Sociological Theories of Crime & Deviance (3)

Subcultural theories of crime

The facts

The official crime statistics (OCS) suggest that **most economic crime** (e.g. mugging, drug-pushing, burglary etc.) and **non-economic crime** (e.g. violence, joy-riding, vandalism etc.) are **committed by young people**. In 2009-10, the peak age for known male offenders was 18 years and for known female offenders, it was 15 years.

A Home Office research paper on youth crime in England and Wales in 2009/10 showed that **under-18-year-olds commit a 'disproportionate' amount of crime**, as under-18s make up a tenth of the population but are responsible for **23 per cent of offences.** The report states that young offenders commit more than a million crimes per year - **half of all robberies (51%) and one in three burglaries (32%) were committed by under-18-year olds.** The Home Office notes that **young offenders were more likely to commit so-called 'acquisitive' crimes, such as street muggings of schoolchildren for their mobile phones and other gadgets.** Moreover, the Home Office also found that young criminals committed around a fifth of violent crimes, sex crimes and shoplifting offences as well as 31% of vehicle crimes and 28% of criminal damage offences.

Government statistics suggest that **nearly one in five of all youth offenders first arrested in 2000 went on to commit more than ten offences over the next nine years, with the youngest most likely to re-offend.** A National Audit Office study published in 2011 showed re-offending rates among youths given community punishments rather than custodial sentences rose 6 per cent between 2000 and 2010. However, **even those who have a served a custodial sentence, either in a youth detention centre or prison are likely to re-offend - about three quarters return to crime within a year.**

Gang violence

A specific youth problem identified by the police, mass media and politicians in recent years has been **gang violence**. The **Centre for Social Justice defines a gang as a group of street-based young people who share common deviant values and norms and who consequently engage in criminal activity and violence, often organised around drugs and territory.** Such gangs usually have an **identifying**

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feature – which may be based on **ethnicity or postcode** – and **are often in conflict with other gangs**.

The Centre for Social Justice profiled **a typical gang member as aged between 12 and 25 years. 98% are male.** In Glasgow and Liverpool, gang members are predominantly white whilst in London and Manchester, gang members are predominantly black. Moreover, **the majority of gang members are truants or have been excluded from school.**

Studies of gangs conducted by the Home Office found that **up to 6% of 10-19-year-olds belonged to a gang in England and Wales.** In 2008 Strathclyde Police estimated there were 170 gangs in Glasgow, with 3,500 gang members aged from 11 to 23. The previous year, the Metropolitan Police said there were **171 gangs in London.** Gang expert **Professor John Pitts** estimates some 600 to 700 young people are part of gangs in the London borough of Waltham Forest alone.

Some commentators noted that **gangs may have co-ordinated the riots and looting that occurred in London and Manchester in late 2011.** An examination of those who have been convicted of offences relating to this incident also suggests that **a disproportionate number of young people were involved. Some 50% of those brought before the courts were aged under 21 years** – only 5% were over the age of 40. **13% of those arrested overall were gang members but in London the figure was 19%.**

Knife crime

There has been an intense debate within the British media and political circles about knife crime. For example, **many media commentators this is a major type of crime that is on the rise and that the major offenders and victims are teenagers**. What are the facts?

- Between 2014 and 2018, there was a two-thirds increase in knife crime offences from 24,000 offences to nearly 40,000 offences.

- Data from hospitals in the same period suggest there has been a 8 per cent increase in people being treated for injuries caused by a 'sharp object'.

- The number of knife-related homicides went from 272 in 2007 to 186 in 2015. Since then it's risen every year, with a steep increase in 2017-18, when there were 285 killings, the highest figure since 1946. Knives are therefore the

largest single method of homicide, accounting for between a third and half the total number of homicides. In contrast, murders by gun have fallen dramatically – only 29 people were shot dead in 2017-2018 compared with 96 in 2001-02.

- One in four victims of knife crime between 2017-2018 were males aged 18-24.

- 25 per cent of victims were black - the highest proportion since data was first collected in 1997.

