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2 RESEARCH METHODS IN CRIMINOLOGY

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **2.1** Explain the importance of objectivity, ethics, and operationalization in research in criminology.
- **2.2** Describe how crime data for the UCR and NIBRS are collected and organized.
- **2.3** Describe the alternative data-gathering strategies that can be employed in criminological research.
- **2.4** Identify the three elements of an experiment and the importance of evidence-based research.
- **2.5** Discuss the benefits of and issues with survey data collection and interpretation.
- **2.6** Describe what kinds of research can be done using participant observation, case studies, life histories, unobtrusive research methods, and network analysis.
- **2.7** Summarize the importance of validity, reliability, and triangulation in research methods.

THE RESEARCH ENTERPRISE OF CRIMINOLOGY

Two critical features of any discipline are its theory and its methodology, or research methods. Theory, which is the subject of Chapters 5 to 8, addresses the questions of why and how. Methodology (methods), on the other hand, is covered in this chapter and is concerned with the *what*.

Theories involve attempts to develop reasonable explanations of reality. They are efforts to structure, summarize, or explain the essential elements of the subject in question. They provide testable propositions, which we then use research methods to examine. What causes crime? Why do some individuals commit crime? Why are some nations or areas more crim inogenic than others? Theories represent the intellectual leaps of faith that provide fundamental insights into how things operate; they attempt to illuminate or shed light on the darkness of reality. Without the generation of useful theoretical explanations, a field is intellectually bankrupt; it becomes merely a collection of "war stories" and carefully documented encyclopedic accounts. It fails to explain, summarize, or capture the essential nature of its subject matter. Studying a field devoid of theory would be akin to a mystery novel in which the author told us neither "whodunit" nor how and why they did it.

Methodology involves the collection and analysis of accurate data or facts. With respect to criminology, this comprises information such as the following: How much crime is there? Who commits crime? How do commissions of crime or definitions of crime vary? If the facts regarding crime are provided by defective models, they will be in error, and then theories or attempted explanations of this incorrectly described reality will most certainly be misdirected.

In the social sciences, there at times exists a chasm between those who are primarily interested in theory or broad conceptual analysis, analogous to philosophy, and those who are methodologists. Theory devoid of method, explanation without accurate supportive data, is just as much a dead end as method devoid of interpretive theory. The former resembles armchair theorizing, the latter a fruitless bookkeeping operation. In reality, to realize mature development, criminology needs both incisive theory and sound, accurate methodology. This chapter on methodology identifies the research base on which the findings presented in this book rest and points out their relative strengths and shortcomings.

Objectivity

A basic tenet of scientific research is that researchers attempt to maintain **objectivity**. Being objective requires that the investigators strive to be value free in their inquiry and, in a sense, to permit the findings to speak for themselves (Weber, 1949). A researcher may occasionally find the attitudes, behavior, or beliefs of a group they are studying repugnant or immoral; however, the researcher is trained not to judge but rather to objectively record and to determine what meaning these findings have for the field of criminology and to the development of its knowledge base. For example, a researcher evaluating

a substance abuse treatment program may wish that the program works to reduce or stop substance use—but they cannot let this wish influence how they perform their research or their findings.

Ethics in Criminological Research

Because it is part of the social sciences, the subject matter of criminology is different in kind from that of the physical sciences. The latter concentrates on physical facts (e.g., How is the human brain different from the mouse brain?), whereas criminology's subject matter—crime, criminal behavior, victims, and the criminal justice system—is concerned with human behavior, attitudes, groups, and organizations. Like physical science investigations, criminological inquiry must be concerned with its potentially adverse impacts on human subjects.

Ultimately, **ethical conduct in research** is an individual responsibility tied into deep moral judgments; a blind adherence to any checklist grossly oversimplifies a very complex decision. Until recently, the fields of criminology and criminal justice relied on the codes of ethics of parent fields such as sociology or psychology for guidance. Beginning in 1998, however, both the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) and the American Society of Criminology (ASC) began compiling a **code of ethics**. The ACJS adopted a code of ethics that year, and the ASC continues to explore the issue. Although space does not permit full discussion of each, the guidelines of both of these codes of ethics include the following (ACJS, 1998):

Researchers should

- Strive for the highest technical standards in research
- Acknowledge limitations of research
- Fully report findings
- Disclose financial support and other sponsorship
- Honor commitments
- Make data available to future researchers
- Not misuse their positions as fraudulent pretext for gathering intelligence

In addition,

- Human subjects have the right to full disclosure of the purposes of the research.
- Subjects have the right to **confidentiality**. This requires the researcher to protect the identity of their subject.
- Research should not expose subjects to more than minimal risk. If risks are greater than the risks of everyday life, then informed consent must be obtained.
- Researchers should avoid privacy invasion and protect vulnerable populations.
- All research should meet with human subject protection requirements imposed by educational institutions and funding sources.
- Researchers should properly acknowledge the work of others.
- Criminologists have an obligation not to create social injustice such as discrimination, oppression, or harassment in their work.

Ethical horror stories in criminology and the social sciences include both biomedical and social science examples. During World War II, Nazi doctors tortured, maimed, and murdered innocent captive subjects in the name of research. In the famous Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the U.S. Public Health Service withheld penicillin, a known cure for syphilis, from 425 uneducated Black male sharecroppers who suffered from, and most eventually died of, untreated syphilis. In the past, in discussing the Tuskegee

Syphilis Study with students, the author often had to correct their impression that the U.S. Public Health Service gave their subjects syphilis. What they did was bad enough, without actually giving the subjects the disease. In 2010, it was revealed that American scientists deliberately infected prisoners and patients in a mental hospital in Guatemala with syphilis in the 1940s.

PHOTO 2.1 U.S. President Bill Clinton looks on as 94-year-old Herman Shaw, one of 400 Black men secretly not given a known cure for syphilis in a government study, speaks during ceremonies at the White House on May 16, 1997. Clinton apologized to the survivors and families of the victims of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study.

Paul J. Richards/Staff/Getty Images

During the Cold War, U.S. intelligence agencies, with the cooperation of the scientific community, performed bizarre and dangerous experiments on subjects without their permission. Although most of these examples were biomedical in nature, social and behavioral research can likewise put subjects at risk. The three most cited social science examples are Stanley Milgram's *Obedience to Authority* (1974), Philip Zimbardo's simulated prison study (1972, 1973, 1974), and Laud Humphreys's *Tearoom Trade* (1970).

In his *Obedience to Authority* study, Stanley Milgram (1974) wanted to discover how "normal" people come to commit monstrous acts. Volunteers were recruited and paid to act as teachers while confederates (fake subjects) acted as learners. The teachers were deceived into believing that each time they threw a lever on a shock apparatus, they were administering higher levels of shock to the pupils. The teachers were willing to administer what they believed were painful shocks despite cries to stop from the subjects, when assured by the presence of scientific authorities. Do experimenters have the ethical right to deceive and put subjects in a position of emotional stress in the name of science?

In Zimbardo's simulated prison study, male undergraduate paid participants played the roles of guard or prisoner in a mock prison setting, set up in the basement of a Stanford University building. The experiment was canceled after 6 days (of a planned 14) when participants became carried away with their roles. In *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, Zimbardo (2007a) coined the term *Lucifer effect* to describe a transformation of human character that may cause good people to commit evil actions. This could include sexual degradation and torture as occurred at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. One of Zimbardo's associates, after observing a humiliating experiment called the humping experiment, in which the prisoners simulated sodomy, berated Zimbardo for contributing to the suffering of human beings. This snapped Zimbardo back to his senses and led him to cancel the experiment (Zimbardo, 2007b).

PHOTO 2.2 "Deep Throat" was the alias for W. Mark Felt, the anonymous source who leaked secrets about President Nixon's Watergate cover-up to the *Washington Post.*

AP Photo

Laud Humphreys's *Tearoom Trade* (1970) involved studying secret gay male activities in public restrooms. Acting as a voyeur (or "watch queen"), Humphreys served as a lookout but also, without the permission of his subjects, as a hidden observer. He copied down their license plate numbers and traced the participants back to their homes, where he showed up under the guise of being a mental health researcher. All three of these examples raised highly controversial ethical questions and most likely would not be approved today by codes of research ethics or institutional review boards.

In an incredibly insensitive experiment later dubbed the "Monster Study," for 4 months during the Depression, researcher and graduate student Mary Tudor and her professor Wendell Johnson taught children at an orphanage in Iowa a "lesson they would never forget"—how to stutter ("Lessons Turn Orphans Into Outcasts," 2001). Although the experiment helped thousands of children overcome speech difficulties, this took place at the expense of some of the children. The children were divided into two groups of 11, one labeled normal speakers and given positive speech therapy and the other group taught to stutter. Eight members of the treatment group became permanent stutterers. Although Tudor felt remorse and returned to the orphanage a number of times in attempts to reverse the damage, Johnson did nothing and became famous in the field of speech pathology due to the study. Tudor describes how during the experiment, trusting orphans greeted her, running to her car and carrying materials for the experiment. Thirteen of the subjects who were still alive learned of the experiment in 2001, when it was reported in the *San Jose Mercury News.* In 2007, the state of Iowa agreed to pay $925,000 to six subjects of the study who had been harmed by the University of Iowa researchers. The 1939 study became known as the Monster Study because of the methods used by the researchers. Mary Tudor was instrumental in breaking the story ("Orphans Granted Settlement for Monster Study," 2007).

