). Homicide offences were weighted with the factor 3, whereas sex offences and violent offences were weighted with the factor 2. Other categories of offences were included in the weighted index using the factor 1.

As can be seen in the results section, two subjects exhibited an extremely biased response behaviour. In order to better understand the dynamics of the respondents demonstrating this response pattern, the decision was taken to conduct a qualitative analysis of the wave 3 interview transcripts of these two participants.

5. Results

5.1. The Sample

A total of $N = 140$ participants ($n = 80$ sex offenders and $n = 60$ violent offenders) were included in the present study. Participants were $M = 33.4$ years old ($SD = 13.1$) on average, ranging from 20 to 73 years. Fifty-eight participants (41 %) had a lower secondary school leaving certificate (eight years of schooling) and 38 (27 %) a secondary school leaving certificate (10 years of schooling). Nineteen subjects did not have a school leaving certificate at all (14 %) and 16 subjects had attended a special needs school (11 %). With regard to the prison regime, 50 subjects spent their prison term in a regular prison, 72 subjects were treated in a social therapeutic treatment facility, and 18 participants dropped out of the social therapeutic treatment. The average number of previous convictions was 3.1 [0-24]. The sex offender sample exhibited an average of 2.7 previous convictions, the violent offenders 3.7. In 84 cases, the past conviction for the index offence was the first incarceration. Almost one third of the subjects fulfilled

the criteria for an antisocial personality disorder (34.3 %; $n = 48$). Likewise, one third of the sample had substance abuse problems (32.1 %; $n = 45$).

5.2. Descriptive Reoffence Analyses

The presented results refer to a follow-up period of $M = 1.5$ years after prison release. Thus, the comparison between self-reported and officially recorded reoffences is limited to the period from prison release to the time at which the wave 3 interview was conducted. The follow-up period ranged from half a year to four years, with 75 % of the participants having been interviewed one year after prison release.

With regard to the reoffence patterns, 67 % of the offenders ($n = 94$) had no officially recorded reconviction. Hence, two thirds of the sample did not officially reoffend. In contrast, only 40 % of the total sample ($n = 56$) did not reoffend according to the self-reported data (see *Table 1*). The official criminal records ranged from zero to five entries per person, the number of self-reported crimes from zero to 15 per person.

Table 1: Number of self-reported and officially recorded reoffences

| | Official records | Self-reported delinquency |
|----------------------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| No reoffence | 94 (67.1 %) | 56 (40.0 %) |
| One reoffence | 33 (23.6 %) | 36 (25.7 %) |
| Two reoffences | 9 (6.4 %) | 13 (9.3 %) |
| More than three reoffences | 4 (2.8 %) | 35 (25.0 %) |
| | 140 (100 %) | 140 (100 %) |

As can be seen in *Table 2*, a total of 64 reoffences were officially recorded.⁵ Most of these reoffences pertained to property crimes followed by violent offences. Two thirds of these officially recorded crimes were committed by violent offenders. No violent offender reoffended with a sex offence. However, there was a remarkable discrepancy between officially recorded ($n = 3$) and self-reported violent crimes ($n = 13$) in the sex offender sample.

With regard to self-reported reoffences, a total of 186 offences were reported. The most frequently self-reported crimes referred to violation of supervision of conduct and drug offences, followed by road traffic offences. These were the offence categories with the most striking discrepancy between officially recorded and self-reported delinquency in both subsamples. A closer look at the sex offences revealed that three offenders acknowledged that they had sexually abused a minor, while one sex offender reported committing both child sexual abuse and sexual assault of an adult person. One previously convicted sex offender for whom the Federal Central Criminal Register disclosed a rape as a renewed offence did not reveal this in the self-report.

⁵ Only in six cases were the subjects sentenced for two offences simultaneously, e. g., a drug offence and violation of supervision of conduct or rape and bodily harm. In these cases, the reoffence was allocated to the most severe offence category.