- Although knife crime is on the increase, it should be seen in context. **It is relatively unusual for a violent incident to involve a knife, and rarer still for someone to need hospital treatment.** Most violence is caused by people hitting, kicking, shoving or slapping someone, sometimes during a fight and often when they're drunk. **Domestic violence is more common than knife crime.**

- The Crime Survey for England and Wales, which includes offences that aren't reported to police, indicates that overall levels of violence have fallen by about a quarter since 2013.

- In the year to September 2018, 21,381 people were cautioned, reprimanded or convicted for carrying a knife in England and Wales, most of whom were adults. But one in five - 4,459 - was under the age of 18, the highest number for eight years.

- Knife crime tends to be more prevalent in large cities, particularly in London. For every 100,000 people in the capital, there were 168 knife offences in 2017-18, with separate figures, from the mayor's office, showing that young black and minority ethnic teenage boys and men were disproportionately affected, as both victims and perpetrators.

CLASS DEBATE

How do these facts about knife crime fit in with media accounts or your own understanding of this social problem? Do the facts support the general view that this is a youth or ethnic minority 'black-on-black crime or problem?

Young people and custodial sentences

An examination of those serving custodial sentences for crime also suggests a **disproportionate number of young people are locked up in the criminal justice system**. For example, approximately 90,000 children enter the youth justice system for the first time in any given year. Of these, **in 2011, 3,012 children aged under 18 were locked up in Juvenile Justice Centres (a type of secure children's home), Secure Training Centres or Young Offender's Institutions** – 37 of these were aged under 14 years. However, **three quarters of all under 18 year olds released from custody are re-convicted within a year.**

An examination of the age profile of the 83,842 prisoners in prison establishments in England and Wales in 2013 shows that **almost half of these were aged 25-39 whilst 22% were aged 18-24.**

Sociological explanations for crimes committed by juveniles and young adults

The facts above suggest that **the older a person gets, the less likely they are to be engaged in criminal activity.** Crime committed by young people has traditionally been referred to as **juvenile delinquency** but this term may now be dated because the sort of crime that young people engaged in fifty years ago is very different to that committed by young people today.

Sub-cultural explanations of crime and deviance

Subcultural explanations of youth crime emerged in the 1950s in the USA when sociologists such as **Albert Cohen** adapted **Merton's blocked opportunity** theory to explain why **young working-class people committed juvenile delinquency** which was defined as a form of **malicious youth crime** focused on such **criminal and anti-social acts** as **gang violence, joyriding, vandalism and graffiti**. It was assumed that such delinquency shared common characteristics such as:

- It was **rarely motivated by material or financial reward** compared with the types of crimes committed by older people. Delinquent acts were seen to be

committed for **anti-social reasons** – out of **spite or malice** – as a form of **protest against authority figures** such as parents, teachers, police officers etc. (However, **recent evidence as cited earlier suggests this view is now dated** and that crime committed by young people in 2013 is often about the acquisition of money and/or material goods).

- It had a **collective or subcultural** character – it is committed as part of a larger **group or gang.** Subcultural sociologists such as Cohen defined '**subculture' as a mini-culture that exists alongside the main or dominant culture of a society.** It is claimed by subcultural theory that members of delinquent subcultures or gangs have **different norms, attitudes, values and beliefs** to the rest of society and these generally tend to be **deviant**.

(a)   The work of Albert Cohen

Albert Cohen begins his theory of juvenile delinquency with the observation that Merton's 'material success' goal is not really relevant to young people because they have not yet embarked upon the career ladder and consequently material success is out of their reach. Instead Cohen suggests that the central cultural goal for young people is the pursuit of **status –** they want to feel that other people **value** or **respect** them. Cohen goes on to argue that juvenile delinquency is caused by **three** inter-related factors which are underpinned by the desire for status.

(i) Inadequate socialisation by parents

Cohen suggests that **working-class boys are not adequately socialised by their parents into the sorts of values and norms that are required for academic success and status at school** compared with middle-class pupils.

