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CRIME AND INEQUALITY: CURRENT ISSUES IN RESEARCH AND PUBLIC DEBATE INTRODUCTION

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The 1980s for Britain and the USA proved a decade of New Right triumphalism, culminating in the collapse of the State socialist regimes of the USSR and Eastern Europe. A domestic version of that collapse in Britain was the defeat of organised labour and the weakening of the powers of left-wing local authorities. The return to free market economics gave impetus to the already strong trend towards so-called 'jobless growth', the result of the new information technologies. In part, however, government policies have been a recipe for mass job destruction, as in mining (due to the privatisation of electricity) and construction (due to the freezing of capital receipts of council house sales). As a result, male unemployment soared from 5 per cent in 1979 to 12 per cent in 1983 and, after a fall which bottomed out in the election year of 1987, rose yet more steeply to 14 per cent in 1993. For women, it rose less sharply, from 3 to 6 per cent, reflecting the steady growth of women's participation in the labour force compared to men, especially in part-time work. Long-term male unemployment rates reached 80-90 per cent. More insidiously, the growth of job insecurity and *non*-employment have been masked by the crude, much manipulated unemployment figures; and social polarisation in housing and education echo the growth of inequalities in work and incomes.

Of late, these trends have been variously charted in a stream of reports, from the Labour Party's commission on Social Justice, the Rowntree Foundation, Barnardo's, the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders and the Liberal-inspired Committee on Wealth Creation and Social Cohesion. Each in turn has linked the pursuit of short-term profit-taking to the pattern of large-scale job-shedding; some have gone further, pointing to the impact of such devastating changes - the increase in family break-up and community breakdown which foster rising crime and disorder. It is not simply the speed of change that matters, but its direction. Companies can indeed be down-sized *en masse* but only at immense social and ultimately moral costs. You cannot so readily down-size society.^[1] Something has to give.

What gives are the very pre-conditions for law and order, the informal social controls that form the bedrock of community stability and the glue of social cohesion. Social theorists of deviance from Emile Durkheim in the 1890s to Robert Merton in the 1930s used the term *anomie* to capture the sense of weakening moral guidelines and the blurring of distinctions between right and wrong that resulted. Sheer absence of controls were not, however, enough to account for increasing rates of deviance. Both theorists saw unrealisable aspirations as alone capable of generating the anger, disillusionment and frustration that led to suicide and, by extension, deviance in general. For Durkheim, the capacity to aspire 'infinitely' was a human propensity of such force that only a strong and commonly upheld moral order could control it. Periodic bouts of anomie were inevitable in the transition to a socially just society from the moral chaos of late nineteenth century capitalism. For Merton, American culture was a receipt for a continual strain to mounting anomie, since the American Dream was formed by

insatiable aspirations. Society could not possibly supply the reality of 'money-success' to more than a minority: yet all were democratically attuned to expect it. Though Merton was no Marxist, his emphasis on the extent to which capitalism flourishes only by fostering the propensity to consume - mass production must be accompanied by mass consumption - lends his approach a radical appeal. Much elaborated, these theories provide the taproots for most modern theories of crime and deviance.

Their relevance to the rise and rise of crime rates in the post-war period now seems indisputable, since they alone can address the paradox that crime has risen steeply with growing prosperity and reduced but persistent inequality. When greater affluence is combined with *growing* inequality and the rise of what has been called a winner/loser culture, crime has climbed even more steeply (James 1995). In England and Wales, official crime rates doubled over the 1979-92 period, most dramatically by 40 per cent between 1989 and 1992, though victim surveys have shown half that rate of increase. Differences of age and gender are surprisingly constant, over time and between different societies. Most crime (apart from the largely hidden icebergs of occupational crimes and domestic violence) is youth crime, committed by a minority of young men and boys under the age of 25, who are disproportionately drawn from the urban, under-educated, under-employed working class. Youth and crime are so strongly linked because adolescence is a limbo between childhood dependence and adult maturity: energies are high, outlets are few, needs are keenly felt and authority is to be tested and resisted. The gender divide persists because girls are much more carefully watched by parents, deflected from risk-taking (Hagan, Simpson and Gillis 1979) and, though here things may be changing fast, brought up to anticipate reliance on a male partner in raising a family. The male role remains the more restricted, for without work men are less likely to gain emotional as well as occupational fulfilment.