In the name of research, criminologists should have no interest in behaving as "mad scientists" who inhumanely pursue science for its own sake. In most research, informed consent of participants based on knowledge of the experiment is essential. If some form of deception is necessary, it is even more incumbent on the researcher to prevent harm and, where possible, to debrief, reassure, and explain the purposes of the project afterward. Obviously, criminology cannot afford to limit its inquiry to volunteers. **Reciprocity** involves a system of mutual trust and obligation between the researcher and subject. Subjects are asked to share themselves in the belief that this baring of information will not be used in an inappropriate, harmful, or embarrassing manner. A basic tenet of any scholarly research is the dictum that the investigator maintain objectivity and professional integrity in both the performance and the reporting of research. The researcher, first and foremost, is an investigator and not a hustler, huckster, salesperson, or politician. Researchers should avoid purposely choosing and reporting only those techniques that tend to shed the best light on their data, or "lying with statistics" (D. Huff, 1966).

Related to these issues is the fact that the researcher should take steps to protect the confidentiality and privacy of respondents. One procedure for attempting to protect the identity of subjects, organizations, or communities is the use of pseudonyms, aliases, or false names. Names such as "Doc," "Chic," "The Lupollo Family," "Vince Swaggi," "Deep Throat," and "Wincanton," to mention just a few, have become legend in criminology.

In 2011, Boston College received a federal subpoena for oral history materials held in its library. Acting on behalf of the British government, the U.S. Department of Justice sought interviews from the Belfast Project of former paramilitary members who had fought in Northern Ireland's "Troubles" (sectarian conflict). However, the interviewers had promised the subjects strict confidentiality until their death. Some of the sought tapes involved individuals who were still alive (Bray, 2011). Such government measures threaten the very research that the government seeks. Premature revelations of such information may spell death to participants who revealed information assuming that they were protected by promises of confidentiality.

Operationalization—Who Is Criminal?

To illustrate the importance of methodological precision, let us examine the basic but deceptively complex questions of who is criminal and how much crime there is. Although an initial response to these questions might be, "Why, of course, we know," the answers are not as obvious as they seem.

Taking what would appear to be the easiest question—who is criminal—most would agree that long-term recidivists who have repeatedly been found guilty are people who commit crime. Yet some people might even on this point maintain that some of these "career criminals" are in fact not criminals but are, from the conflict perspective, political prisoners. They are viewed as victims of an unfair class system or of a politically oppressive system. In addition, not all apprehended individuals or persons accused of crime are guilty. And what about those who commit crimes but are not arrested?

It becomes apparent that the manner in which the variable "criminal" is operationalized will have a major influence on the definition of the concept of criminal. A **variable** is a concept that has been operationalized or measured in a specific manner and that can vary or take on different values, usually of a quantitative nature. Another example of a variable related to criminal justice is police contact. **Operationalization** involves the process of defining concepts by describing how they are being measured; the notion of operationalization can be practically explained by completing the statement "I measured it by ––––––––––––." For police contact, you could operationalize it by assessing whether a person reported any crime to the police. In Chapters 5 to 8, we describe many theories that assume excess criminality among lower class groups based on official statistics; however, what methodological problems and biases in addressing this issue are introduced by relying solely on one measure of crime?

OFFICIAL POLICE STATISTICS—THE UNIFORM CRIME REPORT (UCR) AND THE NATIONAL INCIDENT-BASED REPORTING SYSTEM (NIBRS)

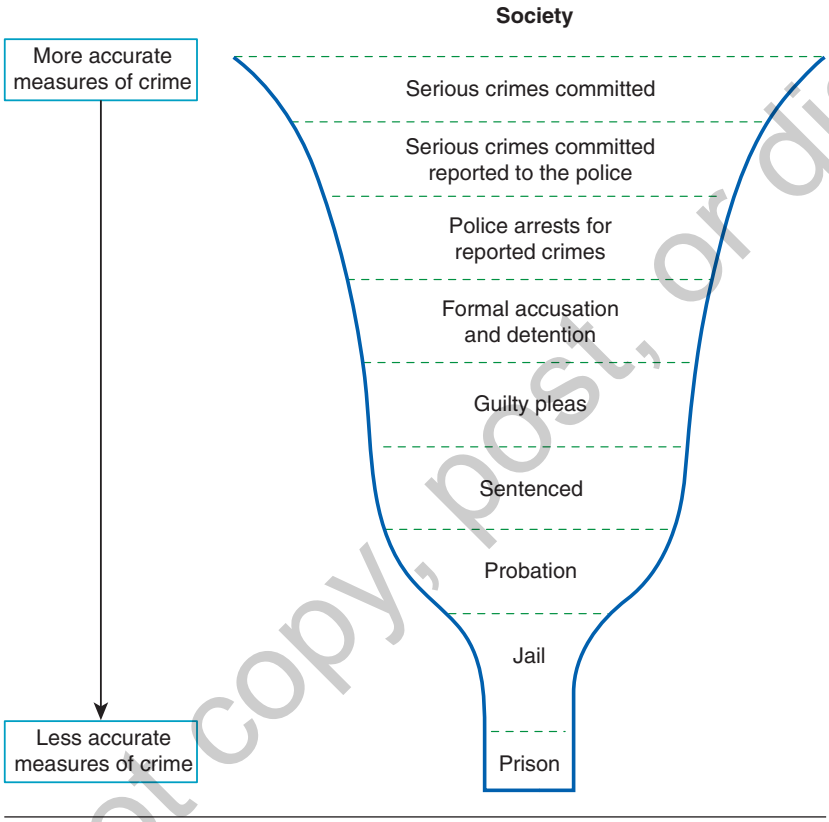
Internationally, until relatively recently, the major source of information regarding crime statistics was official police statistics. Gathered for government administrative purposes with only secondary attention paid to their usefulness for social science research, these data tended to be uneven in quality and were not gathered or recorded in any systematic manner. Basically, criminologists had no efficient statistics to consult to answer even basic questions such as whether crime was increasing or decreasing.

Since 1930, the U.S. Department of Justice has compiled national crime statistics, the **Uniform Crime Report (UCR)**, with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) assuming responsibility as the clearinghouse and publisher. Police departments collect the data and submit their reports to the FBI. Although participation in the UCR program by local police departments is purely voluntary, the number of departments reporting and the comprehensiveness of the information have steadily improved over the years, with police departments from large metropolitan areas historically the most reliable participants.

Sources of Crime Statistics

Returning to our question of how much crime there is, an examination of the UCR and its relationship to sources of data on crime and people who commit crime is useful. Figure 2.1 illustrates the relationship between crime committed and the **sources of crime statistics**, including the UCR. It is unclear whether an accurate estimate of the amount of crime committed is possible, for several reasons. For one, not all crimes that are committed are discovered. In addition, some crimes may be known only to the perpetrators, in which case the victim is unaware of loss. Perhaps there is no identifiable victim, as in the case of a gambling violation. The further a source of statistics is from the "crimes committed" category, the less useful it is as a measure of the extent of crime. Not all crimes that are discovered are reported to the police; similarly, not all reported crimes are recorded by police (see Figure 2.1).

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Sources of Crime Statistics: The Flow of Offenders Through the Criminal Justice System



Source: Adapted from the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice. (1967). *The challenge of crime in a free society.* Government Printing Office, pp. 262–263.

In addition, some law enforcement agencies may purposely conceal recorded crimes; some offenses may be **unfounded crimes** or defined by investigating officers as not constituting a criminal matter. For instance, when a complainant reports an attempted burglary, investigating officers may conclude that there is not enough evidence to support that a crime took place.

Despite this problematic relationship between crimes recorded and crimes committed, the UCR until recently represented the best statistics available on crime commission and, as discussed later in this chapter, still represents one of the best sources. Again, as shown in Figure 2.1, once we move beyond crimes recorded as a measure of crime commission, we are getting further removed from the accurate measurement of crime. Thus, arrest statistics, indictments, convictions, incarcerations, and other dispositions such as probation and parole are not as useful. Such statistics have much more to do with police efficiency or allocations to the criminal justice system and general societal policies toward crime control policy than they do with measuring the extent of the crime problem.

Redesign of the UCR Program: NIBRS

The Uniform Crime Report is now defunct. It was officially retired on January 1, 2021. After that date, all law enforcement agencies in the country are required to use NIBRS, and most departments have already begun doing so. The redesigned UCR program is called the **National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)**. In 1982, in response to the criticisms and limitations of the UCR program, the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the FBI formed a joint task force and contracted with a private research firm (Abt Associates) to undertake revisions of the UCR program. This was the first in the program's then more than 50 years of existence (Poggio et al., 1985; Rovetch et al., 1984). On the basis of recommendations of a steering committee made up of police practitioners, academicians, and the media, the NIBRS suggestions for changes in the UCR included the following:

- A new two-level reporting system in which most agencies continue to report basic offense and arrest data much as they do at present (Level I), while a small sample of agencies report more extensive information (Level II).
- Conversion of the entire UCR system into unit-record reporting in which police agencies report on the characteristics of each criminal incident (e.g., location, time, presence of weapon) and on the characteristics of each individual arrest.
- Distinguishing of attempted from completed offenses.
- Distinguishing of crimes against businesses, individuals, or households from crimes against other entities.
- Instituting ongoing audits of samples of participating UCR agencies to check for errors in the new program.
- Support for better user services, particularly in making databases more available to outside researchers.
- NIBRS collection of data on each single incident and arrest in 22 crime categories.
- Unlike the UCR, NIBRS documents animal cruelty. extortion. and identity theft offenses.
- NIBRS also documents "crimes against society" such as drugs, gambling, pornography, prostitution and weapon law violations.
- NIBRS also eliminates the "hierarchy rule" which involved recording only the most serious offense per incident. (Nussman, 2022).

