

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

Longitudinal Studies of Delinquency



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Introduction

This issue of our newsletter's *Research Highlights* will aim to introduce readers to a variety of different longitudinal projects, from right here in New York to across the pond in London. In future issues we will take a deeper dive into the findings of notable longitudinal studies of delinquency to take stock of the knowledge collectively produced by this body of scholarly work.

What are longitudinal studies?

What exactly are longitudinal studies? And how do they compare to other research designs? Longitudinal studies are observational in nature, meaning it involves one set of subjects (the sample) observed at multiple, discrete times (called "waves"). The same data are collected at each wave, so changes over time can be tracked. This type of data collection can complement cross-sectional data, which is a research approach that presents a snapshot of information collected at one point in time. For example, when studying delinquency and/or adult involvement in crime, it can be very helpful to collect early childhood data to get a more complete picture about the development of these behaviors. Both longitudinal and cross-sectional research can investigate a wide array of research questions and subjects. Although subjects are often people, they can also be organizations, counties, or even entire countries.

Pros and cons

Before starting any data collection, researchers must consider the appropriateness of the proposed methodology, letting the question drive the data collection approach. Cross sectional research is quick, not incredibly resource intensive, and analyses can be straightforward. These are good for providing prevalence estimates, and demonstrating correlations which can help with theory development. However, finding definitive causal relationships using cross sectional research poses analytical challenges because everything is reported at the same time, which can violate the time order requirement of causal relationship.¹ The composition of the sample is important because cross sectional studies can be biased by nonrepresentational samples when

¹ There are of course exceptions such as birth weight, age, and race/ethnicity which tend to be reliable and the reporting timing doesn't matter as much.

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generalizing to the broader population. Longitudinal research addresses the issue of causal relationships and grants researchers the opportunity to watch development in action, particularly when the data are collected *prospectively* (when people report on near contemporaneous experiences at regular intervals). Longitudinal research is not without its own downsides. This type of research can be very expensive and time-consuming. In the time it takes between each wave of data collection (oftentimes years!), sample members can drop out, researchers might move on to other projects, and the social context might be quite different than when the study began. All of these potential problems have to be carefully considered before data collection begins, with strategies to mitigate these challenges.²

Notable longitudinal studies of delinquency

The oldest ongoing longitudinal study that examines delinquency is the Dutch Transfivse study. This project began in 1882 and the most recent data was collected in 2007. It spans five generations and is an example of an *intergenerational* longitudinal study, meaning that parents and their children were the subjects of the study. During this time period, there have been at least eight other longitudinal studies that focus on how delinquency develops. These are:

- Cambridge-Somerville Youth Study (CSYS), starting in 1939 in Massachusetts
- The Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency, starting in 1950 in Massachusetts
Sheldon Glueck and Eleanor Glueck started this research and there was a follow up by Robert Sampson and John Laub in the 1990s and 2000s
- The Cambridge Study of Delinquency Development (CSDD), starting in 1961-1962 in London
- The Rochester Youth Development Study (RYDS), starting in 1986 in New York
- The Denver Youth Study (DYS), starting in 1987 in Colorado
- The Pittsburgh Youth Study (PYS), starting in 1987-1988, in Pennsylvania
- The Pathways to Desistance (Pathways), starting in 2000-2003 in Arizona and Pennsylvania
- The Crossroads Study (Crossroads), starting in 2011-2013 in California, Pennsylvania, and Louisiana

Each of these projects deserves its own *Research Highlight* brief. For that reason, in future issues of *On the same page*, I will discuss some of the notable findings that these research teams put so much effort into discovering. I'm looking forward to sharing this information with you!

Until next time,

Alysha

What do you want to see in future *Research Highlights*? Let us know [here](#).

REFERENCES

Mann, C. J. (2003). Observational research method. Research design II: Cohort, cross-sectional, and case-control studies. *Emergency Medicine Journal*, 20, 54-60.

² See Mann (2003) for a more complete discussion about the pros and cons of different research types.

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