The damage inflicted by the economic changes of the past two decades have fallen particularly harshly on this group. In the most afflicted neighbourhoods, a 'crisis of masculinity' has been discerned (Campbell 1993) in which youths with no foreseeable hope of gaining self-respect through regular well-paid work sought fulfilment through the manufacture of excitement. At their most spectacular, forms of delinquency were evolved or imported which transcended the mundane: *steaming* used sheer force of numbers to intimidate during robbery and theft; *hotting* meant bravura displays of racing stolen cars around local estates; and *ram-raiding* entailed forcible entry by smashing vehicles into shops or even houses. Such fashions came and went, but it was the remorseless toll of break-ins, car thefts and street crimes - the 'slow riot' of crime and drugtaking referred to in Sidney Fine's *Violence in the Model City* (1989), a study of the Detroit riot of 1967 and its aftermath - that led predictably to mounting public anxieties and the revival of punitive penal policies in the 1990s. Moreover, after 35 riot-free post-war years, sporadic rioting returned to urban Britain, not on the Detroit scale, but enough to signal the breakdown of community controls and effective political representation for the excluded. Such developments place the police and the criminal justice system under enormous strain. Falling clear-up and conviction rates confirm fears that crime is getting out of control and add a further twist to the anomic process.

Not surprisingly, though, on grounds quite consistent with their beliefs about individual responsibility, successive Conservative governments resisted the view that crime and, in particular, unemployment were all connected. This great denial also had the merit of exculpating Conservative administrations from any responsibility for rising crime. At most, lack of personal morality, inadequate discipline at home and in schools, and increased opportunities were officially cited in explanation. At worst, this denial amounted to a Home Counties version of Stalinist criminology. In the post-revolutionary (Thatcherite) society, crime cannot be due to social changes linked with economic policy: it can only be explained by pre-revolutionary residues (the permissive 1960s) or anti-revolutionary infiltration (socialist councils, left-wing teachers), or it is caused by biological/psychological defects (human evil). Social explanations are just excuses.

Yet this conflation of explanation and excuse is only wheeled out in discussions of illegality. Not even a Conservative Chancellor would presumably deny that economic factors massively influence behaviour. Otherwise, why bother with interest rate changes, exchange rates and the like? In an increasingly materialistic society, the absurd pretence is maintained that crime is the only form of activity uninfluenced by economic policy. Yet much property crime is for a market, and Simon Field's work for the Home Office (1990) has shown the extreme sensitivity of crime rates to changing rates of consumption: anomie in action, as it were. When times are

good, people buy from department stores; when they are bad, from car boot sales and backs of lorries. For a growing number, times are always bad.

Ultimately, the individual *is* responsible, but choice and responsibility are not exercised in a vacuum. Certain circumstances encourage people to make criminal choices rather than resist them. Also, people do not simply leap from conformity to crime overnight: a lengthy process of drift, indecision, backtracking and networking is commonly involved, at any stage of which the individual may desist (Matza 1964). It is the job of governments to foster social arrangements that make the drift into delinquency less rather than more likely. In what is coming to be known as the 'risk society', self-protection is increasingly individualised. Insurance, security devices, target-hardening and private policing have all boomed in the past two decades: but their effect may be to re-distribute crime regressively, to poorer neighbourhoods and victims. Collective risk management - otherwise known as social and economic policy - has become increasingly disconnected from crime prevention and control. Some social crime prevention projects have been mounted, but - despite some successes - they tend to be too localised, short-term and under-funded to make a lasting impact (for a model account of two projects, see Foster and Hope 1993). Tony Blair's formulation - 'Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' - is greatly to be preferred, but rests on the premise that we can sort out the confusion about what those causes are and then agree on how to tackle them. Meanwhile, being tough on crime takes priority by default.

One source of confusion is the view that welfare provision, far from assisting in crime reduction, actually services to increase it, by creating a new 'underclass' born of welfare dependency (Murray 1984). Welfare supports have created a shiftless generation of single parents wedded to the State whose sons and sometimes partners lack paternal authority: the result is increased crime and the answer is to cut welfare supports to unwed mothers. Though the balance of evidence from different states and from countries far more generous in welfare support than the USA is heavily against Murray, he is credited with winning the political even if losing the intellectual argument. Similarly, Dennis and Erdos (1993) talk of the 'anomie of fatherlessness' rather than of unemployment and pour scorn on the view that 'if the rate of unemployment were to fall to the level of the 1960s, the crime rate would fall to the level of the 1960s'.

In this welter of assertion and counter-assertion, the focus on either unemployment alone or single-parenthood alone is the most striking feature. In a singular re-analysis of the complex issues and evidence, Elliott Currie (1985) argued that two false antitheses bedeviled the field. First, to pitch unemployment against family breakdown as the cause of crime is singularly unhelpful, since economic and social inequalities can aggravate both as well as leading to community decline. Secondly, unemployment is not simply to be contrasted with employment, as if both were standard units of experience. Insecure under-employment is no better than unemployment as a source of livelihood sufficient to support a family and experience an active sense of citizenship. Short spells of unemployment between rewarding jobs is better than being stuck with work that offers only poor pay, hours, conditions and prospects.

