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Sociological Analysis

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The Effects of Family Income, Geography, and Structure on Juvenile Crime

This paper looks to explore the effect that family income, geography, and structure have on juvenile crime. These three categories have all been theorized and researched, which will help to provide a backbone for this paper. Though there are many other factors that have been linked to juvenile crime, I will focus only on these three.

The importance of the study of juvenile crime to sociology is enormous. The more we as a society know about the risk factors associated with juvenile crime, the better we will be able to prevent it. As shown by the following numbers, juvenile delinquency is a big social problem in our nation. The 10-24 age bracket accounts for only 21.5 percent of the population but 46.3 percent of all arrests. Crime peaks at age 17 or 18 and then declines, especially beyond young adulthood (Barkan 2006). According to these statistics youths are disproportionately committing crimes (Barkan 2006); while they should only be accounting for one fourth of all arrests they account for almost half. The fact that crime peaks around age 17 or 18 supports the idea that family has an effect on the way a child acts because around 18 years old is when a child normally leaves the home. This is the general trend for all types of crime except white collar crime which is primarily committed by an older age class due to the high social class and professional position one needs to be in.

In the study of juvenile crime and delinquency there are a plethora of theories used to explain why one may commit a crime. I will use a few of these theories to explain how family

factors may have an effect on juvenile crime. They are Merton's anomie theory, Hirschi's social control theory, and the Chicago school's social disorganization theory.

Merton's anomie theory says that every society has goals and means to reach those goals. This can be a problem, if the goals cannot be reached or the means to the goals are not attainable which may result in stress or anomie (Barkan 2006). When one can no longer handle trying to achieve a seemingly unachievable goal they may turn to crime as an alternative.

Hirschi's social control theory on the other hand attributes crime to a person's bonds to certain things. According to Binder (2001) Hirschi's social control theory states that a person is less likely to choose crime if they have strong social bonds. It states that schools train for social adjustment, peers typically advance ideas of success and conventional behavior, and parents (even parents who themselves play fast and loose with the rules) seek to inculcate law-abiding habits in their children. The theory says that to the extent that a youngster fails to become attached to the control agencies of society (for instance, the families and the schools), the youngster's chances of engaging in delinquency are increased. (Binder, Geis, & Bruce, 2001)

The third theory I use in my paper is the Chicago school's social disorganization theory. This theory attributes crime to a breakdown of institutions, such as family, school, church, and the like, and relationships with people in those institutions. These two things work as policing guides and if they are absent then norms and rules may be broken.

In looking at the research and these theories I will first try to find out whether high or low income affects juvenile crime. Second try to find out if the type of area one lives in effects juvenile crime, and lastly, see if living in a single parent family as opposed to a two parent family has an increased effect on juvenile crime. In this paper I will work to prove that having a

lower income, living in a lower class area, and being in a single parent family will lead to an increase in juvenile crime.

Income

Income is one factor that has an effect on juvenile crime and is supported by Merton's strain theory. In John Clark's (1962) study he looked to see if the income of families in certain communities impacted juvenile crime. He chose four different communities with four different compositions; they were industrial city, lower urban, rural farm, and upper urban. The groups are just as they sound, the industrial city group is a community made up of families where most fathers have blue collar jobs in local industries and services and earn a very low income. The lower urban community is made up of families living in a crowded area who earn a low income, with fathers who work in construction, as janitors, clean-up men and other similar jobs. The rural farm community is made up of mostly farmers, who make low to medium income, and live in rural areas. The upper urban community is made of families who earn a high income, with a majority of the fathers holding high-level executive or professional jobs. This community is located in a very wealthy suburb. What Clark found was that adolescents in the communities with the highest risk of juvenile crime also had the lowest incomes, the industrial city and lower urban communities. The upper urban group which had the highest income committed the least amount of crime, which helps to demonstrate that the lower the income the more crime and the higher the income the less crime (Clark, 1962).

A theory that connects to Clark's study is Robert K. Merton's strain (anomie) theory. As I stated in the background, strain theory is when goals cannot be achieved which leads to stress and possibly results in crime. If a family is not well off, or a child feels that they do not have

enough money or material things to be where they want or to achieve societies ascribed goals, they may turn to crime. They may decide crime is the best option because they do not think there is any other way to get the money or things they want and they therefore feel strain.

While the above study and theory reinforce my hypothesis, Anderson's 2002 study on the effects of income refutes it. Anderson found that three types of crime; violent offenses, heavy drinking, and marijuana use were more common among juveniles with higher income. Heavy drinking and marijuana use are two offenses that having more money would be helpful for. Anderson explains that the possession of spending money implies freedom and opportunities for deviance among youth. Income also can be used more directly for deviant behavior, such as to purchase drugs, alcohol, or the tools used to commit other offenses. Having money, for example, youth may decide individually or collectively to put it toward alcohol, either buying the alcohol from an undiscerning store clerk or paying an added "tax" to adults who agree to make purchases for them. Alternatively, youth may buy marijuana and other drugs sold by kids at school, or they may use their money to buy items initially intended for one purpose (e.g., tools to repair their cars, weapons for hunting or defense) but eventually used in the commission of delinquency (Anderson&Hughes, 2009).