(ii)   Poor experience of schooling

Consequently **working-class boys under-achieve at school** and are **put into bottom sets or streams** in which they can clearly see that the **school does not value them**. Schools expect such boys to **leave school with few or no qualifications** and to end up in low paid dead-end jobs or as unemployed. In contrast, **middle-class children are valued by schools and their achievement ensures status** in the form of **qualifications and higher education.**

(iii) Status frustration

Cohen argues that these experiences result in working-class boys **internalising a strong sense of low self-esteem.** They feel very **alienated, frustrated and angry** at the way that **schools, teachers and society treat them**. They feel that they are being **denied status and respect**. Cohen calls this experience **'status frustration'.**

The sub-cultural or gang response to status frustration

Cohen argues that working-class boys react to this status frustration by developing **gangs** or **subcultures** which

- **reverse the norms and values of the dominant school or academic culture**, e.g. they deliberately break school rules, do not work hard etc.

- **celebrate aspects of working class culture** by **exaggerating** behaviour such as **toughness and masculinity**.

The reward for this deviant or delinquent behaviour is **peer group status and respect. Gangs award status and respect to their members on the basis of anti-social, violent and anti-authoritarian behaviour, i.e. juvenile delinquent behaviour. This compensates for the failure of schools and society to offer them alternative forms of legitimate status and respect.**

In conclusion, then, Cohen blames **both working-class culture and schools/society for juvenile delinquency.** He argues that working-class parents and culture should take some of the blame for delinquency because working class boys are not taught to value education. However, he acknowledges that **society should take some of the blame too because it denies these youth any form of status, respect or sense of value.**

Evaluation of Cohen's ideas

- However, there is little evidence from studies of working-class youth that they **actually want the type of status that is achieved through education or jobs**. In **Paul Willis'** study **'Learning to Labour'** the working-class lads he studied did **not** share the same goals as middle-class youth, e.g. they actually **defined educational failure as success** because they wanted jobs in the local car

factory. Qualifications were unnecessary for such jobs. **They messed around in school because they did not see the point of qualifications, not because they were suffering from 'status frustration'.**

- Most working class boys actually **conform** at school. In other words, they do not mess about in school. Moreover, even when they leave school with few qualifications and little hope of a decent job or career, **most do not break the law or join gangs.** Marxists suggest that Cohen should be asking **why young men who have been so badly treated by society actually conform most of the time to the rules of both school and society.**

- Cohen **ignores working class girls**. He may therefore be guilty of being **gender-blind** and **assuming that crime and deviance are mainly a male phenomenon.**

- Cohen seems to accept without question the criminal profile painted by the official criminal statistics that **working-class youth are the main social problem.** However, **interactionist critics** of Cohen suggest that he fails to realise that this group is frequently **stereotyped as potentially criminal and consequently is paid more attention by agencies of social control** such as **teachers, the mass media, the police and the courts**. For example, the police frequently stop and search this group. Consequently, interactionists argue that this group is socially **constructed as a problem** because it experiences **more surveillance and control** than, for example, middle-class youth or females.

- Cohen tends to **generalise about working-class parents and culture**, e.g. can we really say that **all** working-class parents do not value education? For example, **might the causes of status frustration and delinquency lie with the education system and teachers who favour middle-class students?**

- There is also evidence that **delinquency in the UK in 2013 may be motivated by financial gain**. For example, much gang crime in major cities such as London is organised around the selling of **drugs** whilst **personal robbery (i.e. mugging)** committed by young people has increased in recent years.

(b) The work of Walter Miller

Another American **subculturalist, Walter Miller, rejects Cohen's arguments that society is in any way to blame for juvenile delinquency.** Instead, he puts the blame for juvenile crime firmly on **working-class subculture**.

Miller argues that delinquency and crime are rooted in **the values and norms of working-class subculture.** Miller argues that this culture has **deviant characteristics** which he calls **'focal concerns'** which **give meaning to the lives of working-class males outside of work and school**. Living out these focal concerns **compensates young working class males for the routine, the boredom etc experienced by them in both the school and at work.**

Examples of these focal concerns include:

- A heightened sense of **masculinity** or manliness, e.g. **being tough, being able to 'hold your drink', 'getting loaded', womanizing etc.**

- An acceptance that **violence is a part of life and you need to be able to look after yourself.**

- **Excitement,** i.e. **looking for 'kicks',** a desire for fun and thrills etc.

- **Smartness**, i.e. looking good and feeling 'sharp', being 'streetwise' etc.