Table 2: Number of self-reported and officially recorded reoffences according to offender type

| Type of indicated reoffence | Total sample | | Sex offenders | | Violent offenders | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|-------------------|---------------|
| | Official record | Self-reported | Official record | Self-reported | Official record | Self-reported |
| Homicide | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Sex offence | 5 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Violent offence | 18 | 31 | 3 | 13 | 15 | 18 |
| Property crime | 26 | 25 | 8 | 10 | 18 | 15 |
| Road traffic offence | 8 | 38 | 5 | 15 | 3 | 23 |
| Drug offence | 4 | 40 | 0 | 11 | 4 | 29 |
| Violation of supervision of conduct | 3 | 46 | 2 | 24 | 1 | 22 |
| Total | 64 | 186 | 23 | 77 | 41 | 109 |

Whereas 38 % of self-reported offences in the violent offenders' sample were officially recorded, this was approximately 30 % of self-reported reoffences in the sex offender sample. Table 3 depicts the number of self-reported and officially recorded crimes according to type of imprisonment. In the subsample of the treated offenders, only 27 % of the self-reported reoffences were officially recorded. In the other subgroups, 37 % (regular prison) respectively 45 % (treatment dropouts) of the admitted offences were officially recorded. As can be seen, the percentage of non-recorded crimes varies across the reoffence types, with violation of supervision of conduct exhibiting a low percentage (6.5 %) and sex offences exhibiting a high percentage of official records. It should be kept in mind, however, that these figures are counts of offences and not counts of subjects.

Even though the format of the self-reported delinquency questionnaire did not allow for a proper scaling up, the comparison between the two data sources provides some interesting evidence with regard to the relationship between self-reported and officially recorded data. According to the official data, 64 reoffences were committed by 46 subjects, which amounts to an average of $M = 1.4$ reoffences per recidivating person. According to the self-reports, however, 84 individuals were responsible for 186 offences which amounts to $M = 2.2$ reoffences per person. Since the self-report questionnaire was designed to indicate whether the respondent committed a crime of the respective offence type (and not how often), it can be assumed that the actual scaling up factor would be slightly higher.

As illustrated in the tables, two violent offenders indicated that they had committed a homicide in the follow-up period. It had to be taken into consideration that these subjects did not properly understand the instruction for filling in the self-report questionnaire and additionally reported the offence for which they had been convicted in the past. However, the index offences of the two subjects who reported a homicide crime in the self-report were not related to a crime

causing the death of another person. One respondent ticked almost every box in the self-report questionnaire. For this reason, the semi-structured interviews of the two individuals were analysed in order to ascertain whether the interviews would reveal a certain dynamic or pattern (see below, 5.4).

Table 3: Number of self-reported and officially recorded reoffences according to prison type

| Type of indicated reoffence | Treated offenders (N = 72) | | Regular prisoners (N = 50) | | Treatment dropouts (N = 18) | |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|---------------|
| | Official record | Self-reported | Official record | Self-reported | Official record | Self-reported |
| Homicide | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Sex offence | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| Violent offence | 5 | 10 | 9 | 14 | 4 | 7 |
| Property crime | 9 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 7 | 5 |
| Road traffic offence | 2 | 18 | 4 | 14 | 2 | 6 |
| Drug offence | 1 | 16 | 2 | 17 | 1 | 7 |
| Violation of supervision of conduct | 2 | 22 | 1 | 12 | 0 | 12 |
| Total | 21 | 77 | 26 | 71 | 17 | 38 |

5.3. Analysing the Discrepancy between Self-reported and Officially Recorded Offences

In general, the discrepancy between self-reported and officially recorded reoffences was relatively small. Sixty-four of the 140 subjects did not exhibit any discrepancy between the two reoffence markers. In 42 cases, the difference between officially recorded and self-reported reoffences was one reoffence. In 28 cases, the difference ranged between two and four reoffences, and in six cases the discrepancy between self-reported and officially recorded reoffences was between five and eight crimes. The average difference was $M = 1.08$ ($SD = 1.52$; $Min = 0$; $Max = 8$).

Next, Poisson regression⁶ was used to test whether the count-based dependent variable “discrepancy between self-reported delinquency and officially recorded reoffending” was associated with certain theoretically relevant independent variables as laid out above. Even though there was a significant correlation between antisocial personality measured with SCID-II and

⁶ The Poisson regression model is subject to the relatively restrictive assumption that there is no overdispersion, i.e., that the mean and the variance of the dependent variable are not equivalent but the variance is greater than the mean (Long, 1997). The present data did not fulfil this assumption. However, since neither the negative binominal regression model nor the zero-inflated Poisson regression yielded different results, Poisson regression was used.

the discrepancy between the two reoffence measurements ($r = 0.36, p < .01$), this predictor was not included in the regression model. There were too many missing data, due to the fact that SCID-II was only introduced in the course of the project. The final Poisson regression analysis was based on 137 subjects ($n = 78$ sex offenders and $n = 59$ violent offenders), because $n = 3$ subjects had to be excluded due to missing data.