Income and geography in relation to juvenile crime are two interrelated topics, often when one is from a low income family they may also live in an area that is rundown and not very well kept. This type of area is often a breeding ground for juvenile crime. Even though I found contradicting research about income, there was only a small amount of research on a select number of crimes that refuted my thesis. Therefore backed up by more research and covering a broader range of crimes lower income is still more likely to lead to an increase in juvenile crime.

Geography

Income showed how money can affect juvenile crime, whereas in this section geography will show how location and surroundings affect juvenile crime. Geography has an effect on juvenile crime because crime is more prevalent in certain areas and one may be exposed to it more depending on their location. Clark's (1962) study which was talked about earlier also relates to geography. Often when one is from a lower income family, they also live in a less nice area as opposed to those with higher income who usually live in ritzier, nicer areas. When you think about it, the fact that Clark found more crime committed in the industrial city and lower urban communities, is not a surprising finding, considering the area the youths live in. Living in an industrial city or a lower urban area one would be exposed to more stress from bad living conditions and be exposed to more opportunities for crime. The rural farm community which was low income in a rural area connects income and geography. The rural farm community had a low income but because of their geography the crime rate was lower than the other two low income communities. This is because in the rural farm area crime opportunities and resources are not as readily available as in the high crime areas (Clark, 1962).

Family Structure

Even though family income and geography have a significant impact on juvenile crime and delinquency, the factor I found most connected to an increase in juvenile crime was family structure. After reading, researching, and synthesizing information on family structure and its relationship to juvenile crime, I can confidently conclude that single parent families have the greatest risk for juvenile delinquency. Not only are those kids from single parent family homes at risk, but according to Anderson (2002) students attending school where a high proportion of

students live with only one parent are at significantly higher risk for person delinquency than those attending school where a low proportion of students live with only one parent, and they were somewhat more at risk for committing status offenses. In Anderson's study she researched three different types of juvenile crime; person offenses, status offenses, and property offenses. While she found that a high proportion of single parent families led to more person and status offenses, she also found that the higher proportion did not affect property offenses. Relating this to a larger scale, it was found that the higher the percentage of single parent families at the city or the neighbourhood level, the more adolescents in that particular ecological context engage in delinquent behavior (Weijters et al. 2009). And depending on one's income or the area that they are living in paired with a high percent of single parent families could lead to an even greater increase in juvenile crime.

While I expected single parent families to have a higher level of juvenile crime, finding out that just being surrounded by a high proportion of kids who are from single parent families regardless of your own home situation was surprising. Even though it was surprising it also made sense according to Travis Hirschi's social control theory. Applied to family structure Hirschi's social control theory illustrates why being in a single parent family or around single parent families can lead to an increased risk for juvenile crime. Crime in two parent families is increased by weak bonds; if these weak bonds are to the family then there may be a lack of law-abiding behavior displayed by those juveniles. Now in a single parent family there would not be as much chance for attachment to the parents (because there would only be one parent) and law abiding behavior values, leading to an even greater chance for delinquency. And if those juveniles are displaying delinquent behavior they may pull other kids into it with them, even if those kids are not from single parent families (Anderson 2002).

Why juvenile crime is more prevalent when single parent families are involved may also be because they are less effective in controlling the behaviour of the adolescents living in these ecological surroundings (Weijters et al. 2009). There is less supervision than compared to two parent homes. This idea brings up the theory of social disorganization, the theory that attributes crime to a breakdown of institutions, such as family, school, church, and the like, and relationships with people in those institutions. These two things work as policing guides and if they are absent then norms and rules may be broken. Neighborhoods with weak social networks and low levels of collective efficacy typically lack the resources, social support, and informal social controls that are essential for healthy youth development. Consequently, youth growing up in such neighborhoods may develop weakened social bonds to conventional society (Kingston et al. 2009). Because of these weak social bonds and lack of community policing, disorganization occurs, which according to Kingston (2009) may foster the existence of delinquent opportunity structures, including exposure to delinquent peer groups. For youth with weak bonds to conventional society, the social reinforcement provided by the delinquent peer group increases the likelihood of sustained delinquent behavior. Without strong ties to a family system, it may be hard for youth to stay away from a negative group pulling them in. They may feel like this is the only “family” they can be a part of. Due to the weak social bonds and disorganization that occurs in juveniles from or around single parent families an increase in juvenile crime often occurs.

Conclusion

My thesis which stated that having a lower income, living in a lower class area, and being in a single parent family will lead to an increase in juvenile crime has been supported in this paper. Through the use of research and explanation I have shown that low income (with some

varying results), low class areas, and single parent families all lead to an increase in juvenile crime. Merton's anomie theory, Hirschi's social control theory, and the Chicago school's social disorganization theory all helped to reinforce my argument and support my thesis. With the information presented in this paper we as sociologist and people can better grasp what is causing juvenile crime and work to prevent it, as it is a social problem. We can use this information to improve and start programs to help juveniles at risk for crime. We can also help the families of the juveniles which may be more effective because they are at the center of most of these causes.

Future Research

While I found a lot of research done on single parent families, there was not much else on other types of family structures so a future research idea could be: how do other types of family structures such as having gay parents or one biological parent and one step parent affect juvenile crime? Another idea would be to look at the effect race has on any of my three variables. For example: do single white parent families and single black parent families have different affects on juvenile crime and delinquency?

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