RESEARCHER SAFETY WHEN STUDYING SOCIAL DEVIANCE OR CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the utilization of safety precautions and their level of success for researchers studying social deviance or criminal behavior. A main purpose of this study was to discover what safety precautions are used by researchers engaged in the study of social deviance or criminal behavior, and which of those precautions are considered to be successful at reducing or eliminating risk. An online survey instrument was used to gather data from the sample (n=805) which included researchers who have conducted qualitative and/or quantitative fieldwork or non-fieldwork based research on the topic of social deviance or criminal behavior.

METHODOLOGY

This research sought to address the following research questions:

- *What safety precautions do researchers employ when engaging research on social deviance or criminal behavior?*
- *What safety precautions do researchers judge to be the most useful to reduce or eliminate risks when researching social deviance or criminal behavior?*

The sample included researchers who have conducted qualitative and/or quantitative fieldwork or non-fieldwork based research on social deviance or criminal behavior. Professionals in the fields of criminology and sociology were identified from membership lists for the American Society of Criminology (ASC), the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS), and the Midwest Sociological Society (MSS).

Of the 805 respondents, 718 identified their discipline as *criminologists* (68.8%), *sociologists* (20.2%), or *other social scientists* (11%). Among *other social scientists*, 16.5% of the respondents identified as both *sociologists and criminologists*. Another 19% identified as *psychologists* and 12.7% identified as *political scientists*. Additionally 5.1% of the respondents identified as *victimologists*. There were 373 (52.2%) *males* and 341 (47.8%) *females* who participated in the survey.

The online survey queried respondents on types of safety precautions utilized to reduce or eliminate risk. The respondent was asked to consider any safety precautions they normally take before starting a research project. For each safety precaution used, a Likert scale was available for them to indicate the level of success they felt the safety precaution provided in reducing or eliminating risk (1-5, 1 = not successful, 5 = most successful).

RESULTS

Respondents were asked if they utilize any type of safety precaution for research. There were 758 respondents for this question of which 415 (54.7%) indicated that they do use safety precautions while 343 (45.3%) indicated that they do not use safety precautions. Respondents were also asked to indicate the safety precautions they have utilized. Frequencies were reviewed for the types of precautions reportedly used by researchers.

		N	%
Consider/discuss safety issues	Yes	379	92.4
	No	31	7.6
Risk assessment	Yes	70	17.3
	No	335	82.7
Strategies for boundary violations	Yes	186	47.3
	No	207	52.7
Established protector	Yes	114	28.7
	No	283	71.3
Established locator	Yes	198	50.5
	No	194	49.5
Developed professional/social network	Yes	264	67.3
	No	128	32.7
Contacted police	Yes	131	33.4
	No	261	66.6
Dressed for environment	Yes	322	82.1
	No	70	17.9
Acquired protective gear	Yes	52	13.4
	No	336	86.6
Established a route/make plans	Yes	195	50.1
	No	194	49.9
Establish emergency evacuation plan	Yes	71	18.4
	No	314	81.6
Telephone checks	Yes	115	30.2
	No	266	69.8
Strategy for ineligibles	Yes	193	51.3
	No	183	48.7
Set limits	Yes	261	70.2
	No	111	29.8

The four most used safety precautions were:

- **Consider or discuss possible safety issues** received a rating of *very successful* from 202 (54.3%) and *most successful* from 52 (14%) of the 372 respondents
- **Dress for the environment** received a rating of *very successful* from 129 (42.6%) and *most successful* from 46 (15.2%) of the 303 respondents.
- **Set limits** received a rating of *very successful* from 125 (52.3%) and *most successful* from 52 (21.8%) of the 279 respondents.
- **Develop a professional/social network of support** received a rating of *very successful* from 126 (49%) and *most successful* from 38 (14.8%) of the 257 respondents.

DISCUSSION

Almost half of the respondents indicated that they do not use safety precautions. While it is recognized that some researchers may not wish to utilize safety precautions as it may be counter-productive to their research, it is nonetheless troubling given that 330 (41%) respondents indicated that they have experienced risk.

Also troubling, is the large number of respondents in this study who did not seek assistance for dealing with risks they experienced. It is important for individuals who experience risk to seek help, especially in dealing with traumatic matters. Such encounters can cause issues in everyday life if not dealt with appropriately and in a timely manner. Experience of traumatic events "can lead to high levels of anxiety, depression, and perhaps even paranoia" (Worley et al. 2016 p. 304).

Through awareness of safety precautions, novice researchers may be better prepared for entering into research projects that hold potential for risk. Experienced researchers may also find this information beneficial as they may enter new research projects that present possible risk not yet encountered. It is recommended that all researchers be proactive in their preparations for research. Even researchers wishing not to eliminate danger can benefit from conducting a risk assessment. Recognition of risks does not mean sanitizing the experience.

It is also recommended that preparation for research include the utilization of safety precautions specific to the research environment. These safety precautions should include the establishment of support for dealing with emotional issues as well as ethical dilemmas that may arise during the course of research. Especially for new researchers, there should be support in place prior to beginning research on social deviance or criminal behavior.

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