SOCIO-ECONOMIC THEORIES OF CRIME

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Completed in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

HS 8373 – Understanding Criminology

Capella University

Spring, 2007
Abstract

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This work is an overview of social deviance as it pertains to socio-economics and criminal behavior. It looks at criminal law and punishments, written by those who are not poor, which is imposed more on those who are poor and are committing more of the crime. The question is asked, “if the poor were in power, would there be alternative solutions to prevent crime?”

Considerations are made as to societal explanations for crime in poor neighborhoods and families, such as the extent to which crime results from poverty or that poverty replicates crime. Factors may include poor choices often made by individuals in poverty that seem to make crime more necessary to survive and succeed. Other factors to be considered are that poor families are more likely to have broken homes or missing structural support that would otherwise facilitate a productive livelihood and child-rearing.
Table of Contents

Table of Contents             i
Introduction                 1
Early Sociology Theory       1
Strain, Anomie, and Social Disorganization 3
Economics and Crime          6
Social Development and Social Control 10
A Professional Opinion       12
Conclusion                   14
References                   16
Introduction

Modern criminology theories can be used to support economic deprivation as a causal factor in explaining many crimes, but is directly related to property crimes such as theft. On the other hand, that does not mean that a cause-and-effect relationship exists, as so many lower-class citizens do not resort to crime. Theorists often consider the other elements of social disorganization that can be found where poverty is found, such as low-quality schools, poor housing, unemployment, single-family homes, lack of discipline, or the absence of other social and community controls. It would be difficult, if not impossible to separate the variables and assess each one’s sole affect on crime. Regardless, this report addresses the theories and considerations for linking crime to economic circumstance.

Early Sociology Theories

Cesare Beccaria and classical criminology held that individuals have free will to commit or avoid crime (Siegel, 2001; Barkan, 2006; Vold, Bernard, & Snipes, 2002; and Williams & McShane, 1999). The rational choice theory derives from classical criminology, where individuals weigh the benefits and risks of crime. Positivists believe that behavioral choices result from external forces beyond the individual’s control. Durkheim described the progression to a large, urban, organic society as creating anomie or societal strain. This is related to the conflict view of crime, where law appears to be written by the haves to protect themselves from the have-nots. Likewise, street crimes are given greater sentences than crime in the suites, and often the poor are given stiff sentences while the wealthy are given leniency for even serious crimes. The interactionist view of crime holds that crime and deviance is defined in terms of those in power, and crime is given meaning by the way people react to it.
The Chicago School believed that behavior was influenced by the social and physical environment (Williams & McShane, 1999). Urbanization was seen as the source of crime, as there would be more people moving to the city than there were jobs for them. Large numbers of unemployed people became a burden and led to the creation of social work organizations that were needed to support them. Despite this, crime seemed to fester in city slums. This is highly relevant to explaining theft or any other crime designed to provide an illicit gain. The Chicago School also found that law enforcement was challenged by the fact that neighborhood residents had little in common regarding values or customs.

Social learning theory, credited to Albert Bandura and Ronald Aker, holds that individuals learn how to act by watching others or watching television (Siegel, 2001; Barkan, 2006; and Williams & McShane, 1999). If an individual, particularly a child, lives in a poor neighborhood surrounded by crime, he is at a high risk for acting out the same behaviors that he sees everyday. This is the process of behavior modeling or reinforcement. Behavior may be vicariously reinforced, copying the behavior that has been merely observed. Gabriel Tarde referred to this as imitation (Vold, Bernard, & Snipes, 2002). When friends or family members steal, young impressionable children will model that behavior and begin a life of theft to support their own lifestyle. The idea is that an individual imitates others in proportion to how much contact time he has with others.

Sutherland’s differential association theory likewise held that criminal behavior was learned in a social environment (Williams & McShane, 1999). Crime was seen as a result of a combination of situation, opportunity, and values. Differential association was literally a reference to the groupings that form between individuals, not necessary with criminals. It is a system of values and culture within the grouping. This association may be seen in a gang of
like-minded thieves who take over a restaurant or convenient store by their large numbers, and then steal from numerous victims at one time.

