



A Conversation: The Positive
Correlation Between Crime
Rate and Poverty Rate
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Introduction*

I want you to ask yourself, what is a crime? And further, where does crime come from? For most people, the second question proves much more complicated than the first one. This is because people have so many factors motivating them to commit or not commit crimes no system has ever been able to prevent them entirely, try as they might. Welcome to the field of criminology.

In this paper, I will be introducing the importance of criminology through the illustration of criminological ideologies and the three different levels of analysis criminologists use as a means for understanding criminal(ized) behavior. To demonstrate the distinctions between these levels of analysis and ideologies, I will be presenting two initial interviews with my colleagues, and another two follow-up interviews with the same colleagues conducted a year later. Within the first interview, I will be presenting the statistical fact that there is a positive correlation between the crime rate and poverty rate. Additionally, I will be analyzing the level of analysis each of my interlocutors uses to come to their conclusions, as well as identifying the criminological ideology they invoke. Lastly, it should be noted that I will be using Hugh D. Barlow's book, *Explaining Crime: A Primer in Criminological Theory* to support my analysis.

The Three Ideologies of Criminology According to Barlow

Barlow (2009) illustrates three of the common competing ideological perspectives in criminology: conservative, liberal, and

* Thank you to Professor Lobo. An early version of this work was submitted as a paper for his course, CJ 300: Criminal Justice: A Cross-Disciplinary Perspective.

critical. The three ideological perspectives are composed of multiple theories that support their view of criminal behavior. Conservative criminology is the belief that criminal law is a codification of moral precepts and anyone who breaks this law is either psychologically or morally defective. One theory derived from this ideology is the self-control theory, the view that individuals with low levels of self-control are more likely to commit a crime than individuals who have higher levels of self-control (Barlow 2009). According to Barlow (2009), characteristics such as short-time perspective, adventure-seeking, indifference, and the inability to hold meaningful relationships are signs of low levels of self-control. This theory proposes ineffective parenting as a major cause of crime, emphasizing child development and how a person's moral understanding may reflect their parents' explanations for criminal behavior.

On the other hand, liberal criminology explains criminal behavior through either social structure (the way society is organized) or social process (the way people acquire social attributes) (Barlow 2009). There are a few theories that explain crime through the social structure: strain theory, transmission theory, and conflict theory. Strain theory argues when people cannot achieve a goal through socially acceptable means, their frustration leads them to crime. Transmission theory presents the argument that individuals are impacted by the exposure to norms, values, and lifestyles they see daily. Hence, consistent exposure to criminal role modeling may lead them to crime. In contrast, conflict theory argues society is characterized by conflict since criminality is a product of differences in power when people compete for scarce resources and other conflicting interests (Barlow 2009). Theories that compose in explaining crime through the social process are associational theory, control theory, and labeling

theory. Associational theories assert individuals often become criminals due to having a close association with a relative or friend is a criminal (Barlow 2009). Control theory asserts crime and delinquency often arise from the disconnection that the individual feels towards society. Lastly, labeling theory argues individuals who are often labeled or treated as a criminal may influence to identify themselves as criminals (Barlow 2009).

Lastly, although liberal criminology locates the criminogenic forces in the social structure and social process of society, critical criminology focuses more on the social structure while also proposing a change in society, the economy, and other social structures that may incentivize criminal behavior. They call for a radical change in the economic, cultural, and political structure of the country (Barlow 2009). For example, the Marxist theoretical perspective locates the social structure as being both crime and criminal justice have reinforced and strengthened the power of the state and the wealthy over the poor (Barlow 2009). To remedy this root cause, the Marxist theory proposes a change in the economic structure of capitalism. (Barlow 2009). In the following section, I will introduce you to the three different levels of analysis many criminologists use to classify and differentiate the different criminological theories as presented in this section (Barlow 2009).

The Three Different Levels of Analysis in Criminology

The three different levels of analysis according to Barlow (2009) consist of macro, meso, and micro. First, the macro level of analysis focuses on the “big picture” of crime, it views crime as the property of whole groups rather than the property of individuals. This level of analysis focuses on social structure not only concerning crime but also attempts to make sense of everyday

behaviors by viewing their relations to their neighborhood and community. In connection to liberal criminology, theories such as strain theory, transmission, and labeling theory are examples of theories that have used the macro level of analysis. Second, the meso level of analysis focuses on examining specific groups, communities, and organizations. Lastly, the micro level of analysis focuses on the ways individual interacts with others and with groups to which they belong. According to Barlow (2009), this level of analysis shares an emphasis on the social process by which people and events become criminals.

Having outlined these three different ideologies and levels of analysis, we will now proceed to the interviews. In the following sections, I will be presenting two colleagues of mine, William and Omar, and their thoughts on the statistical reality that there is a positive correlation between crime rate and poverty rate. In their response to the following questions I will be asking during the interview, I will determine both the level of analysis and their ideology when coming to their conclusion and view towards crime.