The results of the Poisson regression for the offenders calculated according to the *simple discrepancy index* (model 1, see Table 4) indicated that age and risk-seeking behaviour significantly contributed to explaining the discrepancy between self-reported and officially recorded criminal recidivism. The older the subjects had been in wave 1, the smaller the discrepancy. Likewise, the discrepancy increased among respondents with a higher level of risk-seeking behaviour. When differentiated according to prison type, similar results were observed. In addition, being a social therapy completer was associated with a higher discrepancy. In the model 2 for the *weighted discrepancy index*, age and risk-seeking behaviour remained significant predictive factors in the offender-group model. Moreover, previous convictions also had a significant impact ($\beta = 0.44; p < .05$). In the prison-type model, the effect of being a social therapy completer vanished ($\beta = -0.27; p = .25$).

Table 4: Poisson regression to predict discrepancy (simple discrepancy index, model 1) ($n = 137$)

| Offender group | β (SE) | Prison type | β (SE) |
|----------------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Constant | -0.11 (0.78) | Constant | -0.33 (0.80) |
| Sex offenders | -0.16 (0.18) | Social therapy | -0.63 (0.25)* |
| Previous convictions | 0.02 (0.02) | Previous convictions | 0.01 (0.03) |
| Age in wave 1 | -0.05 (0.01)*** | Age in wave 1 | -0.05 (0.01)*** |
| FES-K | | FES-K | |
| Impulsivity | 0.07 (0.05) | Impulsivity | 0.07 (0.05) |
| Risk-seeking | 0.11 (0.04)** | Risk-seeking | 0.10 (0.04) * |
| Self-esteem | -0.03 (0.02) | Self-esteem | -0.01 (0.02) |
| Intelligence | 0.02 (0.02) | Intelligence | 0.04 (0.02) |

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

When taking into consideration self-reported delinquency, it could be shown that the discrepancy index (model 1) was influenced by the self-report measure. Running model 1 for the offender group, age ($\beta = -0.03; p < .01$) and self-reported delinquency ($\beta = 0.27; p < .001$) proved to be significant predictors in the simple discrepancy index. Furthermore, in the model 2 with the weighted discrepancy index, the variable previous convictions had a significant impact as well ($\beta = 0.05; p < .05$). Running the model 2 including the self-reported data according to prison type, previous convictions ($\beta = 0.05; p < .05$) and self-reported delinquency ($\beta = 0.21; p < .001$) proved to be the only significant predictors. Thus, the more serious the reoffences, the more important the impact of criminal history and frequency of reported

crimes were. In addition, once the number of self-reported reoffences had been factored in, the only personality-related influence of risk-seeking behaviour vanished.⁷

5.4. Qualitative Analysis of Post-release Interviews of Two Outliers

Within the framework of the overall analyses of the post-release interviews, a reconstructive approach towards the study of the extensive data corpus these interviews provided was taken (see Woessner, in preparation). Based on the analytical method developed to investigate the transcribed wave 3 interviews,⁸ the narratives of two outliers, Noah and Leon, were examined, with the aim of assessing and interpreting the available self-reported delinquency data. In contrast to the rest of the interviews within the context of the overall project, a striking pattern emerged.

Both individuals reported a constant and strong fear of killing another person. They were convinced that they were capable of killing someone. Both Noah and Leon cultivated a narrative of how important it is not be marooned, an aspect that was morally elevated by both respondents as a principle they demanded from others.

Noah's major difficulty was obviously a severe substance abuse problem and his serious health consequences were visible. He looked back on several unsuccessful addiction therapies and anti-aggression trainings, the latter which he assessed as "the most pointless crap of the year." His life was fuelled by feelings of hatred and anger. Noah was repeatedly involved in violent offences, e. g., attacking teachers, supervisors, or colleagues. According to Noah, substance use served as a coping strategy to suppress these negative feelings. "I am quite aggressive, I do not want to play ego-shooter games additionally, watching someone firing all over the place with a gat," Noah emphasised. He did not, however, classify the numerous physical attacks he reported as delinquent behaviour. At the time of the wave 3 interview, he was awaiting another incarceration for violations of supervision of conduct.

