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Social Disadvantage, Crime and Punishment

Tim Newburn¹

Criminologists have long assumed that socio-economic conditions and social inequality play an important role both in why particular individuals become involved in criminal activity and in determining levels of crime within particular societies. The huge rises in crime that occurred from the 1950s to the early 1990s ended any easy assumptions about rising prosperity inevitably leading to falls in crime, and the crime decline in recent years has similarly put paid to the idea of any simple connection between economic crises and crime levels. Criminological theory, of various stripes, has focused on social disadvantage as central to explanation – not least as a consequence of the fact that criminal justice systems are focused primarily on the crimes of the disadvantaged rather than the ‘crimes’ of the socially privileged. Indeed, as Reiner (2007: 341) notes, the etymology of the terms ‘villain’ and ‘rogue’ – the former deriving from the medieval French for peasant and the latter from the Latin for beggar – is an indicator of the fact that this is an age-old association. In what follows I explore some of the complex associations between crime, punishment and various manifestations of social (dis)advantage. The chapter has four broad questions at its heart. First, how, and in what ways, do economic conditions affect levels of crime? Are, for example, unemployment levels or economic upturns or downturns linked to changing levels and patterns of crime? Second, and relatedly, what is the relationship between social inequality and crime rates? Does rising social inequality inevitably lead to rising crime, and vice versa? Third, in what ways are material and social disadvantage related to patterns of offending and victimisation? Finally, does the operation of the criminal justice and penal systems affect social inequality?

Economic conditions and crime

There is by now a quite considerable econometric literature on the relationship between prevailing economic conditions and crime. What one quickly discovers in this field, however, is that the relationships between income, wealth, crime and victimisation, though showing some fairly clear patterns, are far from straightforward. This can be illustrated, for example, by looking at property crime risks at the household level, and rates of property crime at the national level. First, as we will see below, the risk of burglary varies inversely with household income (Rosenfeld and Messner, 2013). That is to say, domestic burglary rates are substantially higher in poorer households. However, at the national level rates of burglary tend to increase according to the wealth, as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Why would this be the case? The simplest answer to this conundrum is most likely that at the national level a measure like GDP is broadly indicative of the level of criminal *opportunities* (how much there is of value to steal), whereas at the household level, patterns of burglary are determined by other factors including the proximity of people with the *motivation* to want to steal and the presence or absence of basic security measures.

In one of the earliest reviews, Box (1987) examined 50 major econometric studies of the relationship between economic conditions and crime. He found that slightly under two thirds appeared to show a positive relationship between rising unemployment and crime, the remainder showing the reverse. Even this far from overwhelming result was further diminished by doubts about the robustness of the data being used in many of the studies and by the fact that the positive relationships uncovered were generally weak.

¹ I am grateful to Coretta Phillips, for comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

Cantor and Land (1985), while confirming a generally weak relationship between unemployment and crime argue that some of the confusion in this field derives from a failure to distinguish two separate causal links: a *positive* motivational relationship (unemployment increases the attractiveness of certain forms of crime) and a *negative* opportunity effect (unemployment keeps people at home and increases *guardianship* and also reduces the availability of goods through reduced consumption). As a consequence they argue that the relationship between unemployment rates and crime levels can be positive, negative or null depending on the crime type under consideration. Hale and Sabbagh (1991), by contrast, found a significant positive relationship with burglary, theft and robbery.

Dissatisfaction with unemployment as a measure – and increasing doubts about unemployment data – led scholars to begin to consider the relationship between macroeconomic changes and crime levels in a variety of different ways. In this regard, and building on Cantor and Land's work, Arvanites and Defina (2006), examined the impact of business cycles on levels of street crime. In particular, using inflation-adjusted, per capita gross state product as their measure, they argue that the strong economy in the United States in the 1990s reduced the number of property crimes in that period, all consistent with a motivation effect rather than an opportunity effect and a 'degree of social strain and control' (2006: 161). Similar results were found by Rosenfeld and Fornango (2007) who found that 'consumer sentiment' was significantly related to regional property crime trends and, in parallel, Rosenfeld's (2009) study of acquisitive crime and homicide rates between 1970 and 2006 found that collective perceptions of economic conditions affect acquisitive crime – such as motor theft, robbery and burglary - and that this, indirectly, affects homicide rates.