It is believed that these revisions in the program, which are taking longer to implement than anticipated, will overcome a number of past criticisms as well as provide a database that will be more useful for both researchers and policy makers.

The 19th-century British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli has often been cited as having remarked, "There are three types of lies: lies, damn lies, and statistics." Obviously, caution must be exercised in examining graphic devices and statistical reports (D. Huff, 1966; Zeisel, 1957). In the 1980s and early 1990s, rising juvenile violent crime led conservative commentators such as Robert Bennett and John DiIulio to make grim prophecies of exploding juvenile crime among violent criminal predators raised in low income areas of the city and in maternal, single-parent households—a foreboding inevitability born of moral rot. In the 1990s, these "hopeless areas" showed the greatest decline in crime, one that few had predicted. Crime File 2.1 assesses this crime dip. In explaining the decline in crime in New York City from 1990 to 2010, Zimring (2006) indicates that crime in the city dropped twice as much as anywhere else in the United States, with burglary, auto theft, and robbery going down 30% more than in other cities. Crime came down more than 80% in New York City, with a virtual ending of open drug markets and killings. Emphasizing harm reduction, the war on drug violence achieved its ends without winning a war on drugs. As he explains it, the lesson learned is that up to 75% of the crime dip can be achieved with relatively superficial changes in the character of urban life

(Zimring, 2006). The declines did not require major changes in the social or structural environments but smaller shifts in policy.

According to Zimring (2010), some lessons learned from the crime decline in New York City included the following:

- Street policing was successful in reducing crime.
- Effective crime control did not require mass incarceration.
- The war on drug violence could be won without winning the war on drugs.

Zimring indicates that although street policing as a crime fighter was regarded as a myth in the social sciences 25 years ago, it has a greater impact on crime than believed. New York City had actually dropped its level of jailing and incarceration by over 90,000 from 1990 to 2013. The New York Police Department (NYPD) had destroyed public drug markets during this period. Drug killings were down 90% without ending illegal drug use. Another interesting candidate for the decline in crime is attributed to local and federal efforts decades earlier to reduce exposure to lead poisoning. Fewer children growing up in lead-infested areas yields less brain damage and less crime.

Retired NYPD Captain John Eterno and John Jay College professor Eli Silverman in *The Crime Numbers Game: Management by Manipulation* (2012) maintain that it was an open secret that crime statistics in New York were being manipulated (Francescani, 2012). An NYPD whistleblower was harassed for reporting that his precinct systematically underreported crime. He claimed that felonies were downgraded, crime reports were never filed, and victims were discouraged from filing reports. Eterno and Silverman interviewed 400 retired NYPD captains.

CRIME FILE 2.1 THE CRIME DIP

From the first compilation of crime statistics by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the early 1930s until the early 1960s, the crime rate in the United States had been declining. Some experts had even unwisely predicted that, given existing trends and growing affluence, crime might become a rarity by the 21st century. By the mid-1960s, however, recorded crime made a reversal and rose to unprecedented levels, producing in its wake yet more predictions of unrepentant explosions in the crime rate. A brief leveling off in the early 1980s was followed by an epidemic of youth violence beginning in the mid-1980s with the advent of crack cocaine and widespread use of weapons to defend disputed drug trafficking turf. By the 1990s, an assumed inevitability of rising crime rates was greeted by unexpected declines, beginning in large cities such as New York. From 1993 to 2000, index crimes had declined by more than 30%.

The causes of this crime dip are a subject of dispute. Factors associated with the crime dip that began in the 1990s include the following:

- A healthy economy
- Crime prevention programs
- Decline in domestic violence
- An incarceration binge
- CompStat and community policing
- A decline in the crack cocaine epidemic
- Legalized abortion

The most prosperous American economy in over 30 years, highlighted by low unemployment and low inflation, may be the major reason for falling crime rates. Such an explanation might not be the case, however. During the 1960s, crime rates rose sharply at a time of low unemployment. More recently, Sun Belt cities with low unemployment have had higher crime rates than older cities with high unemployment. New York City's murder rate in the 1990s fell more than 66% despite high unemployment (Witkin, 1998).

Crime prevention, which shows much promise for early prevention programs with high-risk juveniles, has shown only modest impacts on crime rates.

Domestic murders (among intimates) demonstrated a 40% decline from 1976 to 1996. Part of the explanation for this was a decline in marriages among 20- to 24-year-olds, as well as greater opportunities for abused women to escape bad relationships.

America's incarceration binge has been phenomenal, increasing from 744,000 incarcerated people in 1985 to approximately 1.8 million in 1998. This trend continued through the 1990s, with some decline. At the conclusion of 2013, there were 1,574,700 people incarcerated in state and federal correctional facilities. This is the largest imprisoned population of any country in the world. Although locking up an extra million people must have some impact, New York City showed the most dramatic drop in crime, and the state of New York (with 70% of its prison population from New York City) increased its prison population by only 8% from 1993 to 1996. Utah, on the other hand, raised its incarceration rate by 19% from 1993 to 1996, but its violent crime rate went up (Witkin, 1998). By the end of 2013, a total of 6,899,000 Americans were behind bars or on probation or parole. This represented 1 of every 32 adults.

Another candidate for explanation is better and more effective policing. CompStat (computer statistics) was used to computer map and identify hot spots (high-crime areas) by the New York City police to assign target patrols. Wilson and Kelling's "broken windows" (1982) theory emphasized focusing on small, nuisance crimes under the assumption that, left unpunished, they breed more serious crimes. The fact that many cities that did not employ community policing strategies also experienced major declines in recorded crime—and some innovative departments experienced increases—leaves the more effective policing explanation in question.

A rival explanation is that the police departments are manipulating statistics to show lower crime rates. Although this may occur in individual cases, such a mass conspiracy by most departments seems unlikely. In 1998, the Philadelphia Police Department was accused of having systematically underreported crime for years. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported routine downgrading of the seriousness of crimes in which stabbings and beatings were redefined as hospital cases and burglaries became lost property ("Philadelphia Crime Statistics Questioned," 1998).

Blumstein and Rosenfeld (1998) point out that the increase in homicides in the late 1980s to early 1990s was among younger people (under 21), and this was primarily due to a crack cocaine epidemic in American cities beginning in 1986 that peaked in 1993. This epidemic was accompanied by a great increase in the carrying of firearms to settle turf wars.

A final intriguing explanation in an article by Levitt and Donohue (1999) argues that legalized abortion is responsible for falling crime rates. They claim that half of the drop in crime since 1991 might reflect the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion. Some unwanted potential people who commit crime were not born because their potential mothers had abortions. The decline in crime began in 1992 just when those youth, who would have been born in the mid-1970s, would have hit their peak crime years (ages 18 to 24). Even Levitt and Donohue admit, however, that other factors may be more explanatory of the crime dip than abortion. Just as criminologists debated the causes of the rise in crime, there is no consensus regarding explanations for the decline in crime or even prognostications as to when crime might rise again. During the COVID-19 pandemic, violent crime, particularly murder, increased. It was also predicted that programs to "defund the police" might result in an increase in the overall crime rate.

For Further Thought

1. Using a web browser, locate articles on the "crime dip." What explanations do they provide?

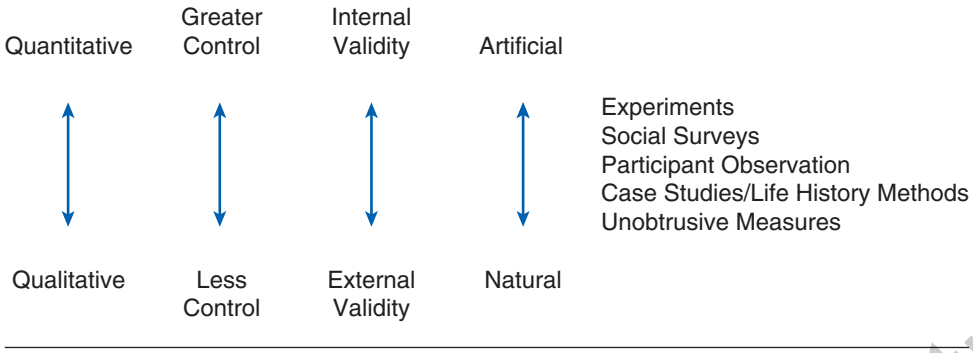
Sources: Wilson, J. Q., & Kelling, G. A. (1999). Broken windows and police discretion (NCJ 178259). U.S. Department of Justice; Associated Press. (1998, November 2). Philadelphia crime statistics questioned; Blumstein, A., & Rosenfeld, R. (1998, October 9–11). Assessing the recent ups and downs in U.S. homicide rates. National Institute of Justice Journal, 88; Levitt, S., & Donohue, J. (1999, August 8). Legalized abortion and crime. Chicago Tribune; Witkin, G. (1998, May 25). The crime bust: What's behind the dramatic drug bust? U.S. News and World Report, 16(2), pp. 28–37.

