

ITEM B: LACK OF OPPORTUNITY

Some sociologists would argue that a lack of opportunity in society is one of the main reasons why individuals commit crime. Marxists for instance would point to the criminogenic nature of capitalist society and state that the pressure to consume can drive people towards crime. Subcultural theory and also Strain theory would agree that a lack of opportunity in society can result in criminality as they would suggest without legitimate means of achieving, individuals turn to illegitimate opportunity structures (Cloward and Ohlin). However, it could also be argued that a lack of opportunity does not necessarily result in crime as women, for example, have a much lower rate of offending than men, and yet are oppressed by a patriarchal society which restricts their chances of social mobility.

Applying material from Item B and your knowledge, evaluate the view that a lack of opportunity in society is the main cause of criminality. (30 marks)

Some sociologists would agree that a lack of opportunity in society results in higher levels of criminality and is therefore the main cause of crime. However, others disagree and say that even those social groups who do lack opportunity do not necessarily turn to crime. By crime, sociologists are referring to any act that breaks the laws of a particular society.

Marxists for instance, according to Item B, would argue that “the criminogenic nature of capitalist society and the pressure to consume can drive people towards crime”. Marxists such as Gordon (1976) argue that although predominately a phenomenon amongst the working classes, all social groups respond in this way to capitalism (albeit to varying extents) as it creates a competitive spirit that needs to be satisfied in order for an individual to feel that they have enough social status or influence.

Part of the reason for the social inequalities in status and therefore criminality comes from the way in which the state sets about creating laws to govern our behaviour. Chambliss (1975) argues that the majority of our laws have been devised not in the public interest, but in the interests of the ruling classes who wish to protect their private property. This was echoed by Snider (1993) who pointed out that the ruling class also had the power to prevent laws being introduced which could potentially threaten their profitability. The result of these trends is that working class oppression is able to continue as the working classes are being penalised more heavily by the legal system since it targets them more specifically. This can result in the working classes being labelled (Becker) as criminal by police and law enforcement agencies as people hold

A clear introduction which defines key concepts and which lays out the argument of the essay.

Immediate reference to Item B which is fully analysed and developed based upon wider knowledge.

Supporting sociological evidence in the form of studies and key concepts.

An introduction to additional Marxist concepts and theories which are clearly developed and which relate explicitly to the question.

Synoptic links are made as part of the evaluation to the ideas of other sociological theories with similar ideas.

New concepts and studies are introduced.

stereotypical views about which social groups are more likely to become criminal, based on the kinds of people that make up the prison population. This can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy as individuals from the working classes (and also those from young or ethnic minority groups) feel that they are already significantly more likely to be targeted by the police and so may assume a criminal or deviant identity (sometimes even to gain greater social status amongst their peers). As such, they go on to commit more crimes and perpetuate a cycle of criminality as their criminal status becomes their master status and thus they end up limiting their own opportunities by reducing their likelihood of future employment as they may hold a criminal record.

Critics, however, would argue that it can actually be a beneficial social trend if a lack of opportunity amongst the working classes leads to criminal or deviant behaviour, since often the only way to bring about social change is through a deviation from the norms and values of society. The Functionalist sociologist Durkheim, for example, argues that all social change begins with an act of deviance and examples to support his ideas can come from social and political activists such as Nelson Mandela who campaigned against Apartheid in South Africa, but whose actions were criminalised and resulted in him being placed in jail. Therefore, without a lack of opportunity there would be no social progress as it is the inequalities between people in society that spur them to make changes. Similarly, without a lack of in equality and social inequality, individuals would have no motivation to better themselves educationally or in terms of work and so the status quo would be maintained and there would be no meritocracy.

However, the notion that a lack of opportunity causes crime is not solely put forward by Marxists. Left Realists, for instance, suggest that a lack of opportunity is brought about by relative deprivation as although according to Lea and Young society as a whole has become more prosperous, there has also been a greater gap between those who are able to access wealth and those who cannot. This, along with a sense of alienation or marginalisation from their lives, can bring about frustrations that are manifested in physical violence or other criminal activities.