- **Fatalism**, i.e. **an acceptance of their fate** especially the idea that **the future cannot be changed** and that boring routine low-paid work or unemployment is likely to be the norm for the rest of their lives

- **Autonomy**, i.e. an attitude that says **'nobody will push us around' especially people in authority**, for example, the police and schoolteachers.

Miller argues that **youth crime is essentially the outcome of young working-class males exaggerating these focal concerns during their leisure time and consequently coming into confrontation with the police and authority.** In summary, then, Miller blames crime committed by working-class youth on what he sees as **the inherently deviant nature of working-class culture.**

Criticism of Miller's ideas

- Miller provides **little evidence** that these focal concerns are characteristics which are **unique to working class people or culture**. As **Box** pointed out, they could **equally apply to most males across the class structure.**

  Matza agreed with Box and noted that many males in Western societies, regardless of social background, subscribe to what he calls **'subterranean values'** – they **crave excitement, want to be outrageous** etc but most attempt to achieve these goals through **conventional means**, e.g. by playing sport, by dressing up, by joining groups or clubs of similarly-minded individuals etc. For example, **middle-class rugby union players often act in outrageous ways yet they are very rarely labelled as deviant or delinquent.** From Matza's perspective, **most young males therefore subscribe to focal concerns or subterranean values. They are not unique to working-class youth.** A good example of this worth investigating on the internet is the '**Bullingdon Club'** – an Oxford University drinking club whose members once included David Cameron and Boris Johnson.

- Matza, who is an **interpretivist** sociologist, notes that when poorer groups attempt to live out subterranean values, **they are more likely to come into contact with the police and courts because the police have already labelled or profiled them as potentially suspicious or criminal.** The police presence in the areas in which the poor live is usually quite high and **their behaviour is more likely than that of the middle-class to result in arrest and therefore they are more likely to become a criminal statistic.**

(c)   The work of Cloward and Ohlin

Like Cohen and Merton, **Cloward and Ohlin** also explain deviance in terms of the **social structure** of society. They argue that **because of their lower position in the class structure of society**, **working class people face greater pressures to deviate in order to achieve economic success.**

Earlier, we saw that Merton talked about the **legitimate opportunity structure** – this is the means through which most people get on in life, i.e. education, qualifications, jobs, promotion etc. However, Cloward and Ohlin argue that there also exists **an illegitimate opportunity structure**, i.e. **how well a criminal gets on in the criminal world depends on the type of illegitimate opportunity structure that is available**

to them in their area. They identify **three** types of illegitimate opportunities which produce **three different types of gangs or subcultures**:

- **Criminal subcultures** emerge in areas where people are exposed to an **established pattern** of illegitimate opportunity. **Organised criminal networks such as the Mafia or drug gangs** are a good example of this type. These types of crime organisations are focused on **making money** and are often **organised hierarchically and bureaucratically,** i.e. people have **specific roles and tasks** and can be **promoted** in much the same way as someone working for a legitimate organisation. Those at the bottom may have role models at the top that they want to emulate. **Sudhir Venkatesh**'s research '**Gang Leader For A Day**' is a study of this type of opportunity structure in its focus on a major drug dealing operation in Chicago.

- In areas which lack access to organised crime hierarchies, some young people may turn to **gangs or conflict subcultures** which engage in **highly masculinised territorial or respect-driven violence**. The studies of UK gangs by **Kintrea et al** and **Pitts** are good contemporary examples of this type of subculture.

- If young people fail to gain access to either the criminal or conflict subcultures, they may form **retreatist subcultures** in which **drug use** rather than drug dealing, especially **heroin addiction,** is the main focus. This type of culture is probably **responsible for most burglary and street robbery** as such addiction is expensive and needs to be maintained on a daily basis.

Marshall's research in 2005 adds another type of gang to the mix. He identifies a group he terms **'crews'** – these are **unorganised groups of young people who tend to hang around together in a particular place.** Such groups may engage in anti-social behaviour which brings them into contact with the law. However, Marshall notes that this is incidental rather than deliberate, i.e. it is probably the **result of high spirits, boredom or drunkenness**, and **does not** reflect any frustration or resentment with society.

