

A further trend in late modernity is for relative deprivation to become generalised throughout society rather than being confined to those at the bottom. There is widespread resentment at the undeservedly high rewards that some receive, whether top-flight footballers or 'fat-cat' bankers. There is also 'relative deprivation downwards', where the middle class, who have to be hardworking and disciplined to succeed in an increasingly competitive work environment, resent the stereotypical underclass as idle, irresponsible and hedonistic, living off undeserved state handouts.

The result of exclusion is that the amount and types of crime are changing in late modern society. Firstly, crime is found increasingly throughout the social structure, not just at the bottom. It is also nastier, with an increase in 'hate crimes' – often the result of relative deprivation downwards, as in the case of racist attacks against asylum seekers.

Reactions to crime are also changing. Late modern society is more diverse and there is less public consensus on right and wrong, so that the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour becomes blurred. At the same time, informal controls become less effective as families and communities disintegrate. This makes the public more intolerant and leads to demands for harsher penalties and increased criminalisation of unacceptable behaviour. Late modern society is a high-crime society with a low tolerance for crime.

The falling crime rate

In a later study, Young (2011) points to a 'second pathological crisis', or crisis of explanation. As we saw, the first crisis was the failure of existing theories to explain the cause of increases in crime from the 1950s to 1990s.

However, since the mid-1990s the crime rate has *fallen* substantially. This is a problem for realist explanations, because it suggests that crime is no longer the major threat they had originally claimed.

However, as Young notes, because crime is a social construction, it may continue to be *seen* as a problem. For example, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (2014) found that 61% thought crime had risen, not fallen.

The rising 'anti-social behaviour rate'

Crime surveys also show a high level of public concern about anti-social behaviour. Young sees this as a result of 'defining deviance up'. Since the 1990s, governments have aimed to control a widening range of behaviour, introducing ASBOs (Anti-Social Behaviour Orders) in 1998 and IPNAs (Injunctions to Prevent Nuisance and Annoyance) in 2015. These measures have several key features:

- Blurring the boundaries of crime, so 'incivilities' become crimes. Breaching an ASBO is itself a crime, thus 'manufacturing' more crime.

- Subjective definition Anti-social behaviour has no objective definition; it is in the eye of the beholder.
- Flexibility ASBOs have been used against people wearing hoodies, making a noise, letting off fireworks, flyposting or begging, and others besides. The subjective definition means the net can be constantly widened to generate an almost endless number of infringements.

Thus, while the crime rate is going down, governments have created a new 'crime' wave – or anti-social behaviour wave – to replace it.

Activity Research

Causes of and solutions to crime

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Tackling crime

The final part of the left realists' project is to devise solutions to the problem of crime. They argue that we must both improve policing and control, and deal with the deeper structural causes of crime.

Policing and control

Kinsey, Lea and Young (1986) argue that police clear-up rates are too low to act as a deterrent to crime and that police spend too little time actually investigating crime. They argue that the public must become more involved in determining the police's priorities and style of policing.

Military policing The police depend on the public to provide them with information about crimes (90% of crimes known to the police are reported to them by the public). However, the police are losing public support, especially in the inner cities and among ethnic minorities and the young. As a result, the flow of information dries up and police come to rely instead on *military policing*, such as 'swamping' an area and using random stop and search tactics. This alienates communities and results in a vicious circle: locals no longer trust the police and don't provide them with information, so the police resort to military policing, and so on.

Left realists argue that policing must be made accountable to local communities and deal with local concerns. Routine beat patrols are ineffective and stop and search tactics cause conflict. Police need to improve their relationship with local communities by spending more time investigating crime, changing their priorities (they over-police minor drug crime, but under-police racist attacks and domestic violence) and involving the public in making policing policy.

Left realists also argue that crime control cannot be left to the police alone – a *multi-agency approach* is needed. This would involve agencies such as local councils' social services, housing

departments, schools and leisure services, as well as voluntary organisations and victim support, and the public.

Application

Suggest possible roles for agencies such as social services, housing and leisure departments, and schools in reducing crime.

Tackling the structural causes

However, left realists do not see improved policing and control as the main solution. In their view, the causes of crime lie in the unequal structure of society and major structural changes are needed if we want to reduce crime. We must deal with inequality of opportunity and the unfairness of rewards, tackle discrimination, provide decent jobs for everyone, and improve housing and community facilities. We must also become more tolerant of diversity and cease stereotyping whole groups as criminal.

Left realism and government policy

Left realists have had more influence on government policy than most theorists of crime. In particular, their views have strong similarities with the 1997-2010 New Labour government's stance of being 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'.