That the very substantial declines in crime that appear to have been underway for at least two decades appear not to have been reversed by the financial crisis of recent times, raises interesting questions about the relationship between crime and the economy. Intriguingly, while there is a growing body of work that sheds some light on the general economic underpinnings of crime trends, the continued crime drop remains something of a mystery. Research by Field (1990) argued that the relationship between property crime levels and consumption are much stronger than that between property crime and unemployment. He found that rates of property crime growth were closely linked to economic growth and, more particularly, when consumption grew quickly, property crime growth tended to slow down or reverse. The opposite, he argued, was true during economic recessions. Field's explanation for this general trend focused on motivation rather than opportunity, increases in consumption being argued to reflect the declining attractiveness of crime for gain. Field's conclusions were largely restricted to short-term changes in levels of property crime. Subsequently, Pyle and Deadman (1994) have pointed to the likelihood of longer-term relationships between property crime levels and economic factors such as consumption levels and GDP, but have been strongly criticised by Hale (1998) whose own analysis reasserted that significant relationships existed between unemployment and crime in the short-run and that, in particular, changes in unemployment levels were significantly and positively related to changes in burglary, theft and robbery rates. Hale (1998) concludes that consumption appears to have a dual role in explaining both trends and changes in property crime, with an explanation that focuses on both opportunity and motivation. If we accept the arguments of routine activities and opportunity theorists (for example Felson, 1995) that for a crime to occur there must be three elements present – a motivated offender, a suitable target and a lack of guardianship – then, as Hale puts it:

...the *level* of personal consumption measures the increasing availability of targets in the long term, the opportunity effect, whilst *changes* in the level of consumption capture the impact of the business cycle upon the numbers of offenders, the motivation effect. (1998: 696)

In a somewhat similar vein, and revising his earlier conclusions, in a follow-up study by Field argued that levels of theft and burglary were actually linked to the stock of crime opportunities “represented by the sum of real consumers’ expenditure in the each of the last four years” (Field, 1990). For every one per cent increase in the stock of opportunities, he calculated, burglary and theft were likely to increase by about two per cent.

There remains what Chiricos (1987) a ‘consensus of doubt’ about the relationship between unemployment and crime. Whilst there have been some interesting studies focusing on more particular economic measures such as consumption, this is a general field in which clear relationships remain hard to detect. Moreover, criminologists have been far less preoccupied with the economic aspects of crime than with biological, psychological and sociological studies of, or reflections on, the causes of crime. The sociological criminology that became increasingly dominant in the second half of the twentieth century has taken a broadly social democratic perspective on crime, ‘seeing it as shaped by social deprivation and inequality’ (Reiner, 2006: 28). The next step is to consider some of the evidence for such a relationship.

Social inequality and crime rates

A range of studies has pointed to a relationship between economic inequality and crime (both violent and property crime), within and across countries (Kelly, 2000; Demombynes and Ozler, 2005). Such studies have tended to use income inequality as their primary measure. Blau and Blau (1982), studying 125 US metropolitan areas found a strong relationship between economic inequality and violent crime, but once economic inequality was controlled for, poverty exerted no influence on rates of criminal violence. Nevertheless, writing in the early 1990s, Hsieh and Pugh said that at that point there was ‘a growing consensus that resource deprivation in general is an underlying cause of violent crime’ (1993: 182). More recently, work by Fajnzylber et al (1998, 2002a, 2002b) found what appears to be a strong relationship between income inequality and rates of both homicide and robbery or violent theft (see also Messner and Rosenfeld, 1997). A study by Elgar and Aitken (2011) found a strong association between income inequality and international variations in homicide levels, and linked this to the lower levels of interpersonal trust they identified in societies characterised by relatively high income-inequality. Such work perhaps speaks most directly to some of the Chicago School-influenced criminological theory which points to social organisation, population turnover and the nature and condition of local neighbourhoods as key determinants of differential levels of violence (Shaw and McKay, 1942; Sampson and Wilson, 1995; Sampson et al, 2005). Their argument finds some support from Kennedy et al (1998: 15) whose study shows that the strong relationship between income inequality and the incidence of homicide and other violent crimes may be attributable to the ‘depletion of social capital’ (see Chapter 4, this volume).