(d) The work of Shaw & Mackay (the Chicago School) – ecological theory

Most crime committed by young people is committed in **urban contexts – towns and cities.** For example, the CSEW notes that **people who live in inner-city areas and on deprived council estates express more anxiety about crime** than people who live in the suburbs or in rural communities. In particular, they are mainly anxious about the **anti-social and criminal behaviour of young people, particularly territorial street gangs, vandalism, use of drink and drugs in public places, mugging and more generally groups of teenagers 'just hanging around'.**

During the 1950s, a group of sociologists based in Chicago, developed an **ecological** approach to the study of social life, i.e. **they looked at the relationship between criminality and the urban environment**. In particular, **Shaw and McKay** attempted to explain **why juvenile crime rates were so high in cities**.

By examining the organization of cities, they used **Burgess' concentric model of cities** to suggest that most cities and towns were organized into distinct **neighbourhoods or zones with their own set of values and lifestyles**. (see the diagram on page 10).

Shaw and McKay were particularly interested in **'zone two'** because most crime in a city or town, whether it was juvenile or adult-orientated crime, was committed in this residential area. Shaw and McKay refer to this area as a **'zone of transition'** because **it was often characterised by cheap rented rundown property such as flats and bedsits and/or council estates. Consequently the area did not experience a stable population or community because people were constantly moving in and out of the neighbourhood.** Moreover, **unemployment and poverty** were a common feature of the neighbourhood.

Shaw and McKay suggested that the **constant movement of people in and out of the area- population turnover- prevented the formation of stable communities.** Instead it produced a state of **'social disorganisation', i.e. there was little sense of community or control -** consequently people were unlikely **to feel a sense of duty and obligation to each other. Neighbourhood controls, whether they were formal (e.g. policing) or informal (e.g. social disapproval) were weak or non-existent. Consequently** residents of these zones felt **little guilt** about committing crime against their neighbours.

Burgess' Concentric Zone City Model
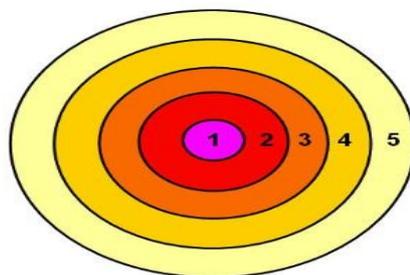
1 CBD (central business district)
2 Transition zone
3 Blue-collar residential
4 Middle-income residential
5 Commuter residential

Shaw and McKay noted that this **social disorganisation often led to a subculture of crime and delinquency.** Children living in such communities are exposed to this culture, and in particular **young males learn criminal skills and traditions** from older ones. Criminal behaviour such as territorial gang violence, theft from cars, drug dealing and joy-riding become a normal part of everyday life, and these **children are socialized into delinquent values and practices.** Shaw and McKay referred to this process by which criminality is transmitted from one generation to the next as **'cultural transmission'**.

Similarly, **Sutherland** suggested that **young people's behaviour is conditioned or shaped** by reference to the behaviour of others around them. **If young people associate with others who prefer crime rather than conformity to the law, and/or live in an everyday situation in which most members of the community seem to be involved in criminal and deviant activities, they are more likely to commit crime themselves.** He referred to this process as '**differential association' and noted that it was more likely to occur in socially disorganised zones of transition.**

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Evaluating the Subcultural and Ecological theories

(1) Despite the media coverage of youth gangs, which give the impression of widespread gang membership, **only about 6 to 9 per cent of young people claim to belong to or have ever claimed to have belonged to a 'gang'** whilst only 2 per cent claim to carry or have ever carried a knife according to research published in 2008. **Subcultural theories, therefore, may be exaggerating the influence or effect of subcultures or gangs on young people.**

(2) David Matza argues that **subcultural theories over-predict delinquency**. In other words, most working-class young people experience status frustration, anomie and subscribe to working-class values **but do not join anti-social or criminal gangs. Most conform and never commit themselves to delinquency.**

Moreover, Matza argues that the few that do get involved in gangs do so temporarily in that they 'drift' in and out of delinquency before they eventually **grow out of it** when they reach adulthood. **There is also little evidence that members of gangs are committed to an alternative anti-social subculture of delinquency.** Most delinquents who are charged with criminal offences use **'techniques of neutralisation'** (excuses) to justify their actions. However, **few of these make reference to a subcultural or gang cause.** Most explain their actions with reference to **individual justifications**, e.g. 'I didn't mean any harm', and most delinquents are regretful about their actions.