Leon, who ticked the majority of all possible responses in the self-report questionnaire, exhibited a palpable indifference to the consequences of his behaviour. He committed a serious violent attack to a close person when he still was a child. He was obviously completely severed from his emotions. Moreover, he was not inclined to lead a "normal" life – this would be too boring – and enjoyed others being afraid of him. The whole interview was filled with aggressive language such as "I would love to punch someone in the face," "I am tempted to kill my parole officer," and "It is always fun to give someone a knuckle sandwich." He also asked himself, "what if all the hatred rockets skywards?" In addition, he was involved in all kinds of deviant behaviour, such as extremely violent attacks, and disclosing repeated police contact on different occasions, such as driving without licence, cannabis consumption, stealing cars, and fare dodging. According to the official criminal records, there was one reconviction of fraud in several cases. This comes as no surprise, as it was more than obvious from the interview that he lived beyond his means.

⁷ According to the Omnibus-Tests of the different models, the predictors included in the model provided a significant increase in explained variance.

⁸ A customised analysis matrix was developed, focusing on identification of the recurring topic of the narrative, life course and its stabilising and destabilising factors, difficulties, and coping strategies as well as risk and protective factors. Leon and Noah are not the real names of the two participants. For reasons of data protection only sparse background information about the two respondents are given.

Thus, even in the interviews, it was evident how difficult it was for both Noah and Leon to control their anger and aggressiveness. Both were 14 years old when they were officially registered as offenders for the first time. The index offence was a violent offence, and they each served their prison term in a regular juvenile correctional facility. Against the background of the narratives, it would be short-sighted to exclude these extreme cases as unrealistic outliers. First, it is very likely that Leon committed the number of offences he self-reported. It also cannot be ruled out that these two respondents did not commit a violent offence resulting in the death of another person. Having said that, it is conversely possible that they perpetuated a self-image of a person being capable of committing such a heinous crime or that they were simply playing mind games with the researchers.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to promote insight into the relationship between official criminal recidivism and self-reported delinquency of sex offenders and violent offenders. Even though self-reported delinquency surveys have become a standard method in criminology, hardly any authors have used this tool to shed light on the reoffending behaviour of sex offenders and violent offenders.

Most importantly, a large proportion of the subjects did not reoffend, either officially or “unofficially.” As expected though, the subjects reported a higher number of reoffences than were officially recorded. Violent offenders committed a higher number of violent reoffences than sex offenders. Whereas violent offenders were for the most part charged with the offences, the violent offences committed by the sex offenders remained largely undetected. Road traffic offences, drug offences, and violations of supervision of conduct, in particular, tended to remain in the dark field of crime, but this did not apply to sex offences. This means that serious crimes were more likely to be officially recorded than minor offences, even though one respondent reported a sex offence that was not officially recorded. Yet, it is also possible that sex offences are more likely to be concealed in the self-reports. It should be stressed that a few officially registered offences were not self-reported. The discrepancy between self-reported and officially recorded reoffences was primarily influenced by age at wave 1 and the offenders’ level of risk-seeking behaviour. Once the self-reported data were regressed on discrepancy, however, this effect vanished. Likewise, the weighted discrepancy index was exclusively predicted by previous convictions and self-reported reoffences, including age, in the offender model.

Like any study, this paper has a number of limitations. First, the method of sealing the questionnaire in an envelope before handing it over to the person with whom the respondent just had the wave 3 interview might have led to a limited willingness to properly self-report deviant behaviour. However, Elliott and Ageton (1980, p. 97) assume “that the necessity for anonymity is overemphasised.” In addition, self-selection effects are possible. In particular, if the wave 3 interview primarily attracted subjects without a daily structure, this could very likely be associated with an overestimation of the ratio of self-reported to officially recorded reoffences. Compared to the total sample in wave 1, the wave 3 sample had a comparable distribution with regard to the school leaving certificates, which would not support the self-selection argument. With respect to the level of education, however, it has to be taken into consideration that – due to poor levels of reading literacy – at least some of the respondents may have found it difficult to properly fill in the questionnaire. Fraud was not included in the self-reported delinquency

questionnaire, because it is difficult to appropriately translate the legal description of fraud offences into everyday language. This might be the reason why other studies also have not included fraud in their self-report analyses (e. g., Jolliffe et al., 2003). It follows that the self-report does not represent the actual criminal recidivism, a shortcoming that has been identified with regard to self-report studies in general. Elliott and Ageton (1980, p. 96) stress the “unrepresentativity,” with some offences usually being overrepresented and others underrepresented or even omitted in self-report instruments. Lastly, the yes-no response format hampered the estimation of how often the subjects actually reoffended with regard to a specific wrongdoing. Therefore, this instrument might have led to an underestimation of certain reoffences. Yet, in agreement with other scholars (Cops, De Boeck & Pleysier, 2016, p. 93; Krohn et al., 2010, p. 521), we are convinced that, although self-reported data will never be free from biases, they, and hence also this study, can contribute to a better understanding of how to interpret the results and conclusions derived from self-report data and official reoffence data.