Albert Cohen wrote of subculture theory, which was created out of the merger of anomie theory and the Chicago School (Williams & McShane, 1999; and Barkan, 2006). He felt that subcultures formed in groups, gangs, and in inner-city neighborhoods abandoned by middle-class residents who moved to the suburbs. He saw subcultures as inherently non-utilitarian, malicious, and negative. Those who remained in slum neighborhoods would feel status-frustration, much like in conflict theory. These subcultures are often subcultures of deviance. While subcultures can develop among individuals who are not poor, the members of a gang or an inner-city slums are certainly suffering from poverty or unemployment. A non-integrated community would lack organization, lack social control over juvenile offenders, and lead individuals to associate in groups that provide respect and a sense of belonging. This may also be known as a conflict subculture, having abandoned the norms of society, seeking belonging, seeking money-making opportunities that are unlawful, and otherwise rebelling against the dominant culture as a group.

**Strain, Anomie, and Social Disorganization**

Eimle Durkheim and Robert Merton contributed the theories of strain and anomie (Siegel, 2001; Barkan, 2006; and Vold, Bernard, & Snipes, 2002). Strain results in times of change, as society becomes more organic and complex. Strain also results where a culture places a strong emphasis on the achievement of wealth and material possessions. The structure of the society may limit the possibility of poor individuals to achieve success through institutionalized and socially-acceptable means. The clarity of norms breaks down. Strain results from its theoretical components, such as poverty, lack of opportunity, and the formation of lawless groups. Anomie leads individuals to develop alternative values, often rebelling against societal
norms to achieve success through illegitimate means. Strangely, during periods of economic prosperity, crime rates may actually increase. According to relative deprivation theory, greater success by some motivates the lower-class even more to commit crime for their own benefit. Relative deprivation is more of a perception, a comparative process in the mind of an individual concerning his surroundings, than it is a theory (Webber, 2007).

Social disorganization descended from the Chicago School (Williams & McShane, 1999). Shay and McKay articulated social disorganization concepts, attempting to prove that slum life created an inclination to commit crime (Siegel, 2001). This is especially true for property crimes, as the individuals in these neighborhoods have few material possessions and may feel the only way to gain possessions is to steal them. In criticism of their research, higher crime rates could be a reflection of police presence in a given neighborhood or the notion that police make the decision to arrest in part based upon a suspect’s social status. Similar studies on social ecology indicate that ecological conditions predispose individuals to crime, such as substandard housing, low income, and improper socialization within a family. Further, neighborhoods with empty housing, transient residents, lacking in social organization, and lacking in social control tend to see increases in crime rates. More recent studies on social disorganization still hold that social disorganization leads to delinquency because of the weakened social control (Barkan, 2006). Social control is a key antidote for social disorganization and is identified by cleaned neighborhoods, crime watch groups, agencies to help individuals, discipline in or out of the home, and other alternative punishments to incarceration for offenders.

Broken windows theory relates to social disorganization as it links neighborhood decay to an increase in crime. If petty offenses are not prosecuted or decaying facilities not maintained, it signals a disinterest in the community by residents and serves to invite worse crime.
(Anonymous, 2002). This may lead to an increase in vandalism, gangs, and the sale of narcotics, but will also lead to an increase in burglary, robbery, and theft. There is a perception that no one is watching and no one cares. Crimes and social disorganization are believed to derive from poverty, unemployment, population density, and low collective efficacy (Harms, 2000). Social meaning, social influence, and social construction make up the social conception of deterrence (Harcourt, 1998). Individuals in the community determine what they want and what their values are, then through influence or social norms marketing they influence the behaviors of others in the community. Broken windows theory views urban deterioration as a cause of crime, and it is a supporting argument for community policing. Through community policing, enforcement efforts are strengthened and directed at target areas (Faggins, 2001). However, if the police spend too much time and energy, they may generate hostility, according to macro-level theory, from those neighborhoods that feel they are being unjustly targeted.

There are three overlapping branches in the social structure perspective of crime (Siegel, 2001). Social disorganization theory focuses on environmental conditions. It considers: neighborhood condition, lack of social control, criminal gangs and groups, conflicting social values, unemployment, family condition, and single-family homes. Strain theory focuses on conflict between goals and means. It considers: the unequal distribution of wealth and power, frustration, and alternative methods of reaching goals, such as robbery, theft, and drug trafficking. Cultural deviance theory is the merger of the other two. Because of strain, disorganization, and isolation, a unique subculture is formed. That lower-class culture has its own values and beliefs, usually in support of criminal activity, such as taking from and conquering those in the upper classes. Those values may be spread or taught to others through
cultural transmission. This transmission of values can also be explained by social learning theory.

