

Juvenile delinquency: strain theory



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A juvenile delinquent is a person who is typically under the age of 18 and commits an act that otherwise would have been charged as a crime if they were an adult. Depending on the type and severity of the offense committed, it is possible for persons under 18 to be charged and tried as adults

(Wikipedia). Juvenile delinquency is a growing problem in the United States today. Many families are faced with high poverty rates and social problems due to the constraints of living in a low income community where deviance is the only process to achieve success. In order for children to succeed we must come to terms with this underlying issue and be able to solve this primary source. Using Robert Merton's Strain theory I will explain the high concentration of crime of juvenile delinquents in low income communities.

Robert Merton a sociologist who coined strain theory believed that people were placed on established paths in order to be successful in society. Merton believed that social structure rather than culture was the main problem for juvenile delinquents association with crime. Using several adaptations of strain theory he clarifies his argument. Merton believed there were five adaptations in society that you could travel in order to be successful. The five adaptations were innovation, retreatism, ritualism, conformity, and rebellion. The three I will be explaining are innovation, conformity, and rebellion. Merton states, "the social structure effectively limits the possibilities of individuals within these groups to achieve this goal through the use of institutionalized means" (Merton 159). If a juvenile delinquent from a low income community has no means of getting an education or bettering himself then he is going to adapt to the societal norms that are already in existence in his social environment.

For example, a juvenile delinquent grows up in the projects with low income housing, his mother is a single parent who works full time but can barely afford to put food on the table. In order for the juvenile delinquent to provide for himself he must find other means of income. His only means of income that he has been raised to know is selling drugs. The juvenile delinquent's strain is that he only knows deviance and crime in order to prevail. Although the juvenile delinquent is breaking the normative methods of society he is still able to survive through one of the five adaptations which is innovation.

Robert Merton's concept of innovation says " people accept the cultural goals of a society but reject the conventional methods of attaining those goals" (Merton 1936). A prime example of an innovator would be a drug dealer. The drug dealer has fully accepted the cultural goals that he needs to complete in order to be successful. Instead of abiding by those cultural goals and following the process of achievement he uses deviance to stray away from the path of success. Same prophecy goes for the juvenile delinquent stated above he must conform to innovation in order to provide for himself and his family. The juvenile delinquent has accepted his social status and low income community but has decided instead of going to school and striving for a good education he would rather comply and sell drugs just like his peers he has looked up to his whole life. His social constraints dictate his decisions and therefore he is placed in confinement. The juvenile delinquents deviance is mainly caused by his living environment and community lifestyle. He has learned the way of crime and deviance through watching his elder's and peers. The experiences that he has been a part of make him more prone to commit deviant acts. Merton states " there are fewer legitimate

opportunities to obtain wealth for the lower socioeconomic class" (Merton 1936). This means he believes that the only way that you can obtain wealth is that you must be born in the middle class or upper class of society. Merton also says it's okay not to achieve but everyone should give an effort and try, but those who don't achieve still have some sort of value. The value he is trying to portray is the value you give of yourself. Even though you may struggle at first it's the greatest accomplishment to never give up. The juvenile delinquent may never become wealthy or have the finer things in life but that doesn't mean he cannot make life enjoyable. If he applies himself with great values and strives to be the best he can overcome many obstacles that may derail his path. In addition to Innovation another adaptation that is prevalent in strain theory is Conformity.

Conformity is the accusation that most people comply with society's norms. People are taught at a young age the rules and punishment of society. When an individual conforms they not only lose their individualistic ideals, but they are allowing society to dictate their thoughts and emotions. When a juvenile delinquent is established to a social group, such as a street gang, they are no longer looked at as an outsider but rather embraced into likeness as an insider or brotherhood. Conformists are people who not only believe in the assumption of cultural achievements but also believe in the methods that allow them to reach them. The conforming processes are an easy route into societal norms and allow an individual to hide their true agenda of individualism.

The last adaptation that comes into play is rebellion. " Rebellion occurs when an individual rejects both culturally defined goals and means and

substitute's new goals and means" (citation). This means they no longer adhere to any of societal rules but create their own. A prime example would be a hip hop artist. A lot of times hip hop artists don't adhere to any of society's social norms but rather rebel and show the representation of the bad boy image. The juvenile delinquent listens to hip hop music which encourages him to party, sell drugs, and make money then more than likely he is going to want to follow that lifestyle. Music influences everything in terms of society, norms, and values. Without music how would becoming a deviant person be acceptable in our world today? Most hip hop artists live a deviant crime filled lifestyle everyday of their lives. Just like the delinquent selling drugs on the corner it's the same self fulfillment they each get which make their rebellious nature. We all have rebellious tendencies it's in our human nature. Being the good person all the time seems somewhat weak and stagnant. The juvenile delinquent feels he has to prove something to his peers but also his family. People in society always want to feel accepted no matter what social group they come to find. The rebellious adaptation is an important aspect of strain theory of social structure it completes the cycle of social structure.

Merton was an established thinker and a great sociologist. His development of strain theory and the adaptations associated with it made him a well known person of his time. Merton coined this theory so that he could help future thinkers like us understand where his ideals and passion steamed from especially in crime and deviance. His strain theory led to other important theories such anomie and the self fulfilling prophecy. Crime and deviance especially in juvenile delinquents will always be prevalent in

today's society. There will always be low income communities that breed out drug dealers for the streets. The persuasion of crime is a war that has affected many generations of juvenile delinquency. Juvenile delinquency is a privilege a young boy gets before he sees the real institutions of punishment for crimes. The only way some delinquents learn about punishment and the laws of society is by breaking them. Unfortunately breaking the law has serious consequences and can affect a delinquent's future in society. Until we learn how to really create better opportunities for low income communities with juvenile delinquent issues our society will be a refuge for many more to come. This issue can only be solved by our government but they make too much money off delinquents why would they want to give up their cash cow. If the government paid more attention to neighborhoods and social structure of living we would not have to deal with criminals ruining our society. Our society must learn the problems so that juvenile delinquency retreats and our children grow up to be the face of a prosperous and protected America.