ALTERNATIVE DATA-GATHERING STRATEGIES

Official crime statistics published by national governments have their uses; however, criminologists would be remiss in their duty as scholars and scientists if they were to restrict their inquiries and sources of statistics to data gathered for administrative purposes by government bodies. In some totalitarian regimes, for instance, there would be nothing to study because the official government ideology might simply hold that there is no crime in the people's paradise. Even in open societies, official statistics

seldom cover crimes of the elite. Fortunately, criminologists have at their disposal a veritable arsenal of techniques whose application is limited only by the researcher's imagination and skill.

FIGURE 2.2 ■ Alternative Data-Gathering Strategies



Source: Hagan, F. E. (1993). *Research methods in criminal justice and criminology* (3rd ed.). Macmillan, p. 101.

Figure 2.2 offers a model or paradigm (schema) with which to consider and compare the alternative data-gathering strategies that can be employed in criminal justice and criminological research. As an illustrative device, Figure 2.2 is an attempt to broadly describe the relative advantages and disadvantages of the different data-gathering strategies. The model suggests that, as we move up the list of techniques or vertical arrows to experiments, we tend to obtain quantitative measurement (which lends itself to sophisticated statistical treatment), greater control over other factors that may interfere with one's findings, and increased internal validity (or accuracy in being certain that the variable[s] assumed to be responsible for one's findings are indeed the causal agent[s])—but the result is artificiality. The latter point suggests that, as a result of controlling for error, the researcher may have created an antiseptic or atypical group or situation that no longer resembles the "real world" that one is attempting to describe.

Generally, as one proceeds down the vertical arrows or list of techniques, the methodology employed becomes more qualitative. Qualitative techniques involve less commitment to quantitative measurement on the part of the researcher, more engagement with field and observational strategies, and less direct means of obtaining information. Generally, as one moves down the list, one has less control over manipulating the research setting and rival causal factors. Such procedures, however, increase external validity (the ability to generalize to larger populations) as well as present the opportunity to study subjects in more natural settings. Criminologists, like other researchers, tend to favor their own particular methods of data gathering; this is to be expected. At times, however, academic battles break out among those who claim that their preferred method contains some inherent superiority over other procedures. Such **methodological narcissism** (or methodologism) is a fanatical adherence to a particular research method, often at the expense of a concern for substance (Bayley, 1978; Martinson, 1979; "Martinson Attacks His Own Earlier Work," 1978). This "methods for methods' sake" orientation ignores the fact that methodology is not an end in itself but a means to an end—the development of criminological knowledge. It is more useful to permit the subject to dictate the proper methodology than to assert that, unless a subject lends itself to deployment of one's favorite method, it is not worthy of study.

EXPERIMENTS AND EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH IN CRIMINOLOGY

The **experiment** is the lodestone or benchmark for comparison with all other research methods. It is the most effective means of controlling for error or rival factors before the fact through the very design of the study (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). Although there are myriad variations of the experiment, the point of departure or prototype is the classic experimental design. The **classic experimental design** contains three key elements:

1. Equivalence
2. Pretests and posttests
3. Experimental and control groups

Basically, *equivalence* means the assignment of subjects to experimental and control groups in such a manner that they are assumed to be alike in all major respects. This can be done either through random assignment (where each subject has an equal probability of appearing in either group) or through matching (a procedure in which subjects with similar age, sex, and other characteristics exhibited by the experimental group are recruited for the control group). The *experimental group* is to receive the treatment (*X*), and the *control group* will receive no treatment but will be observed to compare it with the experimental group. Both groups are given pretests (preobservations to note conditions that exist prior to treatment) designated as 01, or observation time 1, and posttests, or observations after the experimental treatment (*X*) has taken place. The logic of the experiment assumes that, because both groups were equivalent in the pretest period, any differences in the posttest observation must be due to the fact that one group received a particular treatment and the other did not. Increasingly, such experiments are being used to inform public policy decision making.

Some Examples of Experiments in Criminology

Housing for Prisoners

In a randomized controlled trial, the Maryland Opportunities through Vouchers Experiment (MOVE) was recently evaluated. This project involved giving former prisoners 6 months of free housing away from their home area (the treatment group) and the treatment group free housing in their home area (control group). The project was then conducted again, but this time the control group did not receive free housing. Rearrest rates were examined for the treatment and control groups for 1-year postprogram. The results of the program showed that the treatment group who moved to new areas fared better in terms of rearrest than those who did not move. It was also found that rearrest was lower for those who received free housing in their home area compared to those who did not receive the free housing.

Scared Straight

Much fanfare was raised in the United States in the late 1970s over a novel program intended to deter wayward juveniles from progression to more serious criminal activity by means of blunt, heart-to-heart talks in prison with specially selected inmates (see Photo 2.3). Portrayed in the film *Scared*

PHOTO 2.3 "Scared Straight" programs were designed to expose delinquents to "heart-to-heart" talks with inmates with the aim of literally scaring them into becoming straight, or nondelinquent.

AP Photo/Craig Schreiner

Straight, the initial Rahway, New Jersey, prison project was intended to counteract the glamorized image associated with criminal life. Although many jurisdictions rushed to imitate what appeared to be the latest panacea in corrections, further research suggested that this optimism was premature. An evaluation of the JOLT (Juvenile Offenders Learn Truth) program at the Jackson State Prison, Michigan, randomly assigned youth to experimental and control groups. Delinquency rates were measured 3 and 6 months afterward and found no significant differences between those who had attended the JOLT sessions (experimentals) and those who had not (controls; "Scared Straight Found Ineffective Again," 1979).

Evidence-Based Research

Those who are impatient with or question the need for research in criminology or criminal justice often raise the questions of "So what?" or "Of what practical use are all of these research projects?" Perhaps in answer to such questions, in 1996 the U.S. Congress required the attorney general to provide a "comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness" of over $3 billion spent annually in Department of Justice grants that had been designed to assist state and local law enforcement and communities in preventing crime (see Criminology in Context 2.1).

Evidence-based research is an attempt to base knowledge and practice on well-researched evidence. The "what works" in criminology and criminal justice approach used by the Department of Justice is based on the assumption that it makes little sense to continue to invest in programs that do not work. Why not find out which programs *do* work or are promising and put our scarce funding into those programs? This evidence-based research employs a problem-solving approach using local, national, and international evidence on what works (http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk).

The most ambitious effort in this regard is the **Campbell Collaboration** (C2). Named in honor of the late Donald Campbell, a pioneer in research design, the purpose of the organization is to facilitate the preparation, maintenance, and accessibility of systematic program reviews. In support of this, the group keeps a register of systematic studies. C2 was based on the highly successful Cochrane Collaboration in health care that attempted to address the lack of evidence guiding medical and health care practices. Chaired by David Farrington at Cambridge University, during 1 year, C2 solicited program reviews in 25 areas, including boot camps, street lighting, restorative justice, child skills training, and hot spots policing.

The Campbell Collaboration intends to produce the best evidence on what works to inform decision makers, researchers, and the general public. "Best evidence" means systematic reviews that are rigorous, are updated in light of new studies and criticisms, are relevant and accessible to end users, cover studies published worldwide, and are open to criticism and comment (Petrosino et al., 2003). Another example of a comprehensive effort to evaluate successful programs is the Blueprints for Violence Prevention program at the University of Colorado (Mihalic et al., 2004). Another resource for identifying "what works" to reduce crime in can be found at CrimeSolutions.gov. In 2010, the Office of Justice Programs established CrimeSolutions.gov as a central clearinghouse to update what works in criminal justice, juvenile justice and crime, and victim services. Programs are rated as follows:

- Effective
- Promising
- No effects

Effective or successful programs are described as evidence-based, "smart on crime" approaches. Included in this type of approach is an attempt to have a broad examination of the evidence. The attempt is to summarize the findings and ultimately integrate them into practice. All approved CrimeSolutions.gov lead researchers and study reviewers are certified, have undergone training, and have extensive experience with the subject matter as well as research methodology experience.