For example, New Labour's firmer approach to policing hate crimes, sexual assaults and domestic violence, along with anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs), echoed left realist concerns to protect vulnerable groups from crime and low-level disorder. Similarly, New Labour's New Deal for unemployed youth and their anti-truancy policies attempted to reverse the exclusion of young people at risk of offending.

However, Young regards many of these policies as doomed attempts to recreate the 'Golden Age' of the 1950s. For example, the New Deal did not lead to secure, permanent jobs, while ASBOs did not recreate a sense of community. Young also criticises the record of governments, including New Labour. He argues that they have largely just addressed the symptoms, such as anti-social behaviour – they have been tougher on crime than on its underlying causes, such as the insecurity, inequality and discrimination that produce relative deprivation and exclusion.

Evaluation of left realism

Left realism has succeeded in drawing attention to the reality of street crime and its effects, especially on victims from deprived groups. However, it is criticised on several grounds.

- Henry and Milovanovic (1996) argue that it accepts the authorities' definition of crime as being street crime committed by the poor, instead of defining the problem

as being one of how powerful groups do harm to the poor. Marxists argue that it fails to explain corporate crime, which is much more harmful.

- Interactionists argue that, because left realists rely on quantitative data from victim surveys, they cannot explain offenders' motives.
- Their use of subcultural theory means left realists assume that value consensus exists and that crime only occurs when this breaks down.
- Relative deprivation cannot fully explain crime because not all those who experience it commit crime. The theory over-predicts the amount of crime.
- Its focus on high-crime inner-city areas gives an unrepresentative view and makes crime appear a greater problem than it is.

Comparing right and left realism

There are both similarities and differences between the two realisms. For example, both see crime as a real problem and fear of crime as rational. On the other hand, they come from different ends of the political spectrum: right realists are neo-conservatives, while left realists are reformist socialists. This is reflected in how they explain crime – right realists blame individual lack of self-control, while left realists blame structural inequalities. Political differences are also reflected in their aims and solutions: the right prioritise social order, achieved through a tough stance against offenders, while the left prioritise justice, achieved through democratic policing and reforms to create greater equality.

Activity Discussion

Left versus right

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Topic summary

Realists see crime as a real problem, especially for the poor. Right realists are conservatives. They see the cause of crime as partly biological and partly social. They see it as a rational choice based on calculating the risks and rewards. Because causes cannot easily be changed, they focus on deterring offenders.

Left realists are reformist socialists. They identify relative deprivation, subculture and marginalisation as causes of crime. Relative deprivation and exclusion are increasing in late modern society. Their solution lies in accountable policing and reducing inequality.

REALIST THEORIES OF CRIME

Realist approaches to crime differ markedly from the theories examined in the last two Topics. Approaches such as labelling theory and critical criminology regard crime as socially constructed – the result of the way police and others label, stereotype and criminalise members of certain groups.

By contrast, realists see crime as a real problem to be tackled, and not just a social construction created by the control agencies. In addition, all realists:

- Argue that there has been a significant rise in the crime rate – especially in street crime, burglary and assault.
- Are concerned about the widespread fear of crime and about the impact of crime on its victims.
- Argue that other theories have failed to offer realistic solutions to the problem of crime and they propose what they regard as practical policies to reduce it.

Realist approaches emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in the political context of a shift to the right in politics. On both sides of the Atlantic, New Right conservative governments came to power, led by Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the USA.

These governments favoured rolling back the welfare state together with a strong commitment to law and order. They favoured a 'get tough' stance on crime, with increased use of prison (and in the USA, the death penalty) and a 'short, sharp shock' approach to dealing with young offenders.

We can divide realist approaches along political lines:

- Right realists share the New Right or neo-conservative political outlook and support the policies described above.
- Left realists are socialists and favour quite different policies for reducing crime.

Right realism

Right realism sees crime, especially street crime, as a real and growing problem that destroys communities, undermines social cohesion and threatens society's work ethic. The right realist approach to crime has been very influential in the UK, the USA and elsewhere. For example, its main theorist, James Q. Wilson, was special adviser on crime to President Reagan, and it has provided the justification for widely adopted policies such as 'zero tolerance' of street crime and disorder.

Right realist views on crime correspond closely with those of neo-conservative governments during the 1970s and 1980s. For example, policy-makers argued that 'nothing works' – criminologists had produced many theories of crime, but no workable solutions to curb the rising crime rate.