Much of the early work in this field was much influenced by Gary Becker’s (1968) economic theory, essentially a rational choice approach positing that growing inequality is likely to lead to more crime as a consequence of the changing balance between the costs and anticipated benefits of such activity. Such a theory has always appeared more obviously suited to explaining acquisitive crime and, indeed, work by a number of authors has cast doubt on its ability to explain patterns of violent crime (for example, Neumayer 2003, 2005). Kelly (2000) found violent crime to be little influenced by poverty, but strongly influenced by inequality, whereas inequality had little impact on property crime but that poverty did. As a consequence he suggests that Becker’s economic theory is not especially helpful here and argues that strain theory (focusing on the gap between social approved goals and the availability of legitimate opportunities for

achieving them), and varieties of control theory (focusing on the importance of weak family and community ties) are likely to be more helpful.

In the UK, using data from police force areas, Machin and Meghir (2004) found that relative falls in the wages of low-wage workers between 1975 and 1996 led to increases in crime, particularly vehicle and property crime. On this basis they argue that it may be the nature of the low-wage labour market that exerts a greater effect on crime rates than levels of unemployment. Nilsson's (2004) work in Sweden, while finding a similar link between an increase in the proportion of the population on low incomes was associated with higher rates of property crime, also found that higher levels of unemployment tended to be linked with increases in overall crime, auto thefts and robbery. Witt et al (1999) found that high wage inequality associated with the distribution of weekly earnings of full-time manual men (arguably of decreasing significance in the late modern economy) was associated with high crime. Recently published research by Hicks and Hicks (2014) addresses this issue slightly differently, abandoning income inequality in favour of measures of the distribution of visible consumption and criminal behaviour within US states a 20-year period. First and foremost, their results reinforce Kelly's (2000) finding that different patterns appear to apply to violent and property crime. The relationship they identify between property crime and consumption holds only for inequality in visible expenditure, not for inequality in total expenditure. On this basis they argue that 'visibility' is an important factor in decisions to offend and suggest that relative deprivation theories fit most closely with their data (see Runciman, 1966 and Chapter 1, this volume), whereas traditional economic theory, as Kelly had illustrated, has only a limited fit.

The relationship between inequality and crime has also been demonstrated at the sub-national level. An analysis using police-recorded crime data in England and Wales found inequality (measured using the Gini coefficient for Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) weighted according to each Middle Layer Super Output Area's total population in 2005) to be positively and 'fairly strongly' correlated with burglary, robbery, violence, vehicle crime and, though to a lesser extent, criminal damage (Whitworth, 2011). Whitworth's results were strongest for acquisitive crimes: 'other things equal, a one per cent increase in inequality within a CDRP is associated with a 0.20 per cent increase in the rate of burglary, a 0.28 per cent increase in the rate of robbery and a 0.27 per cent increase in the rate of vehicle crime' (2011: 32-33). On the basis of his analysis of a wide range of variables, Whitworth argues that his results fit more comfortably with elements of both social disorganization and strain theory than they do with Becker's economic theory.

In a systematic review Rufrancos et al (2013) conclude that 'although there is some evidence to the contrary... a strong argument can be made for the existence of a longitudinal inequality-property crime relationship.' Though the explanation of violent crime is significantly more complex they nevertheless conclude that 'homicide, murder and robbery are determined, to some extent, by changes in income inequality, whilst crimes such as assault and rape are determined to a considerably lesser extent and are likely obscured by reporting differences and/or different determinants'.

Social disadvantage, offending and victimization

We now turn our attention to questions of the relationship between material and social disadvantage and patterns of offending and victimisation? Beginning with offending, it is as close to an established criminological 'fact' as exists that the vast majority of crimes dealt with by the criminal courts are committed by people of relatively impoverished means. Indeed, the predominance of people of lower

social status in offending can be seen irrespective of how offending is measured. Braithwaite (1979: 62), for example, noted that 'lower-class adults commit those types of crime which are handled by the police at a higher rate than middle-class adults'. Before we turn to attempts to explain this relationship, what about the crimes of the socially advantaged? A body of hugely important work within criminology in recent years has attempted to shift the focus of academic (and social) attention to 'social harms' – whether these be physical, psychological, emotional, or economic. Such an approach, it is argued, allows attention to be paid to otherwise ignored problems such as workplace injury and death, environmental offences, corporate 'offences' and other forms of white collar crime, and the 'crimes' committed by states among much else (Davis et al, 2014). The gaze of the state, and that of academic criminologists, tends to focus on the crimes of the powerless, rather than the powerful, despite the very great harms caused by the latter. As Tombs and Whyte (2015: 3-4) observe, it is surely remarkable 'that, more than six years on from the great financial crash of 2007/08, we live in societies that have not fundamentally restructured the control of the corporate sector generally, nor the financial sector in particular. Indeed, given what has unfolded since then, we are yet to see a concerted effort or 'war' against corporate crime. In fact, we have seen precisely the opposite'.