(3) Interactionists criticise the subcultural and ecological theories because they fail to acknowledge that the disproportionate amount of youth crime showing up in the official criminal statistics may be due to **the over-policing of urban inner city areas and council estates which means that such youth is more likely to be stopped, searched and arrested.**

(4) Neo-functionalists point out that both the subcultural and ecological theories **ignore the wider influence of a consumerist culture that stresses individualism (looking out for number one), money, celebrity and the acquisition of material goods as the major means by which people should strive to achieve success and status.** Neo-functionalists therefore argue that

delinquency arises out of a desire to be part of mainstream culture rather than delinquency being a rejection of that culture.

However Reiner and Young point out that the **opportunities** to achieve monetary or material success are more likely to be **blocked if a young person lives in a deprived inner city area or on a council estate because of poor schools and high unemployment.** Young people in this position may be more likely to experience a **strain** between their materialistic goals and the legitimate means of achieving these goals. This may produce **anomie in the form of a culture of envy which encourages some young people to turn to violent street crime such as mugging or dealing in drugs. These delinquent actions compensate for their poverty.**

Studies of gangs in the USA support this view. **Nightingale** (1993) who studied young Black youth in an inner city area of Philadelphia found that like other social groups, they had been socialised by their families, the education system and the mass media to believe in the **American Dream** of material success. However, US society did not provide them with the means of achieving this goal. **Their opportunities were blocked because of poverty, racism and lack of political power.** Such youth looked to compensate for this gap between their goals and means **by acquiring high status designer goods and respect from others by joining gangs involved in violent and profitable drug crime.** In other words, **the desire to be included and to share in what everyone else takes for granted – material success - led paradoxically, to the criminal actions – drug dealing - that ensured their exclusion from mainstream law-abiding society.** There is some evidence that similar motivations underpinned the **riots and looting that went on in London, Manchester** and other parts of the country in the summer of 2011.

(5) Similarly, Marxists are critical of both subcultural and ecological theories because they ignore the view that **social problems** such as **poor housing, unemployment and poverty** which are at the worst in inner cities in which the most deprived youth live may be caused by **the organisation of capitalism.** Marxists argue that it is therefore not surprising that these areas are more crimogenic than the suburbs or rural areas and that those experiencing social and economic deprivation, especially young people, are tempted **to commit crime as a form of compensation for their everyday experiences of deprivation, discrimination etc.**

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(6) **Felson and Clarke** reject the idea that youth crime is caused by status frustration, focal concerns, resistance to authority social disorganisation, cultural transmission or differential association. They argue instead that youth crime occurs in urban areas because these simply contain **more physical opportunity for crime** than rural areas. These areas attract and generate more crime simply because of the existence of more shops, warehouses, businesses, leisure facilities, large insecure car parks and red light districts.

(7) **Hobbs and Lister (2000)** and **Hadfield (2005)** look at crime in cities from a different perspective to either the subcultural or ecological theories. They argue that **youth violence is mainly caused by easy access to alcohol**, particularly the relatively rise in the number of **drinking circuits** in major British cities which have resulted in thousands of people entering large cities such as Leeds and Manchester in search of entertainment and excitement, particularly at the weekend. Hadfield refers to this as **the nocturnal or night-time economy and claims it has led to a major rise in binge-drinking among young people.** He estimates that about three-quarters of all violent incidents in urban areas occur between 9pm and 3am during the weekend when thousands of drunk or drugged-up young men, and increasingly women, are in the city.

(8) **Winlow** notes that both the subcultural and ecological theories neglect the fact that **public space in British cities is becoming increasingly privatised and being made into no-go areas for youth.** For example, private security guards and CCTV are being used to police shopping and leisure centres, and **'undesirables' such as teenagers who fit a stereotypical image, e.g. 'hoodies', are being excluded.** This has had the effect of forcing teenagers to re-locate – **teenagers may be forced to hang around on street corners because there is nowhere else for them to go.** However, this may attract a **more visible and aggressive policing style** in those urban areas that the police perceive to be a problem. This may bring the police into **conflict** with local youth and therefore **increase local stop, search and arrest statistics**.