

Poverty, Inequality and the Social Causes of Crime: A Study between United States and Europe

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Abstract: *Crime can be defined in many ways, most simply as the breach of the rules that govern society. There are numerous variables related to crime. These include: poverty levels; family stability; individual and societal health; social and cultural background; along with geographic, demographic and political considerations. It is further argued that there exists a clear correlation between crime rates and inequality. This paper will examine and explain the main reasons behind the current trends in increasing crime rates in the United States and Europe and explore possible solutions to combat these trends.*

Keywords: Crime, Society, Poverty, Inequality, Prison

1. Introduction

Throughout history, researchers have tried to explain what causes the unusual social behaviour that contributes to crime. Efforts to control “bad” behavior go back to the first recorded code of law in human history known as ‘Babylon's Code of Hammurabi’ (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016). The code provided laws and punishment on citizens based on their social status and gender (Jarus, 2013). Centuries later, the penal law of ancient communities did not deal with crimes but with wrongs (Cotran and Rubin, 1970, p 1-64) while in the 17th century, Europeans regarded crime and sin in a similar way and punish it accordingly (Jones and Johnstone, 2015).

The Belgian statistician, Adolphe Quetelet, looked at the relationship between demographics and crime rates and identified variables including age, gender, education and socioeconomic status. Quetelet found that “the majority of crimes were committed by under educated people, the poor and younger males. He demonstrated that the highest rates of crime occurred in wealthy areas that were physically closer to poorer regions, which suggested that poorer individuals would go to wealthier areas to commit crimes” (Roufa, 2015).

A great deal of research has been conducted into the biological and psychological causes of criminal behavior. Italian Psychiatrist, Cesare Lombroso, highlighted this in the late 1800s in the theory known as the “born criminal” where he suggested that criminals are distinguished from non-criminals by multiple physical anomalies such as a sloping forehead, ears of unusual size, asymmetry of the face, prognathism, excessive length of arms, asymmetry of the cranium. Lombroso discovered that certain physical attributes were shared amongst criminals which led him to believe that there is a biological and hereditary element that contributes to an individual's potential to commit crime (Mason, 2015). Others, such as American criminologist, Edwin Sutherland argued that criminal behavior is learned not inherited and is due to factors arising from socialization and or the learning process (Krohn, 2012).

In the 1930s and 1940s, researchers belonging to the “Chicago School” of thought influenced research across the

nation and abroad. These researchers supposed criminals were ordinary people of all racial backgrounds who were negatively affected by poverty and social insecurity within their own neighborhoods (Encyclopedia, 1955).

More recently, many schools of thought have considered the factors involved in deviant behavior, each arriving at different conclusions about how best to approach such issues (Roufa, 2016). Theories into the biological and environmental causes of crime have evolved to complement each other and have formed what is today considered the discipline of modern criminology, which recognizes both internal and external factors that contribute to the causes of crime (Krohn, 2012). Further it is argued that many factors contribute to crime, including a simple desire for money, feelings of indignation, jealousy or revenge, family circumstances, and the hunger for control (Krohn, 2012).

This is a wide but also complex topic and the relationship between discrimination, inequality and poverty is evident in developed as well as in developing countries. The United Nations Committee on Racial Discrimination has recognized that in the United States “racial, ethnic, and national minorities, especially Latino and African American persons, are disproportionately concentrated in poor residential areas characterized by sub-standard housing conditions, limited employment opportunities, inadequate access to health care facilities, under-resourced schools, and high exposure to crime and violence” (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

2. Poverty and Family Circumstances

The United Nations classifies crime as being high on the list of difficulties impeding a country's development. This means that “governments trying to deal with poverty often also have to face issues of crime as they try to develop their country's economy and society” (Beetseh, 2014). Thus, “poverty contributes to robbery because people may find it easier or quicker to steal than to go through the process of finding employment and keeping a job” (Taylor, 2000). It is argued that some crimes continue for generations in families, while others are planned for moral response (London, 2014, p 1-74).

