Crime & Deviance (5)

The Official Criminal Statistics: Some theoretical perspectives

Examiners sometimes ask about how different sociological perspectives interpret the official criminal statistics. There are essentially **four main theoretical positions on the reliability and validity of the OCS.**

(a) Positivist approaches

These tend to view the OCS as a **useful** guide to crime trends and the types of people who commit crime. On the whole, they **accept the central message of the OCS that crime is mainly committed by poorer sections of the working-class, members of ethnic minority groups, the young and males rather than females.**

These positivist approaches include **functionalism, subcultural and ecological theories, and New Right perspectives such as Murray's underclass theory. All of these theories attempt to explain by examining the pathology or internal workings of groups why the poor or ethnic minorities or young males are more involved in crime.** These theories show little interest in how the statistics are actually collected.

(b) Interpretivist approaches

As we have seen from guides 2a and 2b, this perspective believes **we cannot trust the OCS** because **criminal statistics are socially constructed** – they are the **end result of a complex set of decisions involving a range of social groups** including the general public, victims, politicians, Chief Constables, individual police officers on the beat, judges, magistrates and juries. For example, the OCS suggest that black people are more criminal than other social groups but interpretivists argue that the reality is that the OCS tell us more about police racism.

There are a number of interpretivist approaches including **symbolic interactionism (also known as labelling theory), moral panic theory which focuses on the role of the mass media in the social construction of crime and Left Realism.**

(c)Marxism

Marxists sympathise with the interpretivist idea that the OCS are socially constructed. Marxists are very critical of the OCS because they believe that **the capitalist state collects and constructs the criminal statistics in order to serve the economic and political interests of the capitalist class.** The statistics serve an **ideological function – whoever has the power to collect and construct such statistics has the power to control and manipulate public opinion and concern**. This power contributes to the reproduction and maintenance of ruling class power in the following ways:

- Box argued that **the OCS are used to criminalise the activities of the powerless and to give society the impression that the working class and ethnic minority groups are a 'social problem' in need of social control.** This confirms the stereotypes that these groups are **'morally inferior'** to the rest of society and **'deserve'** more policing of their areas and more laws to control their behaviour.

- This **scapegoating** of these powerless groups **distracts society from the real problems of capitalist societies such as high unemployment, low wages, exploitation at work and inequalities in wealth and income**, i.e. problems caused by the **mismanagement of capitalism by the ruling class.**

- The OCS also suggest to the general public that the **crimes of the powerful** such as white-collar, corporate and state crime are **minor problems** and this justifies not vigorously pursuing such crimes.

  Box concludes that few people are aware of the crimes of the powerful or how serious these are because society's attention is focused on the

official crime statistics, i.e. the crimes of the powerful are rendered invisible by the so-called crimes of the powerless.

(d)   Left Realism

Left Realism is sympathetic to both the interpretivist and Marxist critiques of the official criminal statistics. It agrees that **the media and police pay disproportionate attention to powerless social groups and consequently the OCS are partially socially constructed. It agrees that ruling class crime is not paid enough attention by law enforcement agencies.**

However, Lea and Young argue that **these explanations are insufficient in explaining why working class and black youth are more likely to turn up in the criminal statistics.**

Using data from victim surveys such as the British Crime Survey and their own Islington Crime Survey, Lea and Young suggest that **working class and black youth really are the main perpetrators of crime in the inner cities**. Moreover, the types of crime committed by these groups, e.g. violence, mugging, burglary etc are the types of crime that **ordinary people fear and these fears are justified particularly in inner city areas.**

Their victim surveys indicate that the official criminal statistics **seriously under-estimate** certain types of crime, e.g. burglary and **over-estimate** others, e.g. criminal damage. **The victims of these crimes are often working class, black and female.** Left Realists point out that **ordinary people do not live in fear of corporate or state crime – inner city crime, on the other hand, has real consequences for people living in these areas, i.e. people, especially women and the elderly, are afraid to go out after dark.**

Left realism, then, is also critical of both interpretivist and Marxist approaches for suggesting the statistics are wholly a social construction, i.e. the product of media, police and ruling class practices – they argue that it is **irresponsible** of these theories not to recognise **the devastating effect that everyday crime and fear of crime is having on inner city communities.**