Several studies (e. g., Auty et al., 2015; Pollock et al., 2015) found high rates of consistency between self-reported and officially recorded crimes and a relatively small gap between the two dimensions. Similar findings were yielded in the study presented here. As expected, there were more self-reported reoffences than officially recorded crimes. Whereas most of the official convictions were reported by the respondents, some subjects did not report officially recorded crimes. Moreover, the discrepancy between the two instruments increased with the number of convictions, which might explain the aforementioned phenomenon: Multiple offenders may have difficulties in accurately recalling their delinquent behaviour because they might have committed so many offences that they are unable to remember the exact number of criminal acts (Auty et al., 2015; Pollock et al., 2015). In another approach, Heckert & Gondolf (2000, p. 423) investigated predictors of underreporting of domestic violence offenders and victims. Their findings suggest that it is important to include “situational factors (such as relationship characteristics) and rational reasons” in order to understand underreporting and hence discrepancies. This might also hold true for the present sample. Depending on the sex offenders’ cognitions and the context of a (sexual) assault, the subject might not report his behaviour as having threatened another person or having involved the use of force and violence. As was revealed while conducting the analyses of all wave 3 interviews (Woessner, in preparation), some child abusers framed their sexual contact with minors as a relationship. In the present sample, one previously convicted sex offender concealed his official registration of a rape. Corresponding results were presented in a study by Widman et al. (2013, p. 1530) who found “that only 68 % of the convicted offenders acknowledged they had committed an act of sexual assault.”⁹

According to official reoffence data, the majority of sex offenders’ criminal recidivism pertained to nonsexual crimes (e. g., Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Jehle et al., 2016). It has been argued, however, that seemingly nonsexual crimes may have been sexually motivated (Przybylski, n.d.). In particular, with regard to the violation of supervision of conduct in the current study, these violations may include sexually motivated behaviour such as circumventing bans on approaching children or on accessing public swimming pools. Thus, violation of supervision of conduct has different connotations, depending on the offender group.

⁹ The authors concede that this rate might be an overestimation of underreporting, since the self-report questionnaire did not include the type of offence they had been arrested for.

Like Elliott & Ageton (1980), we found that more serious crimes are more likely to be officially recorded than less severe crimes. However, contrary to previous research, the present study does not support the finding that frequent crimes are more likely to be detected. The link between risk-seeking behaviour and discrepancy might partially explain the gap between official records and self-reports with regard to drug offences, road traffic offences, and violation of supervision of conduct. Both the current study and research by Dubow et al. (2014) yielded a significant predictive validity for age, with the discrepancy between self-reported and official reoffence data decreasing with age – an effect that is very likely to be associated with a higher risk-tolerance on the part of younger subjects and the lower likelihood of being engaged in criminal behaviour with increasing age. This, and the older age structure in the present study, might explain why Emmert et al. (2017) reported contradictory results: Over- and underreporting was consistent throughout a period ranging from adolescence to young adulthood. In Theobald et al.'s study (2014), the scaling-up factor had to be increased for juveniles in comparison to adults, although it has to be mentioned that their study sample included youths between the ages of 13 and 24. Therefore, more research is needed to further elucidate the dynamic between aging, risk-seeking, and other aspects of impulsive behaviour, self-reported delinquency and official crime data – specifically with regard to sex offences. As reported in other studies (e. g., Pollock et al., 2015), the present paper's results suggest that certain groups of individuals, or more precisely certain groups with different criminal histories, are more prone to get caught for certain criminal behaviour than others. There was no evidence for the hypothesised influence of intelligence and self-esteem on this discrepancy. The discrepancy between self-reported delinquency and official records is not only related to a person's willingness to report, which again might be influenced by the personality-related factors this study tried to investigate. It is also subject to the number of self-reported offences in the first place, as illustrated here. The fact that discrepancy was significantly predicted by prison type in the simple discrepancy index could be related to the high number of undetected violations of supervision of conduct and the proportionally high number of not officially recorded violent offences among the social therapy completers. When taking into account the seriousness of the reoffences (weighted discrepancy index), this effect vanished and criminal history had a significant impact – a result that is in line with Babinski et al.'s (2001) findings. The authors examined the influence of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) on the concordance of self-reported delinquency and official criminal records. Only previous convictions, but not ADHD, proved to be a significant predictor for the accuracy of self-reports. Likewise, in Krohn et al.'s study (2013), the gender effect disappeared after previous convictions were taken into account. Yet, Watkins & Melde (2007) showed that low self-control had a significant impact on response behaviour in a survey with subjects who exhibited a low level of self-control producing a higher number of item nonresponses. Thus, it is very likely that the validity of the data is hampered, especially in offender surveys, since it is highly probable that offender samples are – to a large degree – concocted by persons with a low level of self-control. In addition, the authors substantiated the assumed relationship between a lower level of self-control and an increased level of sample attrition in longitudinal studies. It should be emphasised, however,