So, it is with a heavy heart that we must return to the more traditional focus of the relationship between material and social disadvantage and crime as ordinarily understood. Having focused earlier in this chapter on the broad structural relationships between socio-economic factors and offending, here the concern is more with the lives of individuals. In the past quarter century or so increasing attention has come to be paid to what tend to be referred to as 'risk', 'promotive' and 'protective' factors in offending. *Risk* factors are those that predict an increased probability of later offending. They tend to work cumulatively and in interaction with each other. *Promotive* factors are those that predict the absence of offending, and *protective* factors are those that predict desistance among groups of known offenders. Risk factors can be identified in a variety of domains: the individual level, but also the family level, school level and neighbourhood level.

There is a sizeable body of research in this tradition that has examined the nature of the relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and offending. The Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development, for example, found low family SES when a boy was aged between 8-10 was predictive of later self-reported offending, but not officially-recorded offending. Low family income and poor housing were predictive of both officially-recorded and self-reported offending for juvenile and adults (Farrington, 1992). There are similar results in relation to serious persistent offending from the Pittsburgh Youth Study (Stouthamer-Loeber et al, 2002; see also Flood-Page *et al.*, 2000 for the UK). Perhaps predictably there is much research that suggests that there are potentially a number of mediating factors, including parent management skills (Larzelere and Patterson (1990), physical punishment styles, family size and conduct problems including truancy and 'delinquent' peers (Fergusson et al, 2004) which may themselves be related both to SES and to the likelihood of offending. Living in a poor and/or high crime area is also a regularly identified risk factor for later offending. Fabio et al (2011), for example, found that rates of violence among boys in disadvantaged neighborhoods rose to higher levels and were sustained significantly longer than those among their peers in more advantaged areas (see also, Wikstrom and Loeber, 2000). To this extent at least, there is evidence which appears to support both conventional wisdom and significant elements of criminological theory which posit that economic stress motivates people affected by it to offend (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Merton, 1968).

What of demographic differences? Sampson et al (2005) in their study of Chicago neighbourhoods sought an explanation for the fact that the odds of perpetrating violence were 85% higher for Blacks compared with Whites, whilst Latino-perpetrated violence was 10% lower. They found the neighbourhood social

context to be a highly significant factor in explaining such disparities and concluded that their findings were 'consistent with the hypothesis that Blacks are segregated by neighborhood and thus differentially exposed to key risk and protective factors' (2005: 230). In truth, the relationship between individual, group and structural factors in offending is a field of study in which there remains considerable room for development. Explaining the relationship between crime and social (dis)advantage – in essence the direction of causation – has and continues to be a source of controversy. In the 1980s in particular, debates raged between 'left realists' (for whom relative deprivation was seen as key to understanding crime and victimization; Young, 2002) and 'right realists' and underclass theorists (for whom offending was more a reflection of individual characteristics, propensities and choices; Murray, 1990). Both perspectives have had considerable policy and political traction at different times – with those on the left tending to place greater emphasis on structurally 'solutions' and those on the right focusing more obviously on individual responsibility (though the differences between governments have often been relatively slight).

Just as offending is unevenly socially distributed, so is criminal victimization. Early and influential research identified the importance of lifestyles and routine activities (how people organise and spend their lives) in helping to explain victimization risks (Hindelang et al, 1978; Cohen and Felson, 1979) in contrast to social disorganisation theories which argued areas characterized by high population density, ethnic heterogeneity and residential mobility tended to be characterised by higher rates of crime (Shaw and McKay, 1942). There are a number of reasons why, in principle, it is expected that there will be a relationship between social inequality and crime victimization. First, social disadvantage is associated with the likelihood of living in high crime areas. Second, the socially disadvantaged are likely to have fewer resources to protect themselves against the possibility of criminal victimization. Finally, it is also hypothesised that people who are disadvantaged socio-economically are also anticipated to be more vulnerable to the negative effects of criminal victimization.