This led to a shift in official thinking, away from the search for the causes of crime and towards a search for practical crime control measures. It also dovetailed with the US and UK governments' tough stance towards offenders and their view that the best way to reduce crime was through control and punishment, rather than rehabilitating offenders or tackling causes of crime such as poverty.

Right realism reflects this political climate. Right realists criticise other theories for failing to offer any practical solutions to the problem of rising crime. They also regard theories such as labelling and critical criminology as too sympathetic to the criminal and too hostile to the forces of law and order. Right realists are less concerned to understand the causes of crime and more concerned to provide what they see as realistic solutions. However, although their main emphasis is on crime reduction strategies, they do offer an explanation of the causes of crime.

The causes of crime

Right realists reject the idea put forward by Marxists and others that structural or economic factors such as poverty and inequality are the cause of crime. For example, against the Marxist view, they point out that the old tend to be poor yet they have a very low crime rate. For right realists, crime is the product of three factors: individual biological differences, inadequate socialisation and the individual's rational choice to offend.

Biological differences

Wilson and Herrnstein (1985) put forward a biosocial theory of criminal behaviour. In their view, crime is caused by a combination of biological and social factors.

Biological differences between individuals make some people innately more strongly predisposed to commit crime than others. For example, personality traits such as aggressiveness, extroversion, risk taking and low impulse control put some people at greater risk of offending. Similarly, Herrnstein and Murray (1994) argue that the main cause of crime is low intelligence, which they also see as biologically determined.

Socialisation and the underclass

However, while biology may increase the chance of an individual offending, effective socialisation decreases the risk, since it involves learning self-control and internalising moral values of right and wrong. For right realists, the best agency of socialisation is the nuclear family.

The right realist Charles Murray (1990) argues that the crime rate is increasing because of a growing underclass or 'new rabble' who are defined by their deviant behaviour and who fail to socialise their children properly. According to Murray, the underclass is growing in both the USA and the UK as a result of welfare dependency.

What Murray calls the welfare state's 'generous revolution' since the 1960s allows increasing numbers of people to become dependent on the state. It has led to the decline of marriage and the growth of lone parent families, because women and children can live off benefits. This also means that men no longer have to take responsibility for supporting their families, so they no longer need to work.

However, lone mothers are ineffective socialisation agents, especially for boys. Absent fathers mean that boys lack paternal discipline and appropriate male role models. As a result, young males turn to other, often delinquent, role models on the street and gain status through crime rather than supporting their families through a steady job. As Bennett et al (1996) argue, crime is the result of:

'growing up surrounded by deviant, delinquent, and criminal adults in a practically perfect criminogenic environment – that is, [one] that seems almost consciously designed to produce vicious, predatory unrepentant street criminals'.

Rational choice theory

An important element in the right realist view of crime comes from rational choice theory, which assumes that individuals have free will and the power of reason. Rational choice theorists such as Ron Clarke (1980) argue that the decision to commit crime is a *choice* based on a rational calculation of the likely consequences. If the perceived rewards of crime outweigh the perceived costs, or if the rewards of crime appear to be greater than those of non-criminal behaviour, then people will be likely to offend.

Right realists argue that the perceived costs of crime are low and this is why the crime rate has increased. In their view, there is often little risk of being caught and punishments are in any case lenient. As Wilson (1975) puts it:

'If the supply and value of legitimate opportunities (i.e. jobs) was declining at the very time that the cost of illegitimate opportunities (i.e. fines and jail terms) was also declining, a rational teenager might well conclude that it made more sense to steal cars than to wash them.'

A similar idea is contained in Felson's (2002) routine activity theory. Felson argues that for a crime to occur, there must be a motivated offender, a suitable target (a victim or property) and the absence of a 'capable guardian' (such as a policeman or neighbour). Offenders are assumed to act rationally, so that the presence of a guardian is likely to deter them.

Criticisms of the right realist explanation of the causes of crime include the following:

- It ignores wider structural causes such as poverty.
- It overstates offenders' rationality and how far they make cost-benefit calculations before committing a crime. While it may explain some utilitarian crime, it may not explain impulsive or violent crime.
- Its view of criminals as rational actors freely choosing crime conflicts with its claim that their behaviour is determined by their biology and socialisation. It also over-emphasises biological factors: according to Lilly et al (2002), IQ differences account for less than 3% of differences in offending.

Analysis and Evaluation

Why might right realism be better at explaining utilitarian crime than violent crime?

Tackling crime

Right realists do not believe it is fruitful to try to deal with the causes of crime (such as biological and socialisation differences) since these cannot easily be changed. Instead they seek practical measures to make crime less attractive. Their main focus is on control, containment and punishment of offenders rather than eliminating the underlying causes of offending or rehabilitating them.