that Watkins & Melde's (2007) study sample included adolescents only.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Watkins & Melde's (2007) results stress the importance of taking this potential systematic sample attrition of individuals with low self-control into account.

According to Pollock et al. (2015) and Vaughn et al. (2011), offenders committing more severe offences are more likely to have come into contact with the criminal justice system at some point in their criminal careers, thus increasing the likelihood of getting caught for the more severe crimes. In the study presented here, almost 20 subjects whose self-reported reoffences were not officially recorded in wave 3 were convicted for subsequent reoffences, i.e., at a later stage. Therefore, one could argue that, although only a certain proportion of criminal recidivism is detected, the criminal justice system will sanction these offenders at some point. This might be especially true for sex offenders. This assumption is supported by the studies carried out by Groth, Longo and McFadin (1982) and Abel et al. (1987). Convicted sex offenders "got away with" (Groth et al., 1982, p. 454) some of the previously committed sex offences but not all of them.¹¹ According to Abel et al. (1987, p. 15), the average number of rapes committed by the rapists in the authors' study sample was "surprisingly small (7.2 rapes)". Apart from the fact that it is hard to assess whether this number can be considered surprisingly small, these results should be treated with caution, as more recent victim surveys (e. g., Balschmiter, 2018; Kury et al., 2004; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006) but also self-reported delinquency surveys (Beier et al., 2009; Widman et al., 2013) suggest a higher number of undetected sexual assaults. In sum, even though a substantial number of sex offences remain hidden in the dark field of crime, sex offences – like other serious offences – occur much more rarely than less severe crimes (Balschmiter, 2018); this finding is also mapped in the presented data.

Lastly, two further findings are worth mentioning. Although, as laid out above, some respondents did not self-report criminal acts that had already been officially recorded, the subjects did report more serious crimes in the current study, which is in contrast to the study by Babinski et al. (2001). Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the current study by and large yielded reliable data. This has important methodological implications, as the sealed-envelop method might have provided for the necessary anonymity. Babinsky et al. (2001) concede that the interview situation might have contributed to the high number of concealed offences in their study. Another methodological implication pertains to how to handle outliers. It is not possible to clarify whether the two subjects indicating a homicide in the self-report actually committed that crime. However, against the background of the personal interviews with these subjects, one cannot automatically assume that they provided incorrect information. At least, extreme self-reporting should not inevitably be interpreted as overreporting and such extreme self-reports can be considered plausible.

Only a small number of studies have compared self-reported to officially recorded delinquency. According to Farrington (2007, p. 130), it is essential to include self-reports of offending for the understanding of desistance. Thus, even though the present study has its limitations, it contributes to further developing knowledge of the relationship between undetected and detected criminal behaviour and, in particular, recidivism after more severe offences. Although the format of the self-report questionnaire in the present study is a viable tool to assess whether

¹⁰ Similarly, in a study by Sibley et al. (2010), young adults with childhood ADHD had problems reporting deviant behaviour that was reported by third parties, assuming that a low level of self-control is associated with inaccurate self-reports.

¹¹ It is emphasised here that the authors of this paper do not intend to minimise the victims' suffering and pain with regard to undetected or unverifiable crimes.

official desistance represents an individual's actual desistance, it does not allow conclusions to be drawn as to how often the criminal behaviour occurred. Frequency measurements should be used if self-report studies aim at gaining a more detailed picture, e. g., scaling-up schemes. Depending on whether the yardstick by which to assess criminal recidivism of serious offenders, such as violent offenders but above all sex offenders, is interpreted in the light of repeated sexual and severe violent or general reoffending, the presented findings are encouraging or disillusioning.

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