The availability of victimization data since the 1970s in the USA, and the early 1980s in England and Wales, allows the social distribution of crime to be examined in a more accurate manner than was hitherto possible. In short, much of this research has shown a variety of factors – including adverse socio-economic backgrounds such as living in social rented accommodation and multiple occupancy households, and lone parenthood – to be linked with an increased risk of criminal victimization (Grove et al, 2012). Research by Wohlfarth et al (2001: 364), based on a representative sample of the Dutch population, found 'a clear relationship between social class and victimisation, with the unemployed showing a higher rate (11%) compared to all other classes combined (6%).' There have been similar findings drawn from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) showing, for example, the risks of being a victim of burglary, household theft, and personal theft, to be positively related to the level of unemployment in the victim's local community (Sampson and Wooldredge, 1987) and the risk of violent victimisation to be inversely related to income (Brennan et al, 2010).

That some areas have chronically high levels of crime is, according to Trickett et al (1992), 'one of the original and enduring issues in criminology'. Their analysis of crime survey data found prevalence of crimes against the person to be about eleven times as large in the poorest neighbourhoods as against the richest, with the comparison for property crimes being around a factor of four. They found that the vulnerability of victims (the number of crimes reported, on average, by each victim) in respect of both personal and property offences to be more than three times as high in the worst areas as in the best area. Tseloni et al (2002) found that household crime inequality is clearest in the inner city, whereas within more affluent areas, property crime is more evenly distributed. The greatest area inequality, they estimated, falls on households already most at risk – with higher incidence faced by residents of deprived areas generating

increases in crime concentration more than increases in prevalence (i.e. through repeat and multiple victimization). Trickett et al (1992), among others, show that the distribution of crime is different in 'low crime' and 'high crime' areas. In short, whereas crime is broadly randomly distributed across households in low crime areas it is disproportionately concentrated on a small number of households in areas with high levels of crime. In the top crime decile, by area, victims, on average, experience nearly three times as many personal crimes as would be the case were such crime randomly distributed. It is findings like that that have pushed criminologists to focus on the ideas of 'repeat' and 'multiple victimization'. Data from the 1998 British Crime Survey, for example, showed that whereas three fifths of the population experienced no criminal victimization in the year under consideration, five per cent of the population experiencing almost 44% of all crime incidents (Farrell and Pease, 1993). Research by Hope (2001) estimated that around one-fifth of victims of household property crime live in the 10% of residential areas with the highest crime rates, and suffer over one-third of the total household property crime. Over half of all property crime – and over one third of all property crime victims – are found in one fifth of communities in England and Wales and, conversely, the half of communities with the lowest crime rates suffer only 15% of household property crime victimization (Hope, 1996, 1997).

What then of the impact of crime? Beyond the heightened risks of criminal victimization, there is also evidence that those living in areas with high levels of physical disorder, or those who perceive there to be high levels of anti-social behaviour in their local area, are much more likely to rate both crime generally, and fear of crime, as having a moderate or high impact on their quality of life (Nicholas et al, 2007). Recent work on the impact of anti-social behaviour (ASB) found that area deprivation was significantly and negatively associated with the likelihood of being a repeat and vulnerable ASB victim. They concluded that whilst 'the likelihood of being a repeat victim (RV) or a Repeat and Vulnerable Victim (RVV) is strongly associated with the situational vulnerability induced by local socio- demographic disadvantage, non-repeat and non-vulnerable victim status is associated with more advantageous socio-demographic characteristics including low area deprivation and home ownership' (Innes and Innes, 2013: 19).

Not only do those living in lower-crime neighbourhoods face lower risks as a consequence of where they live, they also often have the option, thanks to their material wealth, to increase their security. Indeed, a number of authors (Lab, 1990; Hope, 1995; 2000) have shown income and home-ownership to be among the most consistent predictors of the adoption of security measures, Hope (2000) showing this to include both physical security products (alarms, CCTV, locks) but also 'collective' services such as the arrangement of private contents insurance, membership of neighbourhood watch schemes and free household security surveys offered by the police. In fact, Hope (2000) argues that, irrespective of the impact of access to security, it is access to the private housing market that offers the socially advantaged the greatest benefit, enabling them to mitigate risks 'through spatial and cultural distancing from 'criminogenic' places and people' (2000: 102). As numerous commentators have identified, it is the urban enclavisation – the rise of high crime, heavily policed ghettos alongside the gated, fortified communities of the wealthy - which potentially poses the greatest challenge. This future has been outlined in its most dystopian form in Mike Davis' (1990) description of postmodern Los Angeles, which he views as an increasingly militarized landscape, where much formerly public space is privatized and subjected to constant surveillance, and where the city, divided by wealth, becomes a 'halo of barrios and ghettos' surrounding an increasingly fortified core (Davis, 1995).