When people are unemployed and homeless, social unrest may take over and lead to increases in crime. When people have no money to buy necessities, they may be forced to turn to theft in order to survive. Homelessness and high crime rates affect the people of a country and can create many problems within society (Office, 2014). In Europe, unemployment in general has been on the rise since 2008, due to the economic crisis that caused bankruptcy and financial difficulties for many employers and consequently a rise in the unemployment rates (Eurostat, 2016). In Europe in September 2016, 4.125 million young persons (under 25) were unemployed in the EU-28, constituting 18.2% of that age group compared to 10.8% in the United States where the highest rates were recorded in Spain with 42.6% (Eurostat, 2016).

It is clear that poverty has far-reaching effects on people with a clear connection between poverty and crime. From 1975 to 1995 in Europe, scholars noticed that unemployment amongst uneducated youth spurred a massive increase in theft and violence. In particular in France, “the crime rate soared like never before” (Terms, 2016). Once unemployment is reduced the rates of crimes inevitably decrease. It must be recognized, however, that many wealthier countries also suffer from high crime rates. For example, Qatar was considered the richest country in 2016 where the highest level of crime in Qatar is for homes broken into and theft with 47.54%. The level of crime in Qatar is 20.41% with a ranking of 112 in the world while Lebanon and United States were respectively 45 and 46. It is surprising that Lebanon being a small country have 49.18% of crime which is considerably high compared to the United States having 48.68% (Numbeo, 2016). It should also be noted that crimes are not only committed by those living in poverty but also by the rich (Matthews, 2014).

A further cause can be found in dysfunctional family life and childhood, which can lead to a life of crime. Family violence and other issues are also related to crime in many ways (Inferisx, 2012). People who are neglected or abused by their families can be easily drawn to criminal activity. According to Wright and Wright (1994), a child with criminal parents faces a greater likelihood of becoming a delinquent than children with law-abiding parents. However, this appears to be related to poor supervision rather than criminality (Wright and Wright, 1994). This means that negative family characteristics, such as poor parental supervision of children, are often studied as risk factors for future delinquency or crime. Therefore, children who come from such homes are believed to be at greater risk or more likely to commit offences than children who do not (Petrosino, Derzon, and Lavenberg, 2009, p 108–132). Research findings indicate that rates of delinquency and crime are higher in mother-only families with dependent children than in two-parent families (Wright and Wright, 1994) which typically leads to a 17% increase in juvenile crime (Fagan, 1995).

Although “the portrayed segregation against immigrants in France which roots back a few decades before the 1990s, the ‘first wave’ [of immigrants] has rarely shown such an outburst of violence” (Poverty and crime, 2015). In theory, the main difference between first generation immigrants and

their children is that the children have spent much more time at school. Research has often concluded that tends to reduce violent crime (Ward, 2015).

3. Race Ethnicity and Crime

It is recognized that some migrants and refugees were involved in the attacks that struck Europe, specifically France, England, Germany and Belgium, in 2016. They were not only terrorist attacks but also sexual attacks. As Robert Fico, the Prime Minister of Slovakia, said to the Telegraph, “there was a clear link between sex attacks and the influx of refugees that has swept through Europe from the failed states of Syria and North Africa” (Foster, 2016). A majority of these refugees have no education and come from different cultures where they show little respect for Western rules. The French criminologist, Xavier Raufer, in a response to an article published in France2 about the supposed relationship between immigration and delinquency, stated “70% of ‘street crimes’ [are] committed by immigrants or descendants of immigrants” (Gendron and Deborde, 2014). The relationship between crime and ethnicity was also noted by the director of the French National Center for Scientific Research (NCSR) Sebastian Roché who stated in his survey: *Faut-il voir dans les populations d’origine étrangère une explication de l’existence de ces noyaux suractifs ?* “The fact of having both parents born abroad is associated to more frequent crime, and this is somewhat true when teens have North African origin” (Gendron and Deborde, 2014). He concluded in his survey that 2/3 of juvenile delinquents are from foreign origins.