Crime prevention policies should therefore reduce the rewards and increase the costs of crime to the offender, for example by 'target hardening', greater use of prison and ensuring punishments follow soon after the offence to maximise their deterrent effect.

Zero tolerance Wilson and Kelling's (1982) article *Broken Windows* argues that it is essential to maintain the orderly character of neighbourhoods to prevent crime taking hold. Any sign of deterioration, such as graffiti or vandalism, must be dealt with immediately.

They advocate a 'zero tolerance' policy towards undesirable behaviour such as prostitution, begging and drunkenness. The police should focus on controlling the streets so that law-abiding citizens feel safe. Supporters of zero tolerance policing claim that it achieved huge reductions in crime after it was introduced in New York. (For more on zero tolerance, see Topic 9.)

Zero tolerance: an urban myth?

Zero tolerance policing was first introduced in New York in 1994 and was widely applauded for reducing crime. However, Jock Young (2011) argues that its 'success' was a myth peddled by politicians and police keen to take the credit for falling crime.

In fact, the crime rate in New York had already been falling since 1985 – nine years *before* zero tolerance – and was also falling in other US (and foreign) cities that didn't have zero tolerance policies.

Young argues that police need arrests to justify their existence, and New York's shortage of serious crime led police there to 'define deviance up'. That is, they took to arresting people for minor deviant acts that had previously fallen outside their 'net', re-labelling them now as worthy of punishment.

After zero tolerance was introduced in 1994, police and politicians then wrongly claimed that cracking down on these minor crimes had been the *cause* of the decline. In fact, the

'success' of zero tolerance was just a product of the police's way of coping with a decline that had already occurred.

Other criticisms of zero tolerance include that:

- It is preoccupied with petty street crime and ignores corporate crime, which is more costly and harmful.
- It gives the police free rein to discriminate against minorities, youth, the homeless etc.
- It over-emphasises control of disorder, rather than tackling the causes of neighbourhood decline such as lack of investment.
- Zero tolerance and target hardening just lead to displacement of crime to other areas.

Left realism

Left realism developed during the 1980s and 1990s. Like Marxists, left realists see society as an unequal capitalist one. However, unlike Marxists, left realists are reformist rather than revolutionary socialists: they believe in gradual change rather than the violent overthrow of capitalism as the way to achieve greater equality. They believe we need explanations of crime that will lead to practical strategies for reducing it now, rather than waiting for a revolution and a classless society to abolish crime.

Taking crime seriously

The central idea behind left realism is that crime is a real problem, and one that particularly affects the disadvantaged groups who are its main victims. They accuse other sociologists of not taking crime seriously:

- Marxists have concentrated on crimes of the powerful, such as corporate crime. Left realists agree that this is important, but they argue that it neglects working-class crime and its effects.
- Neo-Marxists romanticise working-class criminals as latter-day Robin Hoods, stealing from the rich as an act of political resistance to capitalism. Left realists point out that in fact working-class criminals mostly victimise other working-class people, not the rich.
- Labelling theorists see working-class criminals as the victims of discriminatory labelling by social control agents. Left realists argue that this approach neglects the real victims – working-class people who suffer at the hands of criminals.

Aetiological crisis Part of the left realists' project of taking crime seriously is to recognise that, from the 1950s on, there was a real increase in crime, especially working-class crime. Young (2011) argues that this led to an *aetiological crisis* – a crisis in explanation – for theories of crime. For example, critical criminology and labelling theory tend to deny that the increase was real. Instead, they argue that it

was just the result of increased reporting, or an increased tendency to label the poor. In other words, the increase in the statistics was just a social construction, not a reality.

However, left realists argue that the increase was too great to be explained in this way and was real: more people were reporting crime because more people were actually falling victim to crime. As evidence, they cite victim surveys such as the British Crime Survey and many local surveys.

Taking crime seriously also involves recognising who is most affected by crime. Local victim surveys show that the scale of the problem is even greater than that shown by official statistics. They also show that disadvantaged groups have a greater risk of becoming victims, especially of burglary, street crime and violence. For example, unskilled workers are twice as likely to be burgled as other people.

Understandably, therefore, disadvantaged groups have a greater fear of crime and it has a greater effect on their lives. For example, fear of attack may prevent women from going out at night. At the same time, these groups are less likely to report crimes against them and the police are often reluctant to deal with crimes such as domestic violence, rape or racist attacks.

The causes of crime

The second part of the left realist project to take crime seriously involves explaining the rise in crime from the 1950s on. Lea and Young (1984) identify three related causes of crime: relative deprivation, subculture and marginalisation.