Smith and Jarjoura (1988) agree with the social disorganization theory, though they argue that other variables may give just as much cause for the commission of crime as poverty does. Whereas broken families, racial heterogeneity, transient neighbors, and other factors are commonly found in lower-class neighborhoods prone to crime, similar factors can be associated with increases in crime in middle-class and upper-class neighborhoods. Their work sought to separate those variables, to show that each variable could be linked to increases in crime, not just the poverty. However, in poor, lower-class neighborhoods, all of those variables may be more prevalent.

**Economics and Crime**

Many authors and researchers have at least indirectly linked crime and poverty. It is widely believed that the poor commit more of the crime, at least street crime. However, it is more a link to property crime, not violent crime (Chester, 1976). Even in rural areas where crime is less frequent, acts of violence are of similar proportions, and those are often linked to socio-economic conditions (Arthur, 1991). The poor have a greater motivation to steal to satisfy their means. They only resort to violence when needed to accomplish the theft, such as in an armed robbery.

Smith and Jarjoura (1988) wrote of Shaw and McKay’s social disorganization theory, where poverty was one of three elements linked to higher crime rates. This is especially true of theft and related offenses. In their follow-on research, they found that where a neighborhood had a high turnover rate and high poverty, violent crime was higher. Greene (1993) proposes that exposure to poverty and violence creates a predisposition to violence, and he states that half of
all homicides result from interpersonal conflict with another. There is still the question of what percentage of such violent crimes are linked to poverty. Positivist criminology states that criminal motivations are beyond the criminal’s control (Vold, Bernard, & Snipes, 2002). Arguably poverty is an influence on the criminal, but there is some inconsistency in linking economic variables with all crime. This may be due to the difficulty of accounting for multiple variables in research, such as divorce, unemployment, broken homes, neighborhood decay, or other variables. Many authors suggest that individuals in poor families and communities are more likely to steal, rob, sell drugs, and otherwise make illicit gains (Crouch, 1996). However, for accurate research, it would be helpful to have findings that separate violent crimes committed with a profit motive and those committed without such a motive.

Early studies on crime and economic conditions were conducted by Quetelet in France nearly 200 years ago (Vold, Bernard, & Snipes, 2002). He found that there was more property crime in wealthy communities, because there was more to steal. Similarly, there was little property crime was low in poor communities because there was no inequality. Everyone was equally poor. The resulting lesson from that research is that if poverty leads someone to steal, they are more likely to go to affluent areas to do it. As for unemployment, there is not conclusive evidence that unemployment makes any one individual more predisposed to crime. However, on the macro-level, an increase in unemployment is accompanied by an increase in crime rates. Research problems in this area often deals with the multi-variate causes of crime, such as: unemployment, poverty, divorce, broken homes, poor schools, poor housing quality, racial and ethnic mix, residential mobility, and population turnover.

Socio-economic strata and classes in society are not a reflection of crime directly. However, the circumstances of low-class living no doubt provide the conditions that create at-
risk residents who are predisposed to criminal behavior. If a person’s success is measured by
wealth, status, and material possessions, the poor may see unlawful means as the only means to
obtain those possessions. Lawful means will not allow them to own a home or get an education.

There is a link between socio-economics and rational choice (Zafirovski, 1998). Socio-
economic factors can be broken down to an exhaustive degree, as Zafirovski has done, but the
result simply means that individuals make economic decisions on a rational decision making
basis. An individual looks at where they are economically, and seeks some type of economic
benefit through legal or illegal means. There may be underlying social explanations, such as
poverty, but even then the individual rationally thinks of executing the theft and calculates the
potential risks and benefits as well. A wealthy person makes a rational choice not to steal, but he
also has no motivation to do so, since his standard of living is sufficient.

Rational choice has its critics too. Boudon (2003) argues that rational choice is
legitimate but weak. There are many variables and factors to explain a person’s decision to
commit a deviant act. There are other social factors to consider, even if a person makes a
rational choice in committing crime, understanding his behavior requires an observer to see the
big picture and understand the motivations for his actions. While the decision may be rational,
the underlying circumstances of being poor will motivate many to steal. If a person is starving to
death, it is difficult to resist the urge to steal in order to eat.

Greene (1993) writes of Chicago neighborhoods plagued by poverty and violence. It is
not clear which causes the other, or if that is irrelevant. The point is the two go together. Basic
service workers have cancelled service in some neighborhoods because they are frequently
robbed and assaulted. These crimes are committed by youth who, acting under social learning
theory, learned that they could gain something by violence. As such, even crimes of violence are
motivated by the desire to steal money or property. These same youth are surveyed and indicate that they fear they will never succeed in life through conventional means. Some blame the poor educational system in these communities, where it is obvious that none of the students could get jobs other than at fast food restaurants. Again, good quality teachers do not dare go to those neighborhoods for fear. So, is poverty causing the violence, or is violence perpetuating the poverty? Arguably, the social support and social structure is completely gone in those neighborhoods, leaving perpetual social disorganization.