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97) self-reported data shows that, by age 18, around 22% of white males had been arrested at least once. The figures for Hispanics and blacks were 26% and 30% respectively (Brame et al, 2012, p 21–27). By age 23, the respective figures were 38%, 44% and 49% (Brame et al, 2012). Men are arrested at higher rates than women, and the rate of arrest differs by race for men but not for women (Brame et al, 2014). In a study based on the NLSY97, Hjalmarsson (2008) found that incarceration reduces the probability of high school completion what was recently explained according to a 2016 analysis of federal data by the U.S. Education Department indicating that state and local spending on incarceration has grown three times as much as spending on public education since 1980 (Brown and Douglas-Gabriel, 2016). This will take us back to the same cycle of no education, unemployment and poverty leading to a life of crime.

4. Inequality and Race

When we talk about inequality we can describe it using various synonyms for instance: disaccord, disagreement, disproportion, dissimilarity, distinction, divergence, incompatibility, inconsistency, injustice, irregularity, partiality, prejudice, unbalance, unconformity, unfairness, unlikeness and variation.

In recent years a variety of factors have contributed to the inability to comply with an increasingly well-developed legal framework and this has created a class of materially

disadvantaged claimants whose rights have been either ignored or violated, and who feel they must find a way to engage the enforcement structures of the state (Brinks, 2008). The feeling of disadvantage and unfairness leads the weak to seek compensation and satisfaction by any means, including the committing of crimes against both poor and rich (Fajnzylber, Lederman, and Loayza, 2002, p 1–39).

In the 1990s, the interest in cross-country studies awakened, in part because of the appearance of internationally comparable data sets on national income and production (Summers and Heston, 1991, p 327), income inequality (Deininger and Squire, 1996, p 565–591) and crime rates (Fajnzylber, Lederman, and Loayza, 2002). One such cross-country study found that income inequality, as measured by the Gini index is an important factor that drives violent crime rates across countries and over time (Fajnzylber, Lederman, and Loayza, 2002).

Inequality cannot be defined solely by income and is also related to gender, religion, race, color, age, etc. There are some 60 million people from ethnic and religious minorities living in the European Union, representing roughly 12% of the total EU population (Debating Europe, 2016). In the United States, the 2010 census indicated that African Americans constituted only 13% of the population, where as 40% of all people behind bars were African American (House, 2015). Statistics from 2014, produced by the French National Institute of High Studies of Security and Justice (INHESJ), revealed that 24% of robberies in France were committed by foreign citizens, an increase from 12.1% in 2008 (Rizk, 2016). The major nationalities were Romania & Balkans with 9.1%, North Africa 7.1% and 4.8% for others nationality (Rizk, 2016). Recently a report by German Police published in Reuters noted that: “Migrants in Germany committed or tried to commit some 69,000 crimes in the first quarter of 2016” (Martin and Heinrich, 2016). This figure will no doubt increase, especially with the recent influx of refugees entering Europe from war torn Middle Eastern countries.

As countries are facing issues related to immigration, governments need to be aware that inequality constitutes a major factor in crime. Researchers have found that “racial discrimination is positively associated with increased crime and note it persists and profoundly affects physical and mental health, life chances and routine situations of everyday life for racial minorities (African Americans) in the United States” (Burt, Simons, and Gibbons, 2012, p 648–677). It has been reported that individuals experiencing racial discrimination are more likely to commit crime and that such discrimination can cause distress, have depressive effects, cause disengagement from social norms and can augment hostile views and behavior (Burt, Simons, and Gibbons, 2012). That having been said, there is significant variation in individual offending, even in the most highly disadvantaged and segregated communities.

