



Cambridge Criminology Series

Delinquent-Prone Communities

*Don Weatherburn and
Bronwyn Lind*

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and

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New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research



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Delinquent-Prone Communities

Despite a century of effort, criminologists do not yet fully understand the relationship between disadvantage and crime. The balance of evidence suggests that economic and social stress increase the risk of involvement in crime by increasing the motivation to offend. But there are a number of empirical anomalies that cannot easily be reconciled with this interpretation of the evidence. Weatherburn and Lind argue that the transmission mechanism linking economic and social stress to crime is not offender motivation but disruption to the parenting process. They put forward an epidemic model of the genesis of delinquent-prone communities and show how this model resolves the empirical anomalies facing conventional interpretations of the disadvantage/crime relationship. This book offers compelling new evidence which will stimulate debate in this area of criminology and will also interest academics, policy makers and practitioners in the field.

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Overview

During the 1980s many countries – including Britain, the United States, Australia and New Zealand – experienced a significant growth in income inequality (Saunders, Stott and Hobbess 1991; Levy and Murnane 1992; Saunders 1993; Cowell, Jenkins and Litchfield 1996). In Britain, the United States and Australia this increase was accompanied by a progressive spatial concentration of the poor. Green (1994), for example, found large increases in the spatial concentration of unemployment in large metropolitan areas and traditional mining/manufacturing areas of Wales and in the north of England. In Australia a similar progressive spatial concentration of the unemployed in urban areas of low socioeconomic status has been documented by Gregory and Hunter (1995). In the United States it has been documented by Wilson (1987) and by Massey and Denton (1993). This growth in inequality might be regarded as of little account were it generally matched by a growth in real income but it has not been. The economic position of unskilled men in the United States fell markedly during the 1980s and early 1990s as did the ratio of employment to the population of working age and hours worked per employee across Europe (Freeman 1995). In Australia and New Zealand the growth in inequality occurred largely because of a decline in real household disposable income at the bottom end of the income distribution (Saunders, Stott and Hobbess 1991).

Criminologists have traditionally viewed these sorts of changes with concern. Most classical theories of crime, whether economic or social, predict that crime rates will increase with the level of disadvantage. Many would also lead one to expect spatially concentrated disadvantage to prove more criminogenic than disadvantage which is widely dispersed. Over the years, however, economic and social theories of crime have fallen on hard times. The

difficulty facing them is that evidence linking disadvantage and crime is neither consistent or clear. To be sure, cross-sectional studies relying on officially recorded crime data consistently show higher crime rates in areas marked by higher levels of disadvantage. Individual-level studies also consistently show that serious and/or persistent offenders are drawn disproportionately from the ranks of those who are economically disadvantaged. Time series studies, however, often show no relationship between disadvantage and crime at all and sometimes show evidence of a negative relationship. To make matters worse, it has never been entirely clear why material disadvantage would prompt involvement in non-acquisitive crime, yet the relationship between the two is remarkably strong.

The apparent failure of empirical research to confirm the hypothesised link between disadvantage and crime has tended to undermine scholarly faith in the idea that economic and social policy have a significant role to play in preventing crime. This idea has been undermined by other factors as well. Alternative explanations for the spatial distribution of crime have been developed which assign no direct causal role to economic and social disadvantage. The failure to reduce crime through anti-poverty measures – such as the War on Poverty in the United States during the 1970s – led to scepticism about the value of such measures. This scepticism has been fuelled by evidence indicating that the antecedents of individual involvement in crime are to be found well before entry into the labour market and, in many cases, before entry into high school. The discovery that certain kinds of family intervention in early childhood can significantly reduce the subsequent involvement in crime has encouraged a shift in the focus of crime prevention policy from social and economic reform to intervention in micro-social and family environments now thought to trigger offending behaviour.

The irony in this is that the decline of theoretical interest in the role of poverty, inequality and social disadvantage in generating crime-prone communities has coincided with the appearance of a number of individual-level research studies highlighting the existence of indirect pathways between economic stress and individual criminal behaviour. These studies indicate that economic and social stress, under certain conditions, reduce the level of parental supervision of children, weaken the level of parent-child attachment and produce parental discipline which is harsh, erratic and inconsistent. These conditions, in turn, increase the risk of involvement in crime, at least in part because they facilitate or encourage association with delinquent peers. Thus, just as criminological interest in the role of poverty and disadvantage in generating crime began to wane it became possible to argue that economic

stress, by a variety of indirect pathways, exerts a causal influence on the spatial distribution of crime.

What remains largely unanswered is how important the indirect pathways from disadvantage to crime are in shaping the aggregate level of and spatial distribution of crime. This is an important issue. Aggregate-level indices of parenting quality are not moving in a very reassuring direction. Britain, the United States and Australia appear to have experienced significant increases over the last decade in levels of child neglect and abuse. Registrations to child protection registers in Britain increased by 44 per cent from 1988 to 1998, rising from 20,900 cases to 30,000 cases (UK Department of Health 1999). In Australia, substantiated cases of child neglect and/or abuse rose by 59 per cent from 1988/89 to 1995/96, rising from 18,816 cases to 29,833 cases (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 1998). These changes might be thought to reflect just increased willingness to report or increased ability to detect child maltreatment. In the United States, however, where it is possible to estimate the true (as opposed to the reported) level of child abuse and neglect, the estimated number of abused and neglected children grew from 1.4 million in 1986 to over 2.8 million in 1993, an increase of more than 100 per cent (NIS-3 1999).