CRIMINOLOGY IN CONTEXT 2.1 PREVENTING CRIME—WHAT WORKS, WHAT DOESN'T, WHAT'S PROMISING

In 1996, Congress required that the attorney general and the National Institute of Justice evaluate the effectiveness of 500 funded programs in a manner that would be "independent in nature" and "employ rigorous and scientifically recognized standards and methodologies." The Institute on Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Maryland was contacted to undertake this task and to serve as a clearinghouse. It issued its report titled "Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising." These evaluations are regularly updated; full reports or research in brief summaries can be downloaded from http://www.preventingcrime.org. They can also be obtained from the Bureau of Justice Statistics website (http://www.bjs.gov). A few of the programs included in the list are the following:

What Doesn't Work

- Gun buyback programs
- Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.)
- Arrest of unemployed suspects for domestic assault
- Storefront police offices
- Correctional boot camps using traditional military basic training
- "Scared Straight" programs whereby minor juvenile offenders visit adult prisons
- Shock probation, shock parole
- Home detention with electronic monitoring
- Intensive supervision on parole or probation
- Residential programs for juvenile offenders using challenging experiences in rural settings

What Works

- For infants—frequent home visits by nurses and other professionals
- For delinquents and at-risk preadolescents—family therapy and parent training
- For schools:
  - Organizational development for innovation
  - Communication and reinforcement of consistent norms
  - Teaching of social competency skills
  - Coaching in thinking skills for high-risk youth
- For older male ex-offenders—vocational training
- Extra police patrols for high-crime hot spots
- For high-risk offenders:
  - Monitoring by specialized police units
  - Incarceration
- For employed, domestic abusers—arrest
- For convicted offenders—rehabilitation programs with risk-focused treatments
- For drug-using offenders in prison—therapeutic community treatment programs

What's Promising

- Proactive drunk-driving arrests with breath testing
- Police showing greater respect to arrested offenders (may reduce repeat offending)
- Higher number of police officers in cities (may reduce crime generally)
- Gang monitoring by community workers and probation and police officers
- Community monitoring by Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America (may prevent drug abuse)
- Community-based afterschool recreation programs
- Battered women's shelters
- Job Corps residential training for at-risk youth
- Prison-based vocational education programs
- Two clerks on duty in already robbed convenience stores
- Metal detectors
- Proactive arrest for carrying concealed weapons (may reduce gun crime)
- Drug courts
- Drug treatment in jails followed by urine testing
- Intensive supervision and aftercare of juvenile offenders

None of these evaluations as working or not working is final; constant replication (repeated experiments) and reevaluation are required, but a persistent, independent, scientific program of evaluation will go a long way in replacing what we think works or what doesn't with what actually does work.

For Further Thought

1. Using one of the titles of the programs just described (e.g., boot camps or drug courts), find an article that describes one of these programs and whether the program worked or not.

Sources: Waller, I., & and Welsh, B. (1998, October). Reducing crime in harnessing international best practice. *NIJ Journal*, 237, pp. 26–32; and Sherman, L. et al. (1998, July). Preventing crime: What works, what doesn't, what's promising? (NCJ 165366). *NIJ Research in Brief*. See also Petrosino, A. J. et al. (2003, June). Toward evidence-based criminology and criminal justice: Systematic Reviews and the Campbell Collaboration, and the Crime and Justice Group. *International Journal of Comparative Criminology, 3*, 142–161; and Mihalic, S. et al. (2004, July). *Blueprints for violence prevention report* (NCJ 204274). Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. NCJ 204274, July.

Web Sources: National Institute of Justice: http://www.ojp.gov/nij; Justice Information Center: http://www.ncjrs.gov; international data on what works: http://www.crime-prevention-intl.org.

SURVEYS

Most readers are familiar with the use of surveys in public opinion polls, voting-prediction studies, and marketing research. Surveys are also used in criminology, particularly in analyzing victimization, self-reported crime, public ratings of crime seriousness, measurements of fear of crime, and attitudes toward the police and the criminal justice system. **Surveys** are used to gather information in a systematic fashion by using questionnaires. Just as experiments control for error and rival causal factors before the fact by the very design of the study, survey researchers attempt to control for these factors after the fact through the use of statistical procedures. Surveys can be administered in a variety of ways—you can create a paper survey, an online or email survey, or a telephone survey. Surveys can be completed by the person themself or an interviewer can ask the questions. Sometimes, an interviewer asks some questions of the survey to a research participant and lets the participant read and answer other questions for themself on a computer. Can you think of any kinds of survey questions that you think would be best answered by a person themself on a computer?

Victim Surveys

One of the major shortcomings of such official police statistics as the UCR is that they fail to account for undiscovered or unreported crime; the "**dark figure of crime**" is the phrase early European criminologists used to refer to offenses that escape official notice. The assumption was that for every crime that came to the attention of authorities, there were an unspecified number of undiscovered crimes—the dark figure.

Victim surveys are specifically designed to record an estimate of claimed victimizations by a representative sample of the population. One major finding, beginning with the U.S. surveys of the late 1960s, was that overall about twice as much crime was reported to interviewers as appeared in official police records.

National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)

Beginning in 1972, the National Crime Surveys were conducted. The NCS (now called the **National Crime Victimization Survey [NCVS]**) consisted of the Central City Surveys and the National Crime Panel Surveys.

The Central City Surveys were essentially cross-sectional studies of households and commercial establishments in selected cities. Initially, probability samples of approximately 10,000 households and 1,000 to 5,000 commercial establishments were surveyed in 26 central cities. The great expense of such surveys in each city led to their discontinuance. The National Crime Panels employed a sophisticated

probability sample of housing units and businesses throughout the United States. In contrast to the Central City Surveys, which were cross-sectional or studies of one time only, the panels were longitudinal in nature, that is, studies over time of a particular group. This use of panels enabled bounding of victim reports or the use of pretests to have a reference point for the survey reporting period. The initial interview acted as a boundary or time period benchmark with which to compare future reported victimizations. Consisting of over 100,000 households to be interviewed every 6 months and 15,000 (later upped to 50,000) businesses, the national panels repeated the interviews twice a year to achieve the bounding feature previously described. Each housing unit remained in the sample for 3 years, and every 6 months, a subsample of households rotate out of the sample and are replaced by a new group. In 2019, 155,076 households with 249,008 persons aged 12 years and older participated in the NCVS (Morgan & Truman, 2020). Persons participating in the NCVS are asked about a range of victimization experiences that occurred during the previous 6 months. The NCVS uses what is called a two-step measurement process. In the interview, participants are asked about victimizations that may have occurred during the previous six months through screen questions. These short questions (e.g., Was something belonging to YOU stolen such as bicycle or sports equipment?) are used to prompt individuals into recalling victimization events. If they answer affirmatively that a victimization occurred, they then fill out the second stage of the interview, called the incident report. They complete incident reports for each victimization they experienced. If a person said they had their bike stolen and they had their house broken into, they would complete two incident reports—one for the theft and one for the burglary. The incident report includes detailed questions about the incident such as who the perpetrator was, if the incident was reported, and whether any financial harm or physical injury resulted. It is also used to confirm that the type of victimization the respondent reported in the screen question, did in fact occur. In this way, if during the completion of the incident report a person noted that that in fact their bike was not actually stolen but it was their car instead, the incident would be classified in the NCVS as a motor vehicle theft, not a bike theft. Measuring victimization this way is an attempt to reduce measurement error, which is discussed in the following section. The initial findings were heralded at the time as the first accurate statistics on crime, but further analysis suggests that this conclusion may have been prematurely optimistic. Just as the UCR was found to have shortcomings, so any measure of crime, including victim surveys, can be found wanting in some respects.

PHOTO 2.4 The owner of this bicycle was interviewed for the NCVS. What type of incident report do you think would be filed?

Pat Greenhouse/Boston Globe/Getty Images

Issues and Cautions in Studying Victim Data

Some possible problems in victim surveys include, but are not limited to, the expense of compiling large samples, false or mistaken reports, memory failure or decay, telescoping of events, sampling bias, overreporting or underreporting, interviewer effects, and coding and mechanical errors.

1. Although large-scale public opinion polls such as those by Gallup or Roper can be conducted with sample sizes of fewer than 1,000, the rarity of some types of victimization, such as rape, requires large samples to turn up a few victims. Hundreds may need to be surveyed to find one victim.
2. A parallel could be drawn with attempting to survey lottery winners on the basis of a sample of the general population. Many would have to be canvassed before turning up only a few winners. If the chances of winning the lottery were 1 in a million, to discover one winner by chance, the researcher would have to interview one million players.
3. False or mistaken reports can result in error. Levine (1976), for example, found inaccuracies in respondent reports regarding their voting behavior, finances, academic performance, business practices, and even sexual activity. Should we assume greater precision in victim reports?
4. Memory failure or decay tends to increase with the distance between the actual time of the event and the interview concerning the event (Panel for the Evaluation of Crime Surveys, 1976).
5. Telescoping of events, a type of memory misfire, involves the moving of events that took place in a different time period (e.g., before the reference period) into the time studied. A victimization of 2 years ago is mistakenly assumed to have occurred this past year. Subjects may even unconsciously telescope events to please interviewers (Biderman et al., 1967). Such demand characteristics or overagreeability on the part of respondents can certainly bias victim studies.
6. Sampling bias may produce an undernumeration of the young, males, and minorities. These very groups that tend to be undercounted by the U.S. Census are also more heavily victimized.
7. Overreporting in victim surveys generally involves subjects reporting incidents to interviewers that they normally would view as too trivial or unimportant to call for police involvement. Much of the dark figure of crime consists of minor property crime, much of which could be considered unfounded by police.