Relative deprivation

For Lea and Young, crime has its roots in deprivation. However, deprivation in itself is not directly responsible for crime. For example, poverty was rife in the 1930s, yet crime rates were low. By contrast, since the 1950s living standards have risen, but so too has the crime rate.

CHAPTER 2

Left realists draw on Runciman's (1966) concept of relative deprivation to explain crime. This refers to how deprived someone feels in relation to others, or compared with their own expectations. This can lead to crime when people resent others unfairly having more and resort to crime to obtain what they feel they are entitled to.

Lea and Young explain the paradox that today's society is both more prosperous and more crime-ridden. Although people are better off, they are now more aware of relative deprivation due to the media and advertising, which raise everyone's expectations for material possessions. Those who cannot afford them may resort to crime instead.

However, relative deprivation alone does not necessarily lead to crime. For Young (1999), 'the lethal combination is relative deprivation and individualism'. Individualism is a concern with the self and one's own individual rights, rather than those of the group. It causes crime by encouraging the pursuit of self-interest at the expense of others.

For left realists, increasing individualism is causing the disintegration of families and communities by undermining the values of mutual support and selflessness on which they are based. This weakens the informal controls that such groups exercise over individuals, creating a spiral of increasing anti-social behaviour, aggression and crime.

Subculture

The left realist view of criminal subcultures owes much to Merton, A.K. Cohen and Cloward and Ohlin discussed in Topic 1, especially their concepts of blocked opportunity and subcultures as a group's reaction to the failure to achieve mainstream goals. Thus for left realists, a subculture is a group's collective solution to the problem of relative deprivation.

However, different groups may produce different subcultural solutions to this problem. Some may turn to crime to close the 'deprivation gap', while others may find that religion offers them spiritual comfort and what Weber calls a 'theodicy of disprivilege' – an explanation for their disadvantage.

Religious subcultures may encourage conformity. Within the African Caribbean community in Bristol, Ken Pryce (1979) identified a variety of subcultures, including hustlers, Rastafarians, 'saints' (Pentecostal churchgoers) and working-class 'respectables'.

For left realists, criminal subcultures still subscribe to the values and goals of mainstream society, such as materialism and consumerism. For example, as Young (2002) notes, there are ghettos in the USA where there is 'full immersion in the American Dream: a culture hooked on Gucci, BMW, Nikes'. However, opportunities to achieve these goals legitimately are blocked, so they resort to street crime instead.

Marginalisation

Marginalised groups lack both clear goals and organisations to represent their interests. Groups such as workers have clear goals (such as better pay and conditions) and often have organisations (such as trade unions) to put pressure on employers and politicians. As such, they have no need to resort to violence to achieve their goals.

By contrast, unemployed youth are marginalised. They have no organisation to represent them and no clear goals, just a sense of resentment and frustration. Being powerless to use political means to improve their position, they express their frustration through criminal means such as violence and rioting.

Late modernity, exclusion and crime

Young (2002) argues that we are now living in the stage of late modern society, where instability, insecurity and exclusion make the problem of crime worse. He contrasts today's society (since the 1970s) with the period preceding it, arguing that the 1950s and 1960s represented the 'Golden Age' of modern capitalist society. This was a period of stability, security and social inclusion, with full employment, a fairly comprehensive welfare state, low divorce rates and relatively strong communities. There was general consensus about right and wrong, and lower crime rates.

Since the 1970s, insecurity and exclusion have increased. De-industrialisation and the loss of unskilled jobs have increased unemployment, especially for young people and ethnic minorities, while many jobs are now short term or low paid. These changes have destabilised family and community life, as have New Right government policies to hold back welfare spending. All this has contributed to increased exclusion of those at the bottom.

Meanwhile, greater inequality between rich and poor and the spread of free market values encouraging individualism have increased the sense of relative deprivation. Young notes the growing contrast between *cultural inclusion* and *economic exclusion* as a source of relative deprivation:

- Media-saturated late modern society promotes cultural inclusion: even the poor have access to the media's materialistic, consumerist cultural messages.
- There is a greater emphasis on leisure, personal consumption and immediate gratification, leading to higher expectations for the 'good life'.
- At the same time, despite the ideology of meritocracy, the poor are denied opportunities to gain the 'glittering prizes of a wealthy society'.

Young's contrast between cultural inclusion and economic exclusion is similar to Merton's notion of anomie – that society creates crime by setting cultural goals (material wealth), while denying people the opportunity to achieve them by legitimate means (decent jobs).