

Correlation between crime and poverty: sociological critique



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Introduction

Jock Young once said: “ At heart, the extent of crime is a political as well ^[1] as a behavioural matter ... The figures for crime ... are not hard facts in the sense that this is true of the height and weight of physical bodies. They are moral not physical statistics”. It is apparent from this statement that there are inherent flaws in all types of theories of crime causation whether these derive from the sociological, psychological or biological traditions.

Nevertheless, crime causation theories form a significant part of modern criminology and have been used extensively to form policy and legislation.

Bearing in mind the limitation of these theories, this essay will try to address the question why sociological theories of criminality suggest that social deprivation and poverty are two of the most significant factors that lead to criminality when two of the most poverty stricken groups, women and the elderly, have low rates of crime.

Crime and poverty: A sociological approach

There are many schools of thought that deal with crime causation.

Sociological theories of crime focus on the social dimension of criminality, trying to analyse the sociological reasons that push individuals to commit crime e. g. poverty, shaming, social deprivation, fear etc. Sociology, in general is “ the study of social organisation and institutions and of collective behaviour and interaction, including the individual’s relationship to the group” ^[2] .

As early as 1893, criminologists such as Durkheim asserted that social deprivation and the division of labour in society puts disadvantaged groups in need, often leaving them with no other option but to resort to crime ^[3]. Very close to this analysis is the approach of Radical Criminology. This uses Marx's ideas of capitalist society and social classes claiming that "much proletarian offending could be redefined as a form of redistributive class justice or as a sign of the possessive individualism which resided in the core values of capitalist society" ^[4].

Radical Criminology went a step further by arguing that individuals from working classes who resort to crime are in reality victims of a false consciousness that turns proletarian against proletarian. The ultimate goal is to preserve unequal class relations, masking the real nature of crime and repression in capitalist society ^[5].

Irrespective of whether we adopt the sociological explanation of the Traditional or Radical Criminology, there is still a paradox that both theories seem to overlook. If crime is closely related to class, social deprivation and poverty - regardless of whether this is a construct of capitalism or simply a means to survival - there is still not an adequate explanation as to why the female and older groups that form great part of poor classes render very low criminality rates.

The correlation between, crime, poverty and gender/age

The two most powerful demographic features that discriminate between offenders and non-offenders but at same time provide a good explanation of

criminal behaviour are gender and age. At one time there was so little criminality from female and older groups that criminologists turned their attention to it.

John Hagan justified the low crime levels within female groups by saying that male groups often see crime as a source of fun and excitement, which is not often the case with female groups which are more family-oriented due to the maternity role they carry ^[6]. Moreover, daughters are believed to be more frequently subject to intense, continual and diffuse family control in the private and domestic environments and this gradually develops among female groups a stronger feeling of emotional sanctions than physical or custodial controls. Therefore, shaming methodologies and the withdrawn of love and affection have greater impact on female groups than incapacitation. This system does not need the intervention of the criminal justice system but of close family guidance. Finally, this close family control also encourages female groups to stay away from the “ purview of agents of formal social control” ^[7].

Carlen’s findings reinforce this theory as he collected evidence that showed “ female criminals were most likely to emerge when domestic family controls were removed altogether” ^[8].

With minor exceptions the crimes of the elderly have not been in the focus of criminological attention ^[9]. Stephens argues that older people who belong to poor classes are more concerned with survival issues and do not feel empowered to resort to crime apart from occasional petty offences. They

also lack the physical and psychological motivation to commit serious crimes such as murder or robbery.

However, this is not the case with older people from wealthy classes as these groups are most often characterised by power, greed. They also carry the advantage of experience. However, again, they lack the physical energy to commit violent crimes and that is why they tend to focus on financial offences.

Conclusion

It is apparent from the above analysis that sociological theories that use poverty and social deprivation to explain crime do not clash with the low levels of criminality within female and older groups. Male groups from poor classes render higher rates because they do not experience the same control mechanisms that female and older groups receive. When these mechanisms are lifted (e. g. because there is no close family control or because the feeling of survival is not that evident), then the risk is the same.

Bibliography

Box S (1983) *Power, Crime and Mystification* , London: Tavistock.

Carlen P (1988) *Women, Crime and Poverty* , Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Durkheim E (1953) *The Division of Labour in Society* , Oxford: Oxford University Press

Rock P (1997) " Sociological Theories of Crime" *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Haggan J (1979) " The Sexual Stratification of Social Control" 30 *British Journal of Sociology* .

Stephens J (1976) *Loners, Losers and Lovers* . Seattle, Washington: University of Washington.

Young J (1988) " Radical Criminology in Britain: The Emergence of a Competing Paradigm" 28 *British Journal of Criminology*

1

Footnotes

[1] Young J (1988) " Radical Criminology in Britain: The Emergence of a Competing Paradigm" 28 *British Journal of Criminology* , page 175.

[2] *The Oxford English Dictionary*

[3] Durkheim E (1893) *The Division of Labour in Society* , later reprinted as Durkheim E (1953) *The Division of Labour in Society* , Oxford: Oxford University Press

[4] Rock P (1997) " Sociological Theories of Crime" *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[5] Box S (1983) *Power, Crime and Mystification* , London: Tavistock.

[6] Haggan J (1979) " The Sexual Stratification of Social Control" 30 *British Journal of Sociology* .

[7] *Loc cit supra* note 4 page 243.

[8] Carlen P (1988) *Women, Crime and Poverty* , Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

[9] One exception is Stephens J (1976) *Loners, Losers and Lovers* . Seattle, Washington: University of Washington.