Arthur (1991) compiles studies on rural crime, also linking socio-economic conditions to criminal behavior. Citing other research, he points out there is a positive correlation between crime rates and socio-economic factors, such as per capita income, inequality, and unemployment rates. However, there is a negative relationship between crime and the percentage of the population below the poverty line. More crime occurs when legal opportunities for gainful employment are denied. His recommendation is that rural areas should diversify economic opportunities, such as building up industries other than just existing agricultural activities.

DeFronzo (1997) looks indirectly at the relationship between economic condition and crime. He finds a relationship exists between welfare recipients and crime. However, in those homes, there is a greater occurrence of single-family or broken homes. These families and neighborhoods may lack that social bonding or social structure that would reduce crime. The findings do not directly link poverty to crime, but they do link the collection of poverty and social disorganization commonly prevalent in poor neighborhoods to higher rates of crime.
Social Development and Social Control

The social development model is not so much a theory for explaining crime, but a complex, systemic solution for addressing crime (Siegel, 2001). The idea is that risk factors must be reduced, increase the quality of life in the community, strengthen social institutions so as to strengthen social control, decrease family stress and family decay, and improve education and educational opportunities. Family and community must work to build prosocial bonds with young adults and children, giving them the positive influence they need to accept social norms. This is good, if the family has the means to supply family members with their material needs. Otherwise, theft may be seen as the only avenue to satisfy those needs.

Interactional theory agrees with the social development theorists, that crime can be traced to a breakdown of social bonds, and accepts the position that social class and social disorganization can increase the risk of delinquency (Siegel, 2001; Thornberry, 1987). Interactional theory further postulates that delinquents will form bonds with peers who share the same poor values system, meaning that delinquents are bi-directional in seeking the company of other delinquents. The interactionist theory of crime is largely the same as other social constructs of criminal behavior, in that people define crime in the context of how they view the world around them (Dotter, 2004). The creation or determination of what is deviant derives from societal interaction and what society determines is reprehensible conduct.

Social control theory addresses the control that society has or influences over individual human behavior (Siegel, 2001; Hirschi, 1969). Most people willing submit to society’s laws and norms. Their behavior is held in check by social elements, such as family, career goals, school and community organizations, and ethical standards. Durkheim argued that behavior is controlled by social reaction, such as punishment (Williams & McShane, 1999). He argued that
social controls disappear where social norms and relationships breakdown. However, to be effective in maintaining desired behavior, social bonds must be between individuals who are compliant with social norms, not with deviants. In keeping with this theory, parents should remain close to their kids, discipline by family and society must be certain, and society must maintain a strong and intentional control over settings uniform norms for everyone to adhere to.

Social reaction theory or labeling theory explains society’s reaction to crime and how the labeled deviant reacts to the new label (Siegel, 2001; Barkan, 2006; Williams & McShane, 1999; and Vold, Bernard, & Snipes, 2002). Labeling is a social construction, based upon what society determines is deviant (Liska & Messner, 1999). Labeling an individual a delinquent will lead him to live up to that label. The individual responds to the image that others have created for him, such as when he is labeled as a troublemaker, ex-con, delinquent, or thief. Whether the offender likes it or not, society has given him a new identity. The offender is highly likely to adopt that identity, internalize it, and live up to the new, lower expectations for himself. It is a stigma that produces low self-image, self-esteem, and self-respect. It leads to secondary deviance, where individuals commit more deviant acts in keeping with their assigned label (Lemert, 1951). Empirical evidence supports that labeling influences offender behavior (Siegel, 2001), but the likelihood of an offender to re-offend could just as much be the result of the limitations put on his life by having a conviction on his record. As a corrective measure, a positive or supportive approach to labeling could be used to reduce the stigma and de-emphasize the criminal element, such as calling a convict an offender (Williams & McShane, 1999). In this sense, labeling theory touches on the humanistic side of the classical theory of criminology.