Controlling for Error in Victim Surveys

Some ways of controlling for error in victim surveys include, but are not limited to, the use of panels and bounding of target groups, evaluations of coding and other sources of human or mechanical error in data processing, reverse record checks of known groups (if persons say they were victimized and reported to the police, you can check police records to see if accurate), reinterviews of the same group, using behaviorally specific questions (questions that provide detail about the behavior in question rather than using labels that the respondent has to define for themself), and interviews with significant others. Panels (longitudinal studies of the same group) were discussed previously as a means of bounding (establishing the time period during which events were recalled as having taken place), thus controlling for forward telescoping (the tendency to move prior incidents into the time frame being studied). Reinterviews of the same group in the National Crime Panel enable a tracking of reported crime incidents and the checking of responses with significant others (those who know the respondent well). The primary benefit of victim surveys is that they provide us with another independent measure of crime, separate from official statistics. Neither official statistics nor victim surveys begin to tap the extent of occupational, corporate, and public order crime; in that regard, both measures seriously underestimate the extent of crime.

Redesign of the National Crime Victimization Survey

Criticisms of the NCVS, particularly its inability to gather accurate information regarding sexual assaults and domestic violence, prompted development of improved methodology that enhanced the ability of respondents to recall events. The survey changes increased the number of rapes and aggravated and simple assaults reported. The redesigned instrument also gathered information on other

victimizations, such as nonrape sexual assault and unwanted or coerced sexual contact, for the first time. Improvements in technology and survey methodology were incorporated into the new design (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994). The NCVS is currently going through another major redesign.

An analysis of available data indicates that we have only a limited idea of the proportion of crime that is committed by any category of individuals or groups in a particular society. This is certainly the case if we rely entirely on official statistics for our discussions.

The National Crime Statistics Exchange (NCS-X)

The National Crime Statistics Exchange is a very ambitious effort by the Bureau of Justice Statistics to create a national crime statistics program that will replace the summary-based uniform crime report that was created nearly a century ago. The NCS-X is a project being designed to generate nationally representative incident-based data on crime. These data are reported to law enforcement agencies and combine data from over 6,000 police agencies as compiled by the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) with new agencies being added to increase the nation's ability to provide more accurate national measures of crime incidents.

The NCS-X will provide incentives to agencies and state reporting programs to encourage their participation. A number of organizations will participate. These include RTI International, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the Police Executive Research Forum, the Integrated Justice Information Systems Institute, and SEARCH; the National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics will be developing the plan.

Phase I of NCS-X will assess the costs and recruit an additional 400 law enforcement agencies to participate. In addition, it will seek the advice of existing state NIBRS programs. The Bureau of Justice Statistics is examining a variety of options for participating agencies, including expanding reporting capabilities, technical solutions, analytic tools, and other incentives to enhance the operational capabilities of NCS-X agencies (adapted from www.bjs/content/ncsx.cfm; www.iacptechnology.org/ncs-x.html).

Self-Report Measures of Crime

As with victim surveys, **self-report measures** attempt to provide an alternative to official statistics in measuring the extent of crime in a society (Menard, 1987). Criminologists ask individuals whether they have committed various crimes or delinquent acts. Common items used to measure delinquency ask individuals under the age of 18 to indicate if they have ever done a list of behaviors. These include the following: (1) stolen items of little value (less than $50); (2) destroyed the property of others; (3) used someone's vehicle without their permission; (4) hit or physically attacked someone; (5) been truant from school; (6) consumed alcoholic beverages; (7) used illegal drugs such as marijuana, heroin, or cocaine; (8) indecently sexually exposed yourself in public; and (9) been paid for having sexual relations. Measuring criminal involvement may be achieved through anonymous questionnaires or surveys in which the respondent is identifiable that can be validated by later interviews or police records. In addition, signed instruments that can be checked against official records, validation through later interviews or threats of a polygraph (lie detector) test, and interviews alone, as well as interviews that are then checked against official records, may be used (Nettler, 1978).

Most self-report surveys conducted in the United States have been of "captive audiences," such as school or college populations (Glaser, 1978; Hood & Sparks, 1971). Few studies have been done of the adult population. One of the earliest, by Wallerstein and Wyle (1947), found that 99% of their adult sample had committed at least one offense. Some of the percentages of admission for males and females, respectively, were as follows: larceny—89% and 83%; indecency—77% and 74%; assault—49% and 5%; grand larceny (except auto)—13% and 11%; and tax evasion—57% and 40%. These figures suggest a remarkable level of criminality on the part of an assumed noncriminal population.

Controlling for Error in Self-Report Surveys

Reliance on self-reported data as a measure of crime commission poses a major question with respect to the relationship between claimed behavior and actual behavior. Nettler (1978) states that "asking people questions about their behavior is a poor way of observing it" (p. 107). If people are inaccurate

in reporting other aspects of their behavior, such as voting, medical treatment, and the like, it may be questionable to assume any greater accuracy in admitting deviant behavior. Some problems with self-report studies include possibly inaccurate reports, the use of poor or inconsistent instruments, deficient research design, and poor choice of subjects. Although mistaken or inaccurate reports may impinge on such surveys, Hood and Sparks (1971) question the number of trivial offenses that are labeled delinquent in the United States and are included in such studies. They point out that in Europe, delinquency is a synonym for crime committed by the young. Small and unrepresentative samples are problematic, and self-report surveys are affected by possible lying, poor memory, and telescoping.

A particularly innovative program for checking self-reports was ADAM (Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring program), formerly the Drug Use Forecasting (DUF) program, sponsored by the National Institute of Justice. Groups of arrestees were asked questions regarding their drug use behavior and then asked to voluntarily provide urine specimens that could be tested for drug use. Besides providing an ingenious way of estimating drug use among criminal populations, the program provided a barometer for the impact of various policies on drug usage. ADAM provided state and local drug policy makers, courts, law enforcement agencies, treatment providers, and prevention specialists with information that could be used to conduct local research and evaluation and to inform local policy decisions (National Institute of Justice [NIJ], 2003). In 1998, NIJ launched International ADAM, which involved a partnership among criminal justice agencies in many countries, providing a global assessment of drug use. In conclusion, although self-report surveys have certain problems, they—like victim studies—give us an independent measure of crime commission. Unfortunately, the program was discontinued by the George W. Bush administration due to budget cuts in 2004.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION, CASE STUDIES, LIFE HISTORY, UNOBTRUSIVE RESEARCH METHODS, AND NETWORK ANALYSIS

Participant observation involves a variety of strategies in which the researcher studies or observes a group through varying degrees of participation in the activities of that group. Ned Polsky's classic *Hustlers, Beats, and Others* (1967) presents both a moving statement on the need for deployment of this strategy and sound advice in this regard.

Participant Observation of People Who Commit Crimes

Contrary to the advice given at one time in most criminology textbooks (Sutherland & Cressey, 1960), uncaught people who commit crime can be studied in the field. Biologists have long noted that gorillas in a zoo act differently from gorillas in their natural habitat. It is imperative that criminologists break their habit of only studying confined people who commit crime in jails and prisons. Polsky (1967), in advocating field studies of people who commit crime, states,

> Until the criminologist learns to suspend his personal distaste for the values and lifestyles of the untamed savages, until he goes out in the field to the cannibals and headhunters and observes them without trying either to civilize them or turn them over to colonial officials, he will be only a veranda anthropologist. That is, he will be only a jailhouse or courthouse sociologist, unable to produce anything like a genuinely scientific picture of crime. (p. 147)

One of the reasons often given for discouraging such research is the belief that the researcher must pretend to be part of the criminal world. In fact, such a strategy would be highly inadvisable, not to mention unworkable and dangerous. Polsky suggests that the distance between criminal and conventional types is not as wide as many would suggest and that the difficulty in gaining access to such subjects is highly exaggerated.

There are, of course, problems in studying people who commit crime au naturel. The researcher must realize that they are more of an intruder than would be the case in a prison setting. Unincarcerated people who commit crime have more to lose than those already in jail do. And on their own turf, people who commit crime are freer to put the researcher down or to refuse to be observed. Having successfully employed participant observation in studying uncaught pool hustlers, organized criminals, and people

with substance use disorders, Polsky (1967, pp. 117–149) offers some sage advice regarding procedures to employ in studying criminals in the field:

- Avoid using gadgets such as tape recorders, questionnaires, and the like. Construct field notes later, after leaving the scene for the day.
- Keep your eyes and ears open, but keep your mouth shut.
- Learn the argot, the specialized language or jargon of a group, but don't overuse it.
- You can often gain entry into the setting through common recreational interests, for example, card games, the track, or poolrooms.
- Do not pretend to be one of them. As soon as practicable, make them aware of your purposes.

Finally, Polsky (1967) raises a number of related issues to be considered in field studies of criminals. In some ways, researchers may be breaking the law or be considered accessories to the fact. Honoring reciprocity with respondents, observers must be prepared to be "stand-up guys" under police questioning. Although their actual legal status is unclear, social researchers in many cases have no guaranteed right to confidentiality or privileged information and are vulnerable to subpoena.

Evaluation of the Method of Participant Observation

Participant observation is an excellent procedure for studying little-understood groups. Some examples of participant observation studies with criminological ramifications have been Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943/1955); Polsky's *Hustlers, Beats, and Others* (1967); Yablonsky's *Synanon* (1965) and *The Violent Gang* (1962); Ianni's *A Family Business* (1972); Albini's (1986) study of the Guardian Angels; and Humphreys's *Tearoom Trade* (1970). In addition, Eleanor Miller (1986) did field research interviewing 64 prostitutes in Milwaukee, Marquart (1986) worked as a prison guard, Hopper (1991) studied outlaw motorcycle gangs, and Sanchez-Jankowski (1991) spent 10 years living with and studying street gangs in Los Angeles, Boston, and New York.