A Discussion with William

The first person I interviewed is a childhood friend named William, who is currently majoring in Statistics. During his time in school, William stated he has familiarized himself with the topic of US crime through his research, with a particular eye toward macro-level statistics as they relate to his field of study. At the beginning of the interview, I asked William what topics come to mind when he thinks of the fact there is a positive correlation between the crime rate and the poverty rate in the United States. William initially responded with the words race and crime, but he further added rather than only explaining crime as a racial subject, one should also account for immigration, poverty, and other systemic

factors that play a role in our criminal justice system. He begins to present the argument if one group is committing more crimes than the other it may well be because of their income. He further clarifies by explaining how people with lower income are more likely to commit a crime due to necessity and to “feel good.”

By “feel good”, William explains poor people tend to not only steal goods for survival but also goods that will fulfill their pleasures; whether it be an expensive watch or a cheap toy. He further notes people living in a high-stress environment are more likely to commit crimes. As studies have shown people in high-stress environments tend to have reduced long-term decision-making abilities due to the accumulated stress and need to devote energy to shorter-term issues. Williams’ reasoning as to why he believes poor individuals are more susceptible to committing a crime is in correspondence to transmission theory given the poor environment and poor lifestyle. It is also apparent William uses the self-control theory as he claims poor people tend to lack rationale and self-control due to a lack of human resources such as food.

Furthermore, when discussing mass incarceration in the US there were two points William brought forth in the conversation. The first being America’s history in sentencing people for drug-related crimes, and the second being how our country holds harsh sentencing in comparison to other countries. William used California’s “Three Strikes” law as his first example of excessive sentencing because rather than the law sentencing people to their corresponding crime, it sentenced people disproportionately. He drew attention to how this law targeted many people within Latin American and African American communities. For his second example, he emphasized how President Bush’s introduction and criminalization of crack in the US has led many people within poor communities to end up in prison. People become addicted to crack

as a result of its availability, and as crack became criminalized it led to drug trafficking. William expressed that while many people went to prison, the high-level officials responsible for the drug's introduction to society went unpunished.

Additionally, when discussing the question of why former convicts commit the same crimes after being released, William responded it was because of their lack of resources. Many of these people have a harder time financially recovering from the days they spent in jail, such as being unable to find a suitable job due to their criminal record. At the end of our conversation, William concluded our criminal justice system along with policymakers should not focus on bringing retribution to the people but focus primarily on deterring crime and rehabilitating former criminals. Based on the conversation I had with William and how his points covered both the social structure and social process to explain criminal behavior, I have concluded he has a liberal criminological view of the issue.

A Discussion with Omar

The second person I interviewed is another friend named Omar, who is currently majoring in political science and has a habit of watching documentaries related to the topic of crime. Similar to William, Omar also believes lower-class individuals are more likely to commit a crime due to necessity, but also points out young individuals are also susceptible to stealing luxury items. Omar uses micro-level analysis to explain why criminal behavior is most common in young people. Omar argues teens of low income will be susceptible to intrusive thoughts such as stealing luxury items the other classmates have in school. Although these items are not necessarily human necessities, they are items that help them feel a sense of belonging in their community, more specifically towards their peers at school. In alignment with the transmission theory

presented by Barlow (2009), many teens, according to Omar, are susceptible to crime given their desire to fit in with other classmates and fit into the “social hierarchy”. Omar further adds teens tend to neglect future consequences and are often exposed to crime through their peers and social circle.

Furthermore, Omar uses macro-level analysis in his explanation to emphasize how certain laws can lead someone to resort to committing a crime. He provides the example of civil disobedience, when a person feels a certain law is unfair or even a violation of their rights would resort to going against a particular law as an act of protest. This point is in further support of the strain theory described by Barlow, as individuals who fail to achieve a goal through socially acceptable means, can often lead to crime out of frustration. The act of civil disobedience may call into question certain laws that restrict an individual from obtaining human necessities.

Additionally, when asked about topics such as mass incarceration and the question of why poor people tend to be incarcerated for repeated violations of the same law, Omar responded by giving the example of Chicago’s redlining. Chicago’s redlining was Chicago’s division between the lower class and higher class members of society, as people who were associated with the lower class of society were placed together. This division has not only enforced an impoverished environment but also a social division between the two social classes. Omar presented the Three Strikes law in California to support his argument on how the criminal justice system targeted minorities. Lastly, his comment on how the media has criminalized minorities, one example being Trump’s remarks on the Mexican and Hispanic community during his presidency can associate with the labeling theory (Barlow 2009). Remarks such as “Get him off the streets! Three-Strikes

Law”, Omar emotionally exclaimed when discussing America’s classification of the “super predator”. The “super predator” referred to the image of an African American man that was convicted of raping a white woman, and was broadcasted nationwide as a threat.