Conflict theory holds that crime is a weapon of the haves over the have-nots (Siegel, 2001). Marxists refer to this power-differential as the instrumental view, where the capitalists
impose their standards onto the poor. The Marxist approach sees crime as a representation of class struggle (Williams & McShane, 1999). The poor are driven to crime, and the wealthy are more than eager to impose harsh sentences on the poor. In the Marxist approach, the political economy considers class and economic structure as contributors to crime. The idea is that capitalism and corporate wealth creates wealth for some, increases economic inequality, which in turn increases crime by weakening the social bond. Perhaps, this communicates that in a socialist state, everyone would be in an equal socio-economic status, so there would be no conflicting groups where crime could cross between. If this is entirely true, it might beg a question about how the poor would change laws and enforcement of those laws if they were in power. According to macro-level theory of crime, individuals and neighborhoods are singled out for enforcement action, thus skewing the crime statistics (Vold, Bernard, & Snipes, 2002). In theory, the group in power controls and regulates the other group through a stronger police presence and greater enforcement efforts. Another example refereed to in Siegel (2001) showed that crime increases when a free enterprise system reverts back to a socialist one. Winston Churchill said, “The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings; the inherent virtue of socialism is the equal sharing of misery”.

A Professional Opinion

In speaking with an experienced criminal justice practitioner, professor, and law enforcement officer, additional information has been obtained that may explain at least some link between economic motivation and criminal behavior (J. Walker, personal communication, May, 10, 2007). Mr. Walker has little experience in crime in the big city, and his explanations or support for crime does not always involve the same theoretical logic often used by contributors to professional journals.
Mr. Walker suggests that a criminal involved in theft or property crime is largely motivated by greed and that he acts on rational choice. Even though the individual offender may not be very educated or have much work experience, he calculates the potential benefits and the risks of getting caught. While acknowledging that strain and social disorganization may be a contributing factor, individual criminals still think about what they are doing, and they do know right from wrong. Mr. Walker does not put much faith in social disorganization theory, except in high-crime areas. City slums where the entire community has become a run-down neighborhood that no one seems to care about would be the only exception. Social disorganization would not explain sporadic crime in an otherwise average community. An individual offender is not at gun-point. Whatever the societal or financial pressures, he still considers the costs before committing his crime. On the other hand, he believes that deterrence theory or the threat of greater punishment would only deter the rational, law-abiding person who is not likely to commit crime in the first place. The typical offender is going to commit the crime anyway, regardless of the risk of consequences.

He does believe strongly that poverty, unemployment, or even a sense of hopelessness about the future can motivate an individual to steal or rob. More than theft, drug crime and drug dealing are the crimes that he has seen most, which is seen as another easy way to make a lot of money by unlawful means. In either event, Mr. Walker acknowledges that strain theory is applicable to explain how a criminal may respond to the imbalance or inequality between his own financial position and what he sees in the world around him. However, many of the individuals who have been arrested for property crimes did have jobs, even if the job was not a high-paying job. This gets back to greed as being the more likely motivator.
Mr. Walker believes that modeling or social learning theory is most appropriate for explaining juvenile offenders. If one juvenile sees a friend or family member steal, then he will find it easy to commit the same offense himself, as an easy way to make money. Other explanations are the associations or friendships that offenders make. Both an adult burglar and a juvenile thief are more likely to steal when he bonds together with other like-minded thieves. Mr. Walker does not see labeling theory as an explanation for crime. An individual is not more likely to commit a crime just because he has been labeled as a deviant, thief, or ex-con. Mr. Walker believes the offender is merely living up to the reputation he has already created for himself.

**Conclusion**

One thing that this compilation study has shown is that there are conflicting views as to the motivations of crime and the influences on criminal behavior. Economic deprivation or poverty can motivate individuals to commit crime or create the circumstances that serve as a breeding ground for crime, especially property crime. Several theories have been used in this writing to tie-in to the socio-economics of crime. Nevertheless, there are many who are poor but still choose to live a life of high moral standards and to adhere to societal norms. As such, poverty can not be a lone explanatory variable for crime. Solutions for reducing crime rates based on economic causation are clearly fraught with problems. More social programs, subsidies, government housing, funded education, or community service programs only create more dependency on outside help. Politically, such programs are not widely acceptable because someone has to pay for those programs. Ultimately, if it were accepted that economic conditions are a causal factor for crime, then it will invariably get worse, as more people the population and a higher proportion of the population are in the lower economic class. All
indications in our society are that poverty will increase and the proportion of people who make a
significant income will decline. Factors include the immigrating poor, inflation, taxation
policies, jobs going overseas, an increase in cost of living, and a reduction in consumer spending.
The increase in poverty will no doubt lead to continued increases in property crimes, theft, and
robbery.
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