Recent evidence in Britain and the USA strongly supports his review of crime-employment trends. In the wake of rising youth unemployment in the early 1980s, hard drug use began to pervade the most socially deprived areas of Britain. In a key study of the Wirral, a 'new to crime' group was identified as extensively involved in property crime to finance their habit: rates of heroin use correlated strongly with unemployment rates (Parker, Bakx and Newcombe 1988). Geoffrey Pearson (1987) explored the way of life of heroin users as filling the void created by joblessness. In a rare study using both variables, Allen and Steffensmeier (1989) found unemployment to be most strongly associated with high juvenile (14-17) arrest rates, but under-employment (inadequate pay and hours) with high young adult (18-24) arrest rates. Any old job is clearly not the answer to the crime problem for this age group. In a study based on victim survey data, which avoids police bias, Sampson and Wooldred (1987) found burglary and theft victimisation increased significantly with the rate of local unemployment. The exigencies of streetlife sharply increase the engagement of dropout and homeless youth in property crime (Hagan and McCarthy 1992).

Outstanding fieldwork in three contrasting Brooklyn neighbourhoods established the links between social networks, labour markets and crime. Access to primary labour market jobs (good pay, conditions and prospects) depended heavily on having family members or friends who already held them. Boys who belonged to such networks usually found such jobs and their involvement in delinquency was at worst relatively petty and short-lived. Boys without such networks, restricted to secondary labour market jobs (low pay, poor conditions, no

prospects), were far more likely to engage in lengthier and more serious offending. Ethnic minority youth were more involved in the latter (Sullivan 1989). Chiricos (1987) concluded a review of 63 American studies by stating that 'considerable changes from one decade to the next suggest that something substantial happened to the unemployment-crime relationship in the 1960s became overwhelmingly positive, and frequently significant, in the 1970s.' This suggests that the meaning of unemployment changed from a brief interval between jobs to enduring worklessness. It is this much harsher reality of unemployment, which in Britain in the 1980s and the early 1990s developed even further than in the USA, which now forms the context for the unemployment-crime relationship: David Dickinson (1993) found an exceptionally close relationship between rates of burglary and unemployment rates for young men under 25 for this period. Cross-national research by John Braithwaite (1979) and Steven Messner (1980) found higher homicide rates were linked with several indicators of social inequality.

There should be no great surprise about these findings. From the 1950s to the 1970s, a great deal of research into group delinquency both here and in the USA had as its common thread the view that most delinquency was either so petty that it could be reasonably dealt with informally or that it stemmed from resistance to inequalities in work, school and leisure. The best schools and the best projects did make some headway in tackling these problems: for example, 'Operation Headstart' in the USA was shown to have long-term effects for the good (Halsey 1980). But the political will to generalise these initiatives failed to materialise. What we are now seeing is the natural development of these theories made manifest in today's society.

Theorists such as Albert Cohen (1955), and Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin (1960), did not link crime to sheer deprivation of working class culture or, indeed, an 'underclass'. They viewed the most serious and pervasive forms of crime and delinquency as generated by a combination of complex experiences born of relative deprivation in a highly competitive, increasingly fragmented social order. The term 'delinquent career' was for a time the preferred way of analysing the move from drifting into delinquency to more serious offending: but this implies a rational and orderly self-control. In *Knuckle Sandwich* (1978), Phil Cohen and David Robins thought 'careering delinquents' conveyed their sheer muddle and confusion far more aptly. Most young offenders are the politically and economically marginalised boys and young men most disaffected or excluded from the basic institutions of family, school, work and standard forms of leisure. Yet the same strain to anomie which theorists discern as underlying their delinquency also furnish the motives for social polarisation, the pursuit of extreme wealth and 'crimes of the powerful'. In *Unfair Shares* (1994), Richard Wilkinson argued that social inequalities produce lower life expectancies for both poor and rich: the poorest class in Sweden enjoy the same life expectancy as the richest class in Britain. The same could apply to crime. These theories ultimately register the need for some semblance of return to an egalitarian ethic to be achieved as the pre-condition for domestic peace.

Agreement about the crime-inequality connection has, however, never been simple or complete. James Q. Wilson has long attacked that view (*Thinking About Crime*, 1975) and relies on 'human nature' to explain it. Such an approach makes little sense of the huge variations in crime between societies and over time. More recently, David Smith (in Rutter and Smith 1995) has cited three counter-examples to the otherwise growing consensus that crime and inequality are profoundly linked. Basically, he asks: 'What about Sweden?'; 'What about the 1930s?' (when high unemployment and much greater poverty than today were combined with much lower crime rates) and 'What about the 1960s?' (when full employment and falling poverty were combined with rising crime). Smith singled out Sweden as experiencing a particularly sharp increase 'during the post-war period of strong economic growth and reduction of income inequalities combined with the most comprehensive social welfare programmes in Europe'. The rise is not in doubt, but its extent is greatly exaggerated by Interpol figures. The International Crime Survey for 1992 (Del Frate, Zvekic and Van Dijk 1993: 513 and 653) shows Sweden to have a lower crime rate than England and Wales, markedly so if prevalence rates for victimisation over the previous five years are singled out for such serious offences as burglary (Sweden 5 per cent, England 11 per cent), robbery (Sweden 1.3 per cent, England 2.6 per cent) and car theft (Sweden 6 per cent, England 10 per cent). One survey does not settle the issue, but it at least serves to cast severe doubt on Sweden's newly acquired role as the most criminal nation in Europe.