The usefulness of such field studies in exploring settings that would not readily lend themselves to quantitative analysis is illustrated by some studies. Philippe Bourgois, author of *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (1995), spent the 5 years from 1985 to 1990 in East Harlem studying young Puerto Rican men on street corners and in crack houses, bars, and homes. Elijah Anderson's *A Place on the Corner* (1981) took place in the 1970s and reported on Chicago low income housing life from Jelly's, a bar and liquor store that he studied for more than 3 years. Anderson's *Streetwise* (1990) describes two other Philadelphia neighborhoods. Mark Hamm's *American Skinheads* (1993) reports on his field study of neo-Nazi hate groups, which included communications with skinheads via the WAR (White Aryan Resistance) website. Jim Aho in *This Thing of Darkness* (1994) conducted a participant observation study of Idaho Christian Patriots until he defined such involvement as increasingly too dangerous. J. M. Miller and Tewksbury in *Extreme Methods: Innovative Approaches to Social Science Research* (2000) and Ferrell, Hamm, and Adler in *Ethnography at the Edge: Crime, Deviance, and Field Research* (1998) provide very interesting collections of articles on difficult-to-access deviant groups that require more innovative, and sometimes controversial, means of investigation.

The major advantages of participant observation relate to the qualitative detail that it can produce. Using this sensitizing or *verstehen* (from the German meaning "to understand") strategy, the researcher is less influenced by prejudgments. The technique is very flexible and less artificial and enables the investigator to observe subjects in their natural environment. Such ethnographic methods provide insider accounts and acquaint students with the perspectives of the subjects (Cromwell, 1996). This technique has produced some of the most exciting and enthralling literature in the field, rivaling even some of the best modern fiction. Examples from this genre are presented in subsequent chapters. Some potential disadvantages of participant observation include the extremely time-consuming nature of the technique; it may exact high demands on the personal life of the observer (J. T. Carey, 1972). The observer faces the dual dangers of overidentification with, or aversion to, the group being studied, often

testing to the limits the researcher's commitment to objectivity. In addition to possible observer bias and the challenge of making sense of a mass of nonquantitative data, participant observation can pose major ethical dilemmas.

Ethnography refers to the observation of a culture and may include being present and observing as well as interviews. An example of ethnography involving interviews is a study of 48 active street offenders who were interviewed about their expectations of the future. These interviews revealed that offenders expected to die early and that they used their religious beliefs to justify or excuse their behavior (Topalli et al., 2013). It is unlikely that this kind of rich detail about death, religion, and crime could have been elicited through surveys; thus, providing detail that can help develop theory is an advantage of using ethnographic methods. More recently, researchers have used ethnographic methods in combination with photographs. This, photo-ethnography approach uses photographs in the interview process to generate information, trigger memories, and evoke multi-layered responses. One recent study used photo-ethnography with 28 women and 24 men who used meth in rural Alabama. Photos were taken by the researchers of the subjects but the research subjects also took their own pictures that were then used during the interview. Using a combination of interviews and photographs provided rich information regarding the motivations behind meth use and how it impacted their relationships (Copes et al., 2021). One problem with this kind of research pointed out by its critics is that one is not certain whether the researcher made things up. Such was the controversy surrounding the publication of Alice Goffman's *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* (2014). Alice Goffman is the daughter of the celebrated and late Erving Goffman. A big debate has taken place regarding how she undertook her field research. Concern has been raised as to whether she had participated in a felony (accessory to a planned murder) while researching young Black men caught up in the criminal justice system in Philadelphia. She describes driving around with one of her subjects who was armed with a gun to hunt down the killer of another of her subjects. Some critics argue that she admitted to embellishing and exaggerating her account.

Case Study or Life History

Like participant observation, a **case study** or **life history** represents an interest in an in-depth close-up of only one or a few subjects to obtain a greater understanding or *verstehen* (Weber, 1949) that a more aggregate analysis might obscure. This method may employ diaries, letters, biographies, and autobiographies to attempt to capture a detailed view of either a unique or a representative subject.

Darrell Steffensmeier and Jeffrey Ulmer (2006) updated Steffensmeier's classic *The Fence: In the Shadow of Two Worlds* (1986) by presenting three decades in the life of Sam Goodman (pseudonym), a professional thief and fence. Their work is titled *Confessions of a Dying Thief: Understanding Criminal Careers and Illegal Enterprises*. The close relationship that developed between Steffensmeier and a dying Sam Goodman underlines the fact that research subjects and researchers become more than just observers and subjects.

Unobtrusive Measures

Unobtrusive measures are clandestine, secretive, or nonreactive methods of gathering data (Webb et al., 1981). Such techniques attempt to avoid *reactivity*, the tendency of subjects to behave differently when they are aware that they are being studied. This certainly has been a problem in much prison research, where the question might be asked whether research volunteers are indeed volunteers. Major types of unobtrusive methods include physical trace analysis; the use of existing records such as archives, available data, and autobiographies; and simple and disguised observation, as well as simulation.

Physical trace analysis involves studying deposits, accretion of matter, and other remains of human activity; archival and existing records contain information that may be useful in providing historical overviews of criminological issues.

The uses of *available data* include procedures such as content analysis and secondary analysis. *Content analysis* refers to the systematic classification and study of the content of mass media, for example, newspapers, magazines, and the like. *Secondary analysis* consists of the reanalysis of data that were

previously gathered for other purposes. The use of any of these types of data-gathering procedures is an excellent, cost-effective means of obtaining data, particularly in a period of growing respondent hostility to studies. In an interesting example of the imaginative use of existing data, criminologist John Laub discovered more than 60 boxes of dusty files in the subbasement of the Harvard Law School Library ("Criminologists' File Found," 1994). These turned out to be the research files of Eleanor and Sheldon Glueck, who had been at Harvard from the 1920s to the 1970s. They had conducted one of the first longitudinal studies in criminology in which male juveniles were followed from age 14 until age 32, attempting to predict the cause of criminal behavior. In an example of secondary analysis, Laub computerized their data and analyzed them.

Observation requires the researcher to keep participation with subjects to a minimum while carefully recording their activities; in disguised observation, the investigator secretly studies groups by temporarily deceiving them as to their real purpose. For example, to study difficult subjects in the field, researchers have posed as thieves and victims (Stewart & Cannon, 1977), a watch queen (Humphreys, 1970), a mental patient (Caudill, 1958), Black Panther supporters (Heussenstamm, 1971), a naive international tourist (Feldman, 1968), and a caretaker (Sherif & Sherif, 1966), among other roles.

Simulation

Simulation entails research strategies that attempt to mimic or imitate a more complex social reality. For example, because actual research into jury deliberations is prohibited, researchers may set up simulated juries by reenacting actual trial conditions to investigate the decision-making process.

Although the obvious advantage of unobtrusive measures is that they are nonreactive—that is, they prevent subject awareness of being observed and ideally escape reactivity—such techniques also have the strength of being more natural and of evading the overreliance on attitudinal data. By making use of data that have already been gathered, researchers are able to exercise great economies of time and expense. Too many researchers assume that doing a study must necessarily involve the expense and time of gathering new data when, in fact, vast storehouses of potential information exist right under their noses, as close as the nearest library and scattered throughout the records of public and private organizations. On the debit side of the ledger, unobtrusive methods raise potential problems of privacy invasion. Does a researcher have the right to observe the private behavior of individuals without their permission? Compounding this ethical issue is that criminological researchers have no state-recognized right to confidentiality or claim to privileged communication comparable to that in a doctor–patient relationship.

Network Analysis

In addition to these unobtrusive methods, a relatively new research method and data analytic technique used to study crime and criminality is **network analysis**. This type of analysis examines the structure of relationships that connect people, or other social units, to each other. It can be used to examine romantic relationships, friendships, and how co-workers influence each other among other things. Social network analysis considers the interdependence among social actors by mapping the set of relationships between a bounded set of actors. These actors may be individuals, but can also be organizations, neighborhoods, cities, web sites or other units that may have relationships (Papachristos, 2011). A relationship is said to exist if there is a link between units—perhaps between two individuals.

Consider who you would identify as your three best friends—when asked, would they also indicate that they consider you one of their three best friends? Now think about you and your friends' behaviors. Does their smoking marijuana effect your use of this drug? Do you think that people with best friends who all reciprocate their friendship would be more likely to have similar behavior? Network analysis can be used to examine how crime and other behaviors may be explained by the ways in which you and your friends are tied or linked to one another (Papachristos, 2011). It can also be used to describe the interconnections of members of street gangs, drug dealers, and terrorist organizations. Some of the most recent applications of network analysis in criminology include mapping spatial networks of crime, the spread of gun violence, and drug exchanges on the dark web.

PHOTO 2.5 A network analysis examines the links between individuals and maps social networks.

