



Agency Records, Content Analysis, and Secondary Data

CADS MODULE 1 – SOCIAL JUSTICE 4330

Introduction

- Data from agency records: agencies collect a vast amount of crime and CJ data
- **Secondary analysis** – analyzing data previously collected
- **Content analysis** – researchers examine a class of social artifacts (typically written documents)

Topics Appropriate for Agency Records

- Most commonly used in descriptive or exploratory research
- Agency records can also be used for explanatory studies
 - Applied studies
- Content analysis often center on links between communication, perceptions of crime problems, individual behavior, CJ policy

Types of Agency Records

- **Published Statistics** – government organizations routinely collect and publish compilations of data (e.g., NCVS, Census Bureau, BJS; often available in libraries and online)
- Nonpublic Agency Records – agencies produce data not routinely released (e.g., police departments, courthouses, correctional facilities)
- New Data Collected by Agency Staff – collected for specific research purposes
 - Less costly
 - Allows the researcher more control

Example: Agency Data

- The Pennsylvania Sentencing Commission makes their sentencing data available to researchers. The data is accessible through their website (<http://pcs.la.psu.edu/data>) and costs \$70.00 per year requested. Using this data, researchers have published several articles and have generated a great deal of knowledge regarding sentencing decisions and the factors that affect those decisions.

Reliability and Validity Problems

- Social production of data: most criminal justice record keeping is a social process
 - Most data reflects reactions to behaviors
- Agency data are not designed for research
 - Data reflect internal agency needs that might not be the same as research needs
- Tracking people, not patterns
- Error increases as volume of data increases

Content Analysis



- **Content analysis:** systematic study of messages; can be applied to virtually any form of communication
 - Decide on operational definitions of key variables
 - Decide what to watch, read, listen to & time frame
 - Analyze collected data
 - Well-suited to answer “Who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect?”

Aspects of Sampling and Coding in Content Analysis 1

- First establish your universe, then your units of analysis and sampling frame, then sample
- Communications need to be coded according to some conceptual framework
- Choice between depth & specificity of understanding:
 - **Manifest content** – visible, surface content – similar to using closed-ended survey questions
 - **Latent content** – underlying meaning

Aspects of Sampling and Coding in Content Analysis 2

- Reminders:
 - Remember operational definition of variables, and their mutually exclusive & exhaustive attributes
 - Pretest coding scheme
 - Assess coding reliability via intercoder reliability method and test-retest method

Illustrations of Content Analysis: Violence in Video Games

- ▶ Thompson & Haninger (2001) sampled 55 of over 600 E-rated games
- ▶ Experienced undergrad gamer played for 90 minutes or until game reached natural conclusion
- ▶ Experienced gamer/researcher and undergrad gamer reviewed videotape of video gaming session
- ▶ Coded: # of violent incidents, # of deaths, drugs/alcohol/tobacco, profanity and sexual behavior, weapon use, explicit music
- ▶ Measured duration of violent acts and # of deaths to length of game playing for standardized measures

Illustrations of Content Analysis: Gang-Related Homicides

- ▶ Analyzed police case files over a 10-year period in St. Louis
- ▶ First classified case as gang-related or not
- ▶ Then distinguished between gang-motivated and gang-affiliated homicides (after conceptualizing both)
- ▶ Interrater reliability was extremely important

Secondary Analysis

► Sources

- **Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR)**: central repository of data collected by social science researchers
- **National Archive of Criminal Justice Data (NACJD)**: source of criminal justice data established by BJS

► Advantages – cheaper, faster, benefit from work of skilled researchers

► Disadvantages – data may not be appropriate to your research question; least useful for evaluation studies