Also, according to Item B, "subcultural theory and also Strain theory would agree that a lack of opportunity in society can result in criminality as they would suggest

Evaluation of previous ideas and new sociological theories are introduced, alongside supporting sociological examples.

New concepts are introduced, as well as supporting studies and there is thorough analysis and links back to the question.

Continued evaluation with new sociological theories and studies being introduced.

A second reference to Item B which introduces new sociological theories as a

without legitimate means of achieving, individuals turn to illegitimate opportunity structures (Cloward and Ohlin)". Those individuals or groups who are unable to achieve in society through the traditional means such as gaining education and employment must find alternative ways of achieving their social status. Sociologist Merton identified five responses to the strain of success which included: Conformity (accepting the goal of success and using the legitimate means to achieve them), Innovation (using illegitimate means to achieve success such as theft or fraud), Ritualism (giving up on success), Retreatism (becoming a social drop-out and engaging in activities such as drug taking), and Rebellion (replacing society's success goals with new ones, e.g. revolutionaries). Those members of society who were unable to achieve success legitimately would therefore adopt either an innovative, retreatist or rebellious approach.

Cloward and Ohlin also identified the differences between a legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structure and argued that not everyone in society has equal access to socially accepted means of success. As such, they identified three types of subculture that individuals who lacked social opportunity were likely to join. These included criminal subcultures (where young people effectively had an apprenticeship in crime), conflict subcultures (professional crime networks) and retreatist subcultures (where an individual fails to achieve success and so turns to illegal drug use to escape).

However, it could be argued that it is not a lack of opportunity that causes crime. Feminists, for example, point out that even though women have far fewer opportunities in society than men, four out of five convicted offenders in England and Wales are men. Heidensohn (1985) puts this down to greater levels of patriarchal control in areas such as the home, in public and at work which mean that women are limited in terms of their opportunity to commit crime in the same way their other opportunities are limited. However, critics would point to the chivalry thesis which argues that women are just as likely as men to commit crime but that they are often let off by law enforcement as they are seen as the weaker sex.

Similarly, there are other potential explanations for criminality aside from a lack of opportunity, with Right Realists for example, arguing that there may be certain biological differences that cause criminal behaviour, or a

continuation of the evaluative argument.

Sociological studies are considered in detail and are relevant to the demands of the question.

Clear links back to the original question which relate to the issue of opportunity and crime.

Continued evaluation which introduces Feminist theory and the idea that a lack of opportunity does not necessarily translate into criminal activity.

Clear sociological evidence in the form of studies and statistics.

New sociological concepts are used.

A brief overview of other explanations for criminality but these are superficially dealt with.

lack of adequate socialisation (Charles Murray). It could also be argued that moral panics within the mass media and negative labelling or stereotyping are also key factors causing criminality, as well as the prejudices that are created by labelling individuals according to issues such as age or ethnicity which could create a self-fulfilling prophecy of crime.

Some good use of supporting studies and concepts.

Based on the evidence, therefore, sociologists would agree that a lack of opportunity causes crime to some extent; however, it is important to note the influence of other social forces and characteristics such as class, age, gender and ethnicity. However, it is undeniable that these social characteristics hugely define the levels of opportunity – legitimate or otherwise – which are available to an individual.

A clear conclusion that explicitly focuses on the demands of the question.

[1191 words]

Examiner style comments: **Mark band 25–30**

This essay is a top mark band essay which addresses a range of sociological theories accurately and which contains strong supporting evidence in the form of concepts, studies and contemporary examples. There is clear reference to Item B and issues which have been quoted have been expanded upon and analysed. There is also clear evaluation throughout and points raised have been clearly related to the question.

To improve further the candidate could have developed some of the later issues raised such as Right Realism and the impact of labelling in society and by the media.