The Human Rights Watch has noted that “ethnic minorities have been disproportionately represented in the US criminal justice system and that racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to experience stigma and legal discrimination in

employment, housing, education, public benefits, jury service, and the right to vote” (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

5. Solutions

High levels of armed violence and insecurity resulting from crime have a destructive impact on a country’s development, affecting economic growth and often resulting in long standing grievances that can last for generations (United Nations Development Programme, 2016). The first and most obvious solution to increasing crime would be to eradicate poverty in all its forms. However, this remains one of the challenges facing humanity because certain countries suffer extreme poverty and are becoming more violent. It is, therefore, imperative that we act now to find solutions and identify all the factors responsible for crime (Larsson, 2015).

According to the United Nations Development Programme, the number of people living in extreme poverty (where people live on less than US\$1.25 a day) dropped by more than half between 1990 and 2015, from 1.9 billion to 836 million (United Nations Development Programme, 2016). By improving global poverty, countries will benefit and could develop into strong global presences with healthy economies (Roufa, 2016). The United Nations is working successfully but governments also need to take leading roles by creating and enabling an environment to generate productive employment opportunities for the poor.

Governments can formulate strategies focused on crime prevention and economic development while avoiding repressive policies. If crime is considered a rational response to income inequality, governments can best fight it through social services and wealth redistribution, not through arrests and incarceration. In addition, public policies that aim to restructure the labour market in order to tackle basic unemployment have a “clear-cut (positive)” impact on income levels and economic growth (Esmer and Laughlin, 2016). Decreasing unemployment remains fundamental to breaking the cycle of poverty and crime and restoring some social conformity (Larsson, 2015).

Furthermore, governments can address economic inequality where income inequalities develop pockets of poverty and crime heavily concentrated in the same “ghettos”, not only between but also within ethnic groups (Poverty and crime, 2015). They can also provide a global plan of high quality childcare that is affordable for all based on an efficient welfare system (Perry, 2016). Of course, effectively discouraging crime with punishment should make criminal behavior less attractive and more risky.

Below are strategies that address the issues considered in this paper: -

- Implement more localized programmes - The European Union began with Youth programmes in the late 80s, which focused on wellbeing. These should continue until 2018 to provide more equal opportunities for young people in education and in the labor market and to encourage citizen participation in society (Dunne et al 2014). For example, Ohio’s youth prison system was a model in diverting juveniles to lower-cost community programmes instead of prison: “From 1997 to 2013,

Ohio's juvenile justice system has undergone important reforms that have led to a significant decline of 80% of young people sent to prison''(The Associate Press, 2015). As, Franklin County Juvenile Court Judge, Elizabeth Gill, stated "statistics show that spending even one night in a juvenile-detention centre reduces a youth's chance of graduating from high school by 50%" (The Associate Press, 2015).

- Provide education in prisons in order to avoid re-offending. For example, in New York 40% of all inmates who are released end up back in prison within three years. Providing criminals with real diplomas is extremely effective in helping to integrate inmates back into society and reducing recidivism. A study of Missouri's prisoners showed that re-incarceration rates "were nearly cut in half for former inmates with a full-time job compared to similar inmates who are unemployed" where \$2.7 Billion/year could be saved (Skorton and Altschuler, 2013).
- Establish a modern police force. Once viewed as the duty and responsibility of every citizen, the importance of maintaining safe and secure communities has become a function of the government. The concept of policing in society has changed significantly over the centuries (Roufa, 2015).
- Help ex-offenders find secure, living-wage employment. Securing a well-paid job can help returning prisoners remain crime-free once they go back to their communities. Studies have found that the more former prisoners earned during the first two months following their release, the lower their chances of returning to prison. Those who earned over \$10 an hour, for example, were half as likely to return to prison as those whose hourly wages were less than \$7 (La Vigne and Rao 2013).
- Treat violence as a public health concern by introducing campaigns and technology to reach every child and family. Further development of such tools to make sure that everybody feels important and cared for through parenting interventions, family interventions, wellbeing campaigns, and early childhood education(Larsson, 2015). The risk factors for becoming involved in criminality also need to be clearly identified and addressed with a treatment plan that involves the family and community (Larsson, 2015).

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