The other questions pressed by David Smith are more difficult to address empirically if not theoretically. Smith is rightly looking for master trends which explain crime over long periods

of time as distinct from at any given point in time. But the 1930s, 1960s and 1990s simply cannot be usefully compared in single-factor terms. If inequality alone is held to be the cause of crime, then the experience of the 1930s and the 1960s would refute that proposition: but no social theorist has ever argued that simply. Virtually all social theorists of crime *begin* with the paradox that economic growth and greater affluence have produced not less but more, much more crime, though they also regard pre-war police figures as providing a poor basis for comparison with those post-war. Their major premise is that economic growth has been fuelled by sharply rising expectations, intensified by sophisticated advertising, which far outstripped any reduction in equality achieved with painful slowness by insecurely based wage increases, taxation and welfare. These processes also seem to act like the social equivalent of global warming on the ice-caps of informal community controls. Moreover, it is a cliché of the social policy field that, though the poor would be worse off without them, the distribution of welfare services disproportionately favours the better-off. Without these elements, no theory is up to the task of explaining rising crime in the affluent society: and tests of inadequate theories merely confirm their inadequacy without taking us further forward.

It can still be maintained that in the inter-war period, high unemployment left community and family frameworks relatively unimpaired and any job was welcomed as better than none. However, though crime rates were indeed far lower than now, they did double in the 1930s. As Currie points out, the crime rate in the USA would have arguably been higher but for the public works job creation schemes of Roosevelt's New Deal, a factor conveniently forgotten by those who hark back to the 1930s as proof that depression and crime need not be linked. Moreover, the long revolution of rising expectations interacts with the changing meaning of joblessness in the late twentieth century to produce a new moral expediency. In the 1930s, however scarring the experience of unemployment, which hit adult far more than adolescent workers compared with the 1980s, the shared hope was that jobs were being withheld and would reappear when times and governments changed. The communal sense of outrage was well conveyed in one of the most celebrated banners of the 1930s hunger marches; 'Jarrow - the town that was murdered'. In the wake of automation, jobless growth withholds even that hope. As John Lea and Jock Young argued (1984) if the first Industrial Revolution involved the exploitation of labour by capital, the second entails the emancipation of capital from labour. Rising pressures to consume combined with falling expectations of productive employment spell a particularly corrosive sense of exclusion.

What critics have focused attention on are gaps and anomalies in the evidence which anomie theorists and their successors, from subcultural theorists of the 1950s and 60s to the 'Left Realists' of the 1990s, should have taken up. Are delinquent children more conscious of relative deprivation than non-delinquents from the same background? How do so many children in such situations avoid delinquency? Why and how has Japan, which has experienced explosive economic growth since 1945, reduced its crime (including its murder) rate in the process? Where are the studies of long-term changes in advertising that denote the growth of a more acquisitive, winner/loser culture? And how is that culture filtered and glossed by different groups? Expectations are simply assumed to have risen - and diverged from reality - further and faster as the century wore on without any real grappling with the empirical issues involved. Self-images of masculinity and femininity are beginning to be explored, crucially with the shrinkage of traditional working-class roles, but such research is just beginning.

All in all, inequality and crime remain strongly linked, once allowance is made for the insights of theorists from Merton on. However, sociologists have rested their theories for too long on incomplete foundations. The critics have at least rammed home how much remains to be done if those links are not to be endlessly disconnected.

Note

1. The time honoured, and dishonoured, routes for down-sizing society include emigration, exile, extermination and imprisonment. Emigration routes are now greatly curtailed. Exile is hardly an option, though it can be effected by other means, e.g. 'voluntary' repatriation. Extermination can presumably be ruled out, though it is practised in states as diverse as the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Nigeria, Rwanda and China. Imprisonment remains the major option. For example, the current US unemployment rate of 5.5% would be some 2% higher if the daily prison population of

some two million prisoners and allied staff were added to the total. Even allowing for the fact that some US prisoners would find legitimate employment if released, imprisonment feasibly 'solves' about a quarter of the US unemployment problem.

[\[Back to text\]](#)

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