In conclusion, Omar expressed many similar views to William, but both shared different reasoning for explaining criminal behavior. Although both shared a liberal criminological perspective, Omar used a micro level of analysis through his example of how teens may be susceptible to crime due to labeling, parenting, and peer pressure due to differences in social status and the people they associate with. William, on the other hand, focused his reasoning on a macro level of analysis to explain criminal behavior in communities with low income. In the following section, I will be presenting the discussions I had with my two colleagues a year after this interview. In these follow-up discussions, I will be presenting any changes in ideology, in addition to, new points being presented.

A Follow-Up Discussion with William

After reviewing the points William made in the previous conversation, William noted that he has had a change in his criminological ideology. William associates himself with critical ideology more than liberal ideology. When asked why there has been a change in ideology, he responded by saying radical criminology aligns more with his beliefs. Since radical criminology proposes a change in the economic, cultural, and political structure of the country (Barlow 2009), William also proposes a change in America’s economy. He argues crime ultimately arises from the basic human needs which are not met by elements of modern society. Hence, those root causes are better addressed by making fundamental changes to society rather than adjusting to the criminal

justice system itself or making simple small changes such as tinkering with incremental policy changes. In the following paragraphs, William uses a micro level of analysis to explain how ineffective parenting and an individual's disconnection from society may lead them to crime.

One of the criticisms he presents is the concept of nuclear families. According to William, a nuclear family is a social norm in that a child is to be raised by only two parents, and it is the full responsibility of the parents to monitor who the child can interact with. As a result of the child being isolated from society, this negatively impacts them psychologically. If the parent were to be abusive or someone of bad influence on the child, it may well lead the child to have their own destructive and violent criminal behavior. The less the parents care for the child, the less likelihood for the child to live an honest life. William's reasoning aligns with one of the reasons for self-control theory according to Barlow (2009), which states ineffective parenting may impact the child's development and moral understanding may reflect their parent's definition of criminal behavior.

In addition, when asked if he were to agree with the self-control theory, William responded by saying he will align himself with the theory but not its solution. This is because he still criticizes the idea that two parents raising their children on their own is the best practice. The self-control theory implies that if both parents were not to be "ineffective" towards raising their child then there would be less crime. William argues this is quite impossible given the social structure in the United States. He describes how the child would have to be lucky in having two parents to learn from with the condition both parents provide good influence and attention. He explains how many parents today tend to share little time with their children as many low-income parents today are obligated to have

more than one job to support their family. According to William, by restricting the child's interaction with others as described in the nuclear family, it would be difficult for the child to speak against abuse and other negative beliefs that can often be presented by their parents.

Lastly, William comments if a child doesn't have a good education, they will be denied economic opportunities. Therefore without the ability to live a good and independent life, they will view society as unfair and have a lack of respect toward social norms and laws. More importantly, it will predispose them to a lack of connection to dignified social institutions. The presented argument aligns with control theory, which asserts crime and delinquency often arise from the disconnection the individual feels towards society (Barlow 2009). When asked if control theory aligns with his beliefs, he agreed and further added that an individual's lack of connection towards society is a large portion of answering why people commit crimes.

A Follow-Up Discussion with Omar

Revisiting the conversation with Omar, I have asked if he has had any changes in his criminological ideology. Omar responded by stating he still aligns himself with liberal criminology when it comes to explaining criminal behavior. Similar to William's argument on ineffective parenting, Omar further adds it may lead to the child being more susceptible to peer pressure. In reflection of the association theory, the child may associate themselves with others who commit crimes and indulge in their activity due to peer pressure. Omar provides the example of his friend, and how the abuse and neglect he received from their parents as a child led them to delinquency. Although his friend was hanging out with the "wrong crowd" it gave them a sense of belonging. Although most

of the views Omar holds today are very aligned with the views he has had a year ago, he still informs himself with a variety of topics related to youth and crime. Given this paper is in focus on the positive correlation between the poverty rate and crime rate, we could not come to a connection between his presented arguments during the second interview.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the three different ideologies in criminology along with the three levels of analysis help explain people's reasoning when explaining criminal behavior. The interviews conducted with my colleagues William and Omar have not only helped me reflect on the different theories presented within the ideologies but have also reinstated the fact there is a positive correlation between the crime rate and poverty rate in the United States. Omar has expressed a liberal approach to criminology and expressed a micro level of analysis when explaining his reasonings. While William expressed a critical approach to criminology and expressed a macro level of analysis when explaining his reasonings. Both of my colleagues through these two interviews have not only helped in my research but also enforce an understanding of criminal behavior in the United States.

Works Cited

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