This book is about the interrelationship between economic and social stress, parental competence and crime-prone communities. We do not, however, put forward a general theory of the role of economic factors in crime, let alone a general theory of crime. Our interest is restricted to the developmental antecedents of crime-prone communities and how these antecedents are influenced by economic and social conditions. Our contention is that economic and social stress create fertile conditions for the development of crime-prone communities, not because they drive otherwise law-abiding people into crime but because they are corrosive of the quality of parenting in a way which renders juveniles more susceptible to delinquent peer influence. An important part of our argument is that this influence creates an autocatalytic effect, in which each increase in the level of delinquency in a neighbourhood lays the foundations for later increases. We use this idea to help explain some of the anomalies surrounding time series analyses of the relationship between economic stress and crime.

Despite the importance we assign to economic and social stress it is not our contention that they alone determine the level and spatial distribution of crime. Factors such as the availability and price of illegal drugs, the supply of criminal opportunities and incentives, the rate of contact between offenders and potential victims and the level and effectiveness of enforcement activity are also important (particularly at very low levels of spatial aggregation) even

though we do not discuss them here. They gain their importance, however, only once a community has a supply of motivated offenders. To put the matter another way, the level and distribution of crime may be shaped by a wide range of situational and circumstantial factors but this does not mean that we can take the supply of motivated offenders as a given. There are significant variations across space and time in the number of people willing to participate in crime. We contend, that, at the macro-spatial level, these variations are in large measure attributable to economic and social disadvantage.

Because we argue that economic and social stress exert their effects on crime by disrupting the parenting process, we are led to the conclusion that the kinds of economic and social support required to prevent crime are those directed at fostering better parenting. Economic pressures, changes in family structure, the spatial concentration of poverty and changes in geographical mobility in Western democratic countries over the last twenty or thirty years have combined to place enormous strain on families. An increasing number of parents or caregivers, already struggling on a limited income, must contend without the support of a partner or a close network of friends, neighbours and relatives. They must also often contend with policy makers who are concerned to discourage welfare dependence but do not yet see the importance of childcare as a means of reconciling the competing demands of parenting and work, or the fact that economic growth alone is insufficient to create structural disincentives to involvement in crime. We argue, in the conclusion of this book, that a resolution or amelioration of these problems is central to long-term crime prevention.

The structure of the book is as follows. In Chapter 1 we review theories and evidence bearing on the idea that poverty and unemployment affect crime by increasing the motivation of those affected to offend. In that review we highlight the empirical anomalies which are difficult to reconcile with this thesis. We also attempt to show why efforts to deal with these anomalies have been relatively unsuccessful. In Chapter 2 we review studies examining the effects of economic and social stress on parenting. We argue on the strength of this evidence that economic stress in the absence of social supports reduces the level of parental supervision, weakens the bond between parent and child and increases the risk of parental disciplinary practices which are erratic, harsh and inconsistent. In Chapter 3 we consider the interrelationship between economic stress, incompetent parenting, delinquent peer influence and participation in crime. We make a case for the hypothesis that economic stress, in the absence of social support, exerts its effects on crime by producing parenting practices which render juveniles more susceptible to delinquent peer influence.

In Chapters 4 and 5 we present the results of some individual and aggregate-level research we have conducted which confirm the importance of parenting and peer influence as mediators of the relationship between disadvantage and crime. In Chapter 6 we develop a simple mathematical model based on this hypothesis and attempt to show how it sheds light on the anomalies which have bedevilled previous attempts to explain the relationship between economic stress and crime. In Chapter 7 we compare the model to other explanations for the spatial distribution of crime and assess its ability to explain features of that distribution, such as the concordance between crime-prone neighbourhoods, ethnic heterogeneity, geographical mobility and family dissolution. We also highlight a key difference between the model and criminal opportunity theory in the level at which each explains the spatial distribution of crime. In Chapter 8 we discuss the implications of the preceding chapters for long-term crime prevention.

The ESIOM paradigm and its problems

The ESIOM paradigm

Scholarly interest in the question of how economic stress affects crime has a long pedigree in criminology. Quetelet (1831) and Guerry (1833) both set out to test the belief, widely held in nineteenth-century France, that crime and economic stress were positively related. They found, instead, that crime rates were higher in wealthier areas. Both attributed this result to the fact that wealthier areas provided more opportunities for crime than poorer areas. Guerry and Quetelet's observations about the relationship between crime-prone areas and wealth in nineteenth-century France may not have been mirrored by those taking observations in other countries at later points in time. The balance of evidence now clearly favours the hypothesis that economic stress and crime are highly correlated, at least where serious crime is concerned (Braithwaite 1979; Box 1987; Chiricos 1987; Belknap 1989). But they firmly established the relationship between crime and economic factors as an important observational domain for criminological theory. They also anticipated a debate about the relative importance of offender motivation and offending opportunity which is alive and well today.

