

Relationship between social class and crime

Society



Assess the relationship between social class and crime Some sociological theories of crime are based, in part, on official statistics provided by the police, the courts, and various government departments. Such statistics provide evidence of the extent of crime and information about the social characteristics of the criminal. A misrepresentation of this data, that crime is largely a working class phenomenon, may be due to the selective application of the law, according to W. J. Chambliss and M. Mankoff in " Whose Law" What Order? (1976). There is increasing evidence to suggest that there is a systematic bias in favour of the ruling class. In general, if an individual has committed a criminal act, then the higher he or she is in the stratification system the less likely he is to be arrested, if arrested to be prosecuted, if prosecuted to be found guilty, and if found guilty to be imprisoned. If this is so, then the assumption that crime is largely a working class phenomenon may be incorrect - so is there really any relationship between social class and crime. CHAMBLISS' THEORY Chambliss argues that crime occurs throughout all social strata. The major differences between the strata may be the types of crimes committed and the nature of law enforcement. He claims that power in the form of 'moneyto influence' is the key factor which determines who gets arrested and who does not. In one of his works Chambliss pointed out that those who operate organised crime are not members of the true 'criminal class', they belong to the economic and political elite!

Also, it is not only the small minority of active syndicate members within the ruling class who profit from crime interests will not be penalised; those that do will not be subject to legal sanctions. Marxists, such as Chambliss and

Mankoff, see crime as a natural product of capitalist society. Both argue that the capital economic system generates greed, self-interest and hostility which motivates many crimes in all levels of society.

Members of all strata use whatever means and opportunities their class position provides to commit crime. Thus, in low income areas the mugger, the pusher, and the prostitute use what they have to get what they can. In higher income brackets, businessmen, lawyers and politicians have more effective means at their disposal. SPECIFIC CRIMES, SPECIFIC CLASSES? In a competitive society people need to look after themselves in order to survive. D. Gordon in 'Class and the Economics of Crime' (1976) argues that crime is a rational phenomenon.

He also stated that the selective enforcement of the law serves to maintain ruling class power, to reinforce ruling class ideology, it gives the impression that criminals are mainly located in the working class. This serves to divert attention from ruling class crime. It can also direct a part of the frustration and hostility produced by this situation onto the criminals within their own class. Additionally, it diverts the attention of members of the subject class from their exploitation and oppression. It directs a part of the frustration and hostility produced by this situation onto the criminals within their own class.

It also serves to divide the subject class, particularly in low-income areas, where there is a tendency for people to see their enemies as criminals within their own class. Study of crime may show that sympathies tend to lie with the criminals. For the Marxists, their political views result in condemnation of ruling class crime and a sympathetic treatment of the

crimes of the subject class. A. W. Gouldner in 'The Coming, Crisis in Western Sociology' (1971) claims that interactionists have a romantic identification with the more exotic criminals.

This identification by largely middle class sociologists (claims Gouldner) with the 'underworld' colours their choice of research subjects, their perspectives and their conclusion. Accordingly, functionalists, for example R. K. Merton 'Social Theory and Social Structure' (1968) have been accused of bland liberalism. Merton's work is based on criticisms and reforms rather than condemnation and radical change. This may well have prevented him from questioning the system itself. As Taylor suggested in 'Deviance and Society' (1971) questions like " who made the rules in the first place? " are important.