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VALIDITY, RELIABILITY, AND TRIANGULATION

In the past, a number of researchers have been critical of the accuracy of much criminological research. Bailey (1966), in a review of 100 correctional research studies, pointed out that much of the research was invalid, unreliable, and based on poor research design. In an analysis of the quality of publications in criminology, Wolfgang et al. (1978) judged that the methodological sophistication was very poor and that a greater display of concern was needed for adequate research design and execution. Although later modifying his view and admitting to methodological narcissism, Martinson (1974; "Martinson," 1978) blasted correctional research, claiming that in his review of the evidence of programs in corrections and their impact on recidivism, he found that "nothing works." As mentioned earlier in this chapter, methodological narcissism refers to the belief that one's favorite method is the only way to do research and all other methods are inferior. What is to be said of this sad state of affairs? If the data regarding "what is" with respect to crime are defective, then what might we expect of the theories that are based on these data? Fortunately, criminologists have plenty of methodological company from economists, psychiatrists, and meteorologists, to mention just a few. The problem of imprecise measurement is not unique to the field of criminology and, furthermore, is not an insoluble one.

Validity concerns the credibility of the research. It asks whether findings are real and believable. There are two types of validity with which researchers are concerned: internal and external validity. Internal validity concerns the measurement and methods used in the research. To be internally valid, the measuring instrument in fact measures what it claims to measure. External validity concerns whether the research findings are applicable beyond the research study. That is, to have external validity, the findings from one study should apply to other studies of the same phenomena. For example, if a study on college students on one campus shows that criminal justice majors are more likely than other students to cheat on tests, these findings should apply to college students at other colleges to have external validity. **Reliability**, on the other hand, involves the consistency or stability of measurement. If repeated measures were made of the same entity, would stable and uniform measures ensue? Obviously, validity is a more crucial issue than reliability; if a measurement is inaccurate, the consistency of inaccuracy becomes a moot question.

The problem of inadequate methods in criminology arises not because of the inherent shortcomings of any particular method but because a given method is used alone. It is foolhardy to concentrate on the insufficiencies, the reliability, or the validity of any one concept, measured at one time using one measure. **Triangulation** involves the use of multiple methods in measuring the same entity. It is similar to the notion of corroborating evidence in law; if different measures of the same concept produce convergence or similar results, then we have greater confidence in the validity of an observation or finding.

CRIME & THE MEDIA 2.1 CRIME RATES

Journalists and criminologists share much of the same turf when it comes to sources used in constructing their research. Although journalists are a bit more interested in arousing public opinion and entertaining, criminologists take a more scientific view of the subject matter and emphasize theory and methods. Some of their subject matter may not attract the same attention or be as entertaining, but the study may illuminate or contribute to the development of a discipline. Although criminologists use official data to track crime over time to generate a picture of trends, the media do not always report on crime rates as a researcher might. Take, for instance, the crime of homicide—in 2016, Chicago had 771 homicides, while this number declined to 650 in 2017. Some news outlets have reported on the decline in homicide in Chicago over this time period, but other outlets published stories with headlines such as "Chicago has at least 3 homicides already in 2018" (Fox News, January 2, 2018, http://www.foxnews.com/us/2018/01/02/chicago-has-at-least-3-homicides-already-in-2018.html), thus overshadowing the improvement seen in 2017, and "Chicago's homicide total drops by over 100, but violence still 'intolerably high'" (*Chicago Tribune*, December 29, 2017, http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-met-chicago-violence-2017-story.html). This headline correctly identifies that the homicide rate is still high in Chicago, but it is not until much later in the article that the author notes that the drop in homicides from 2016 to 2017 is the largest single-year drop in homicides since 2004. What these headlines and articles demonstrate is that the media do not always contextualize crime rates or trends, and when they do, these items may not be the lead of the story. It is important, then, to consider rates over time and to compare crime rates in one area to others for comparison purposes.

Sanders in *The Sociologist as Detective* (1976) makes clever use of Arthur Conan Doyle's fictional sleuth Sherlock Holmes as a means of illustrating the notion of triangulation. Holmes, in attempting to answer the question, "Whodunit?" employed multiple methods (triangulation) like those a social scientist might employ. In attempting to discover who killed the lord of the manor, Holmes observed carefully, attempted reenactment of the crime (simulation), questioned suspects and witnesses, and carefully collected and evaluated the physical evidence at the crime scene. He collected some data through direct questioning, other data through astute observation. "Did the family dog bark the evening of the suspected murder?" If not, perhaps the murderer was a family member or friend. "Did any of the questioned suspects develop a nervous tic?" "Were there footprints or clues?" By combining these various methods, Holmes was able to make a reasonable guess as to which hypotheses to reject or accept (see also Truzzi, 1976).

This chapter has exposed the reader to a variety of methods that criminologists use in obtaining information on the nature of crime and criminals. The outcomes or findings that result from the application of these methods are presented in forthcoming chapters. It is hoped that the reader has been alerted to viewing this material with a critical methodological eye, carefully weighing the sources of evidence for the materials presented. For more detail on research methods, see Hagan (2014).

SUMMARY

Theory and methodology are the two critical features of any discipline, including criminology. Theory is an attempt to provide plausible explanations of reality and addresses the question of *why*. Method (methodology) involves procedures for the collection and analysis of accurate data or facts and is concerned with the issue of *what is*.

The research enterprise of criminology involves certain basic procedures. Objectivity, a commitment to a value-free, nonbiased approach to the subject matter, is an essential tenet of research. Despite conflicting roles, the criminologist's primary role is that of scientist. Some general principles of ethical conduct in criminology include that the researcher should avoid harmful procedures, honor commitments and reciprocity, exercise objectivity and integrity, and protect the privacy of subjects, as well as maintain confidentiality.

The process of methodological thinking was illustrated by means of the research question of who is criminal. Until recently, the primary source of information regarding crime statistics has been official police statistics, which represent crimes recorded by police. The Uniform Crime Report (UCR) presents such statistics for the United States. However, such statistics fail to account for unrecorded crime, the "dark figure of crime."

The UCR crime index from which the crime rate is calculated consists of Part I crimes: murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson. Researchers should be cognizant of shortcomings of official data such as the UCR. The redesigned UCR (NIBRS, National Incident-Based Reporting System) is an attempt to improve the system.

Other alternative measures of crime and criminal activity include crime seriousness measures, which attempt to provide a weighted index of crime. Alternative data-gathering strategies include experiments, social surveys, participant observation, case studies and life history methods, and unobtrusive methods. Each possesses relative strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis the others with respect to quantitative and qualitative control, internal and external validity, and degrees of artificiality or naturalness.

A key point is that, contrary to methodological narcissism (fanatical adherence to one's favorite method), no one method has any inherent superiority over any other. Methodology is a tool and not an end in itself. For each method, the text provides descriptions as well as examples of the method's application in criminological research. For instance, victim surveys are a critical alternative measure of criminality. Similarly, self-report surveys are a useful means of tapping hidden criminality. The basic strategy of participant observation (field studies), life histories, and case studies in criminology is delineated. A particularly moving pitch for the need for such studies emerges from Ned Polsky's research. Unobtrusive (nonreactive) methods are a cost-effective and neglected means of obtaining data. These include techniques such as physical trace analysis, use of archives or existing data (including content and secondary analysis), and autobiographies. Other procedures include simple and disguised observation and simulation.

Much of the criticism of criminological research centers on the validity (accuracy) and reliability (consistency and stability) of the methodology that has been employed. Triangulation (the use of multiple methods) is proposed as the logical path to resolve this issue.

KEY CONCEPTS

Campbell Collaboration (p. 31)
case study (p. 39)
classic experimental design (p. 29)
code of ethics (p. 21)
confidentiality (p. 21)
dark figure of crime (p. 33)
ethical conduct in research (p. 21)
evidence-based research (p. 31)
experiment (p. 29)
life history (p. 39)
methodological narcissism (p. 29)
methodology (p. 20)
National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) (p. 33)
National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) (p. 26)
network analysis (p. 40)
objectivity (p. 20)
operationalization (p. 24)
participant observation (p. 37)
reciprocity (p. 23)
reliability (p. 41)
self-report measures (p. 36)
simulation (p. 40)
sources of crime statistics (p. 25)
surveys (p. 33)
theory (p. 20)
triangulation (p. 41)
unfounded crimes (p. 25)
Uniform Crime Report (UCR) (p. 24)
unobtrusive measures (p. 39)
validity (p. 41)
variable (p. 24)
victim surveys (p. 33)

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Reviewing Crime File 2.1, The Crime Dip, which factor(s) do you find to be most plausible in explaining the crime dip? Using these same factors, do you predict that crime will continue to decrease, or do you foresee an increase in the near future? Explain your reasoning.
2. Examining the codes of ethics of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences and the American Society of Criminology, what stipulations do you regard as most important, and which are of least importance? Are you familiar with any additional studies that have raised ethical concerns? Search the web, Criminal Justice Abstracts, and National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) under titles such as "research ethics" or "codes of ethics" and see if you can turn up any recent controversies.
3. What are some sources of information used by criminologists to examine the extent of crime in the United States?
4. Compare the UCR with the NCVS. Which of these is the better measure of crime?
5. How does the FBI compile and calculate the crime rate? What types of crime does this include?
6. What are some problems with or shortcomings of the UCR?
7. What are some other ways of gathering data in criminology besides reliance on official police statistics? Give an example of each.
8. What is ADAM, and what does it measure? Is there any way of checking its accuracy?