The conventional approach to the problem of explaining the relationship between economic stress and crime has been to argue that economic stress – or stress, in one way or another – motivates otherwise law-abiding individuals to offend. For brevity, in what follows we refer to this as the economic stress-induced offender motivation (ESIOM) paradigm. In using this term we do not wish to be taken as suggesting that psychological stress mediates the relationship between economic factors and crime. The term 'economic stress' is used as Fowles and Merva (1996) use it, that is, merely as a shorthand way of

denoting the psychological condition or conditions which putatively mediate the link between factors such as unemployment (or poverty) and the individual motivation to offend. We could have followed Sampson and Wilson (1995: 45) in using the term 'materialist theory' to describe theories which maintain that conditions such as unemployment or poverty motivate individuals to offend. We prefer to use the term 'ESIOM paradigm' because some classical theories about the relationship between poverty and crime, while clearly motivational, are not necessarily materialist. Social opportunity theory, for example, is clearly a motivational theory of crime but its explanation for criminal behaviour could not be said to hinge on the assumption that offenders commit crimes for reasons of material gain.

Strain theory (Merton 1968) was the first and remains perhaps the best known of the ESIOM theories. According to this theory all societies define certain material goals as 'worth striving for' and specify certain norms which define the legitimate means available to achieve these goals. Economically disadvantaged persons, however, experience a significant gap or disjunction between their socially inculcated aspirations and the legitimate means available to achieve them. This disjunction, according to strain theory, increases the likelihood of involvement in crime. This explanation makes sense of the association between economic stress and acquisitive crime because such crime can be viewed as a means of fulfilling material aspirations. On the other hand it makes somewhat less sense of evidence linking economic stress to non-acquisitive crime. It also leaves the mechanism by which the hypothesised 'disjunction' achieves its criminogenic effects within an individual entirely unclear. In other words, the theory offers no insight into why some economically disadvantaged individuals become involved in crime while others do not.

A somewhat more wide-ranging treatment of the strain hypothesis is the social opportunity theory put forward by Cloward and Ohlin (1960). They argued that delinquency emerges more as an act of rebellion against blocked social opportunities rather than as a means of achieving culturally approved goals. According to Cloward and Ohlin, structural blockages of social opportunity have the effect of driving youths into delinquent gangs as a means of conferring the social status on themselves unobtainable from conventional society. Mere lack of access to legitimate income-earning activities, however, is not sufficient to produce crime. The theory suggests that access to illegitimate opportunities must also be available. Since participation in any form of illegitimate activity is consonant with the desire to rebel against conventional social values, Cloward and Ohlin's theory gives rise to the possibility that economic stress may have just as strong an effect on non-acquisitive crime as on acquisitive property crime. Like strain theory, however, social opportunity

theory says little about why some disadvantaged juveniles become involved in crime while others do not. One might surmise that when disadvantaged individuals do not involve themselves in crime they either have not experienced a blockage of legitimate opportunities and/or do not have access to illegitimate opportunities. But the theory offers no insight into why this occurs and evidence supporting this proposition is nowhere presented.

The theory of crime put forward by Cohen (1955) offers one solution to this problem. Cohen argued that lower-class socialisation equips lower-class boys less adequately than their middle-class counterparts for success in school. The result, according to Cohen, is a sense of personal failure reinforced by stigmatisation at the hands of teachers and more successful students. The rest of Cohen's theory essentially follows the argument pursued by Cloward and Ohlin. The loss of social status engendered by school failure causes juveniles who have done poorly at school to band together. By this means they set up their own social status system, distinguished by the fact of its rejection of conventional social values. The strength of Cohen's theory is that the mechanism by which economic stress achieves its effects – poor school performance – has been explicitly identified. Moreover it is a mechanism whose existence, as Braithwaite (1979) points out, is well-supported by empirical evidence. Juveniles from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to do poorly at school. Poor school performance is universally found to be highly correlated with juvenile involvement in crime. Since not all economically disadvantaged juveniles do poorly at school, the theory is able to furnish at least some explanation for the fact that not all economically disadvantaged juveniles turn to crime.

Although most theories of the relationship between economic stress and crime appeal to sociological notions there are some notable exceptions. Economic theories of crime offer yet a third perspective on the way in which economic stress motivates individuals to offend. The best known economic theory of crime is that formulated by Becker (1968). He rejected the need for any special set of concepts to explain criminal as opposed to non-criminal forms of human behaviour. Instead, he argued, individuals allocate their time between legitimate and illegitimate activities in proportions which result in equal expected utility. The expected utility of crime is determined by the perceived risks, costs and benefits associated with it. The benefits of crime in Becker's theory can be monetary benefits, benefits in kind or intangible benefits like social status. The costs of crime include not only the penalties imposed on offenders but also opportunity costs, that is, benefits foregone as a result of involvement in crime (e.g. income from legitimate activities). Becker argued, not unreasonably, that the opportunity costs of involvement in crime