Punishment and social inequality

Scholars working in the field of the political economy of punishment have observed that contrasting penal practices are almost certainly a function of differences in the social, economic and political organisation of the countries concerned (Lacey, 2008). Whilst there is no suggestion in such accounts that penal differentiation can be reduced to matters of economic inequality, it is striking that there nevertheless appears to be quite a clear positive relationship between incarceration levels and income inequality in the developed world (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). Who, though, gets caught in the penal net? In 1979 Jeffrey Reiman wrote a book with the title, *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison*. Though the title was intentionally provocative, it nevertheless spoke to a number of criminological truths. First, as the title implies, the 'crimes' of the wealthy are rarely punished in the same way, or to a comparable extent, to the crimes of the poor. Second, it is clear that the poor are significantly over-represented in police and prison cells. There is, in fact, relatively little by way of socio-demographic details on those that are arrested by the police. American surveys of arrestees (usually to monitor drug use) report both high levels of unemployment prior to arrest (from 43% to 69%) and similarly high proportions of respondents without health insurance (as high as 73% in Chicago) (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2013). In England and Wales an 'arrestee survey' conducted in 2003-06 found 41% of respondents to have been excluded from school temporarily and 23% excluded permanently, and in its final year found 16% of all respondents had spent some time in a foster home, children's home or a young person's unit, four per cent were homeless at the time of their arrest and 10% had slept rough at some point in the week leading up to their arrest.

There is much more consistent and robust collection of data on the prison population, though this clearly only represents one subset – and not a typical subset – of all those offenders that come into contact with the criminal justice system. Reinforcing earlier research (Caddle and Crisp, 1997; Dodd and Hunter, 1992), the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) study, a longitudinal cohort study which tracks the progress of newly sentenced adult (18+ years) prisoners in England and Wales, found 24% of prisoners to have lived with foster parents or in an institution, or had been taken into care at some point as a child (Williams et al, 2012). In terms of living circumstances, SPCR found 16% of prisoners reported having been homeless (either sleeping rough or in temporary accommodation) immediately prior to their incarceration, compared with the three and a half per cent of the general population who have ever done so. Such living circumstances have potentially profound implications for there is clear evidence that those who were homeless prior to their imprisonment are more likely to be reconvicted upon release compared with those that report living in other forms of accommodation (79% compared with 47% in the first year, and 84% compared to 60% in the second year) (Williams et al, 2013).

The potentially *reinforcing* nature of the experience of crime is illustrated in a number of studies of prisoners. Boswell and Wedge's (2002) study of imprisoned fathers, though small in scale, indicated substantial minorities had been physically abused by their own fathers and had witnessed their father abusing their mother. One third of imprisoned mothers in Poehlmann's (2005) research reported physical or sexual abuse, and more than two-thirds reported having witnessed domestic violence in childhood, and there is some evidence that such experiences have adverse consequences for future offending and anti-social conduct (Glasser et al, 2001). The SPCR study, for example, found that prisoners that had experienced abuse or observed violence as a child were more likely than those who had not to be reconvicted after release (Williams et al, 2012).

Arguably the most interesting study in this field in the UK, though it is now sadly now rather out of date, is that published by the government's Social Exclusion Unit in 2002. In summary, it observed '[b]efore they

ever come into contact with the prison system, most prisoners have a history of social exclusion, including high levels of family, educational and health disadvantage, and poor prospects in the labour market’ (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002: 18). From a variety of sources, they offered the following comparisons:

Table x: Characteristics of Prisoners and the General Population

Characteristic	Prisoners	General population
Taken into care as a child	27	2
Young fathers	25 (of young offenders)	4
Regularly truanted from school	30	3
Excluded from school	49 (male) 33 (female)	2
Have no qualifications	52 (male) 71 (female)	15
Literacy at or below that of Level 1 (expected of an 11 year old)	65	23
Reading at or below that of Level 1	48	21-23
Writing at or below that of Level 1	82	No direct comparison
Unemployed	67 (in the four weeks before imprisonment)	5
Suffer from two or more mental disorders	72 (male) 70 (female)	5 (male) 2 (female)
Suffer from three or more mental disorders	44 (male) 62 (female)	1 (male) 0 (female)
In receipt of benefits	72 (immediately before imprisonment)	14 (of working age population)
Homelessness	32 (not living in permanent accommodation prior to imprisonment)	1 (households assessed to be statutorily homeless each year)
Long-standing illness or disability	46 (sentenced male prisoners aged 18-49)	29 (men aged 18-49)

