

Evidence between offending and social class



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

This essay will outline and critically evaluate the main evidence supporting an association between offending, victimisation and social class, using criminological theories such as Strain Theory and Labelling theory to demonstrate this. Social class in relation to offending and victimisation is an extremely broad area, taking this and the words limit into account this essay will specifically focus on offending and Victimisation of the lower classes in society.

Class was originally defined by Karl Marx in relation to the means of production where he described two main classes the bourgeoisie the owning class and the proletariat the workers who were exploited by capitalism (Giddens, 2001). His theory has been heavily scrutinised and class is now seen as more flexible than Marx first interoperated taking into account; income, wealth and status and in addition to this culture and patterns of consumption (Giddens, 2001). In contemporary society class is based on a complex model where defined by occupation however this leads to the victimisation of the lower classes and low income families especially in respect of stereotypes regarding criminality (Croall, 1998).

The stereotype of the “ Dangerous class” arose in Victorian times as a reaction to the crime rates. The lower classes were depicted by the middle and upper classes as idle and lazy, would rather live off the proceeds of crime than do a hard days labour (Elmsley, 1996). This stereotype lives on to present day with the common belief that the lower classes “ the underclass” are the main offenders in relation to criminal behaviour (Croall, 1998). The underclass has been defined by Giddens (2001) as a group at the bottom of society, who suffers from severe inequalities in health, education and lives

off the welfare system which results in difficulties conforming to the economic, social and political norms of society which are predominantly middle class. Murray ((1990) cited in Walklate (2003)) suggests that members of the underclass are not only defined by their behaviour and unemployment status but also their involvement in crime and their illegitimacy.

Durkheim's theory of anomie suggests that the lack of opportunity that the underclass has consequently resulting in criminality and deviance (Marsh, Melville, Morgan, Norris, Walkington, 2006). This theory of Anomie was taken further by Merton (1910-2003) who suggested that people from more deprived areas had less chance of achieving social, economic and personal growth (Marsh et al, 2006). Their opportunity is obstructed by the area they live, poverty, literacy, cultural background and which puts a strain on their ability to achieve economic status and wealth (Marsh et al, 2006).

This form of Anomie theorised by Merton is Called Strain Theory which accounts for the inability for people from deprived areas to achieve their goals of status and wealth by legal means (Newburn, 2007). This therefore suggests a reason for the shift to criminality and also gives reason for the high numbers of offenders from this class (Giddens, 2001). This can also be explained by the by David Gordon a political economist who believes " crime in capitalist society represents perfectly rational responses to the structure of institutions upon which capitalist societies are based" meaning that due to the strain in striving for greatness and wealth people from lower classes gain their wealth through unconventional means (Reiner, 2004).

Offending occurs in all social classes however, the majority of convictions occur from the lower classes of society in involving crimes such as robbery, theft, burglary and joyriding. White collar crime on the other hand is generally seen by society as crime of the middle and upper classes this may be due to accessibility the middle/upper classes have to commit fraud or exploitation of health and safety laws and with a very low conviction rate this reflecting in the crime statistics (Croall, 1998). This gives an unfair representation of crime and victimises the lower classes in society (Croall, 1998). The majority of convicted offenders are to from lower class background committing crimes of robbery, theft, burglary and crimes against property (Muncie & McLaughlin, 2001) The British Crime Survey (2008/09 [online]) suggests that fifty percent of crime recorded by the police was robbery, theft, burglary, and crimes against property compared with three percent of fraud and forgery. Marsh et al (2006) suggests that Merton and Cohen see crime as a reaction to inequality and there is a “ common cause” for such behaviours such as social influence by family, friends, peers and social background (Newburn, 2007: 486).

This is reflected in the offences that these prisoners have been charges with such as theft and burglary (Muncie et al, 2001). Eighty percent of offenders are male under twenty one, in prison there is an overwhelming majority of these offenders from lower classes and ethnic minorities who have been raised in deprived areas of society (Muncie et al, 2001). These statistics reflect the willingness of the government to criminalise these offenders, disregarding the deprivation and inequality that has lead to their criminality (Muncie et al, 2001).

Merton's Strain theory suggests that there is a strain on the ability to achieve wealth through conventional educational means, therefore there is a need to partake in criminality to gain this wealth and status and through the participation in crime there is an increased probability in the use of drugs (Muncie et al, 2001). This was studied further by Dunlap et al ((2002) cited in Newburn 2007: 486) where he investigated the lives of four generations of women from low income backgrounds, who had been sexually assaulted, violent attacked and taken drugs over their life time learning these behaviours as social norms this consequently lead to the next generation having the same fate.

Victimisation occurs across the whole of society however, according to Felson & Boba (2010) it is predictable and is grouped together in areas especially those of deprivation. According to the Criminal Victimization by Family Income Study (2000) the poorest families in America were subject to three times more crime than the richest (Reiman, 2004). There are specific groups in society who are more prone to victimisation the British Crime survey (2008/09 [online]) suggest that such as; young people especially males aged 16-24 have a thirteen percent chance of being a victim of crime; unemployed have a seven percent chance, single also have a seven percent chance, ethnic minorities have a seven percent chance and people who have already been a victim of crime are more likely to fall victim again (Maguire, Morgan & Reiner, 2002). In addition to this the poor are more likely to be victims of unfair working conditions according to Tombs (1999) cited in Croall (2001: 74) " Safety is related to vulnerability and these groups are elderly, poor and young", miss sale of financial products due to lack of education, the

adverse affects of white collar crimes such as the dumping of harmful waste in third world countries (Croall, 2001).

Howard Becker (Cited in Giddens, 2001) suggests that Labelling theory can account for the victimisation of specific subcultures Anthony Platt (1969 cited in Lilly, Cullen & Ball, 2007) suggests that labelling theory is biased and is aimed at helping the poorer classes attain middle class values. Croall (1998) proposes that the police play a part in the victimisation of the lower classes as they are more likely to suspect someone from a lower class background of offending due to the area in which they reside. The theory of labelling as self-fulfilling prophecy suggests that victimisation can occur of the lower classes due to society labelling them as delinquent (Lilly et al, 2007). This can happen if they are seen to associate with someone who is criminal or dresses in a way that can be perceived as delinquent this subsequent labelling could enforce conformity however, it could also push the person from social norms into criminality (Lilly et al, 2007).

In conclusion this essay has outlined offending in relation to Merton's Strain Theory suggesting that there is a strain on the lower classes to achieve wealth through conventional educational means, therefore there is a need to partake in criminality (Muncie et al, 2001). Felson & Boba (2010) said crime is predictable and is grouped together in areas especially those of deprivation the British Crime survey (2008/09 [online]) suggest that such as; young people especially males aged 16-24; unemployed, single, ethnic minorities and people who have already been a victim of crime are more likely to fall victim again (Maguire, Morgan & Reiner, 2002). The theory of labelling as self-fulfilling prophecy suggests that victimisation can occur in

<https://assignbuster.com/evidence-between-offending-and-social-class/>

the lower classes due to society labelling them as delinquent, this subsequent labelling in some cases can enforce conformity, however, it can also push the person from social norms into criminality (Lilly et al, 2007). Society appears to criminalise these offenders, disregarding the deprivation and inequality which has lead to the offending in the first place this consequently leads to the victimisation and labelling of the lower classes (Muncie et al, 2001).