

Cross-Sectional Research Using Life Calendars— Do Offenders Specialize in Different Crimes?

Lo, Kim, and Cheng (2008) provide an interesting example of an attempt to collect retrospective data using a cross-sectional design. The researchers wanted to determine if certain offenders were more likely to repeat the same crimes or commit different crimes. Specifically, they wanted to know if the type of crime committed early in someone's life was a reliable predictor of offenses committed later. Stated differently, do offenders specialize in different types of crime? Lo et al. obtained official arrest records from the age of 18 to the time of the study (typically around age 25) for a sample of young offenders who were incarcerated in county jails in Ohio. They then asked the inmates to reconstruct their drug and alcohol use among other things monthly for the same time period using a **life calendar** instrument based on the **Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM)** interview schedule. This life calendar instrument helps respondents recall events in their past by displaying each month of a given year along with key dates noted within the calendar, such as birthdays, arrests, holidays, anniversaries, and so on. Respondents are given a calendar that displays these key dates, typically called **anchors**, and then are asked to recall the variables of interest (i.e., drug use, victimizations) that also occurred during the specified time frame. The use of a life calendar has been shown to improve the ability of respondents to recall events in the past compared to basic questions without a calendar (Belli, Stafford, & Alwin, 2009).

Results of Lo et al.'s (2008) research were somewhat mixed regarding offender specialization. Most offenders engaged in a variety of offenses prior to their current arrest. However, compared to drug and property offenders, violent offenders were more likely to specialize, as they were the most likely to have had violent arrest records prior to their current offenses.

It is important to note that retrospective data such as these are often inadequate for measuring variation in past psychological states or behaviors, because what we recall about our feeling or actions in the past is likely to be influenced by