Source: Social Exclusion Unit (2002)

American research reinforces many such findings, not least in connection with a heightened prevalence of mental health issues among the incarcerated population. A recent study by Schnittker et al (2012) found substantially higher lifetime and 12-month prevalence of a wide range of psychiatric disorders. The relationship here is, of course difficult to disentangle. Schnittker et al (2012: 459) suggest that there is ‘considerable overlap between the life-course determinants of crime and the life-course determinants of psychiatric outcomes’. Nevertheless, there does appear to be a persistent relationship between imprisonment and mood disorders (being associated, for example, with a 45% increase in the odds of lifetime major depression).

Imprisonment also contributes to social disadvantage and social inequality. Prison expansion in the United States – from half a million in 1980 to 2.2 million in 2012 – has vastly, and unevenly, increased the lifetime likelihood of serving a prison sentence. The cumulative risk of imprisonment by age 30-34 for Black males is over 25%, compared with just over 5% for White males. The respective figures for Black and White high school drop-outs is 68% and 28% (Western and Pettit, 2010). Prison is now an extraordinarily powerful

institutional influence on life chances, with a growing body of research shows that ex-prisoners face very poor employment prospects on release from prison (Apel and Sweeten, 2010; Pager et al, 2009), and that the very different risks of incarceration contribute to racial inequality (Western, 2006). Western and Pettit's longitudinal research reached the general conclusion that 'that serving time in prison was associated with a 40 per cent reduction in earnings, ...reduced job tenure, reduced hourly wages, and higher unemployment' (2010: 13), and there is increasing evidence that mass imprisonment is contributing substantially to intergenerational inequality (Comfort, 2003; Wildeman, 2010).

Not only does imprisonment contribute to social inequality, but it may also mask it. Again, because of the scale of its imprisonment boom this can be illustrated most clearly by looking at research from the United States. Recent detailed quantitative (Pettit, 2012) and ethnographic research (Goffman, 2013) has illustrated how much of the impact of America's penal experiment, despite its extraordinary consequences, remains largely hidden. Pettit's (2012) meticulous research has shown how the exclusion of prison inmates from social survey research has dramatically affected the picture of inequality in the United States, significantly underestimating the estimated high school drop rate, employment rates among young, black, low-skill men. The research by Pettit, Goffman and others shows how America's most disadvantaged communities have been affected by the imprisonment boom; particularly through its dramatically negative effect on the health and well-being of children and families in those communities (see also Geller et al, 2012; Freudenberg, 2001).

Conclusion

Up until at least the 1970s criminology was much influenced by a social democratic-oriented sociological approach whose primary concerns were issues of social deprivation and inequality. It has been at least partially displaced by a number of other criminologies whose concerns are either narrowly pragmatic (crime prevention and the efficiency of the criminal justice system) or, certainly, much less influenced by broad matters of political economy. Why so? Is it that the social democratic analysis was proven wrong? As should be clear by now, though the relationships between social disadvantage and crime are complex – and issues of causation particularly so - it is hard to conclude that social inequality is anything other than of central importance in understanding crime, anti-social behaviour, criminal victimization and state punishment. As Messner and Rosenfeld (2013: 4) observe, 'Whether we look at official statistics on arrest and incarceration, self-report studies of criminal offending, or surveys of crime victims, the same pattern emerges: lower socioeconomic status is associated with greater involvement with the criminal justice system, higher rates of criminal offending, and higher rates of various forms of victimization. The relationship between socioeconomic deprivation and involvement in crime and the justice system holds not only for individuals... but also for neighbourhoods.' Where the picture becomes less clear is in connection with understanding crime *levels*. Here, although there is a growing body of econometric work linking changes in consumption and other economic trends to short-term shifts in property crime in particular, criminology continues to struggle. In particular, the two big movements in crime since the Second World War – the massive increases from the late 1950s onward which occurred despite rising prosperity, and the sizeable drops in crime since the mid-1990s (which have continued despite a massive economic recession) – were both largely unanticipated, and remain less than fully explained, by criminology. Great strides have been made in untangling the complex relationships between social (dis)advantage and crime, but there remains much still to be done.

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