

CHAPTER II-1-1.1

Poverty and Violence

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I. INTRODUCTION

Poverty is widely believed to cause violence. The general public treats this notion as a truism, and most academics also accept it as such. Debates among the latter tend to be over which social mechanisms cause poverty to affect violence. But there are other positions to be sure. Poverty has been linked to violence in a number of ways. Most scholars as well as lay persons believe that those who live in poverty more frequently engage in acts of violence as a consequence of conditions that they are subjected to. There is, however, disagreement among scholars about which conditions are important and how and why they lead to violence. These conditions may include poor housing (Stark, 1987), distressed neighborhood (Krivo & Peterson, 1996), and disrupted families (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Living conditions of this sort are ordinarily defined as social structural consequences of poverty. While this structural approach has usually viewed poverty as the independent variable and violence as the dependent, some scholars have also argued that violence can cause poverty at the aggregate level by creating an unstable or dangerous environment which is not conducive to economic development or growth (Staley, 1992). It may also be that those who are financially better off will move out of areas with high rates of violence leaving only those who are economically unable to relocate (Wilson, 1996).

Cultural conditions have also been linked to high levels of violence among the poor. In particular, cultures of poverty are said to include norms which promote violence (Banfield, 1970). It has also been argued that welfare dependence by the poor creates lifestyles conducive to social pathology, including violence (Murray, 1984). Broader views of the link between poverty and violence have also been suggested. Poverty is seen by some as a cause of revolutionary violence (Gurr & Rittenburg, 1967). The poor, tiring of their subordinated position, use political violence to seek redress. Or the poor are subjected to violence by political elites seeking to maintain the status quo (Spitzer, 1975). Still other scholars have written about the link between poverty and violence, not in causal

terms, but rather as a correlation that is produced by a common source, such as political or economic arrangements. We will briefly describe the arguments of scholars focusing on these latter types of relationships between poverty and violence, but we will primarily focus on the theories and research that describe conditions that purportedly lead the poor to engage in higher levels of interpersonal violence than do others.

Violence in reaction to political or economic oppression can take the form of organized, purposive action—e.g., the activities of the African National Congress during South Africa's apartheid years; or less organized, less clearly politically purposive action—e.g., robbery by inner-city African Americans (Sullivan, 1989); or even rape, according to Eldridge Cleaver (1968). As Marx predicted, a rising up of the downtrodden in violent revolution against the capitalist elite has occurred in many countries in the twentieth century. More often than not the intelligentsia mobilized the poor, convincing them to take up arms by pointing to the society's economic inequality and their poverty.

Conflict theorists also argue that the observed correlation between poverty and violence is spurious. Both poverty and violence are caused by the exercise of power by elites in the cause of perpetuating their privileged position. To some extent the southern subculture of poverty thesis also treats the correlation between poverty and violence as spurious. Gastil (1971) defines the South's regional history of slavery and persecution, and consequent lack of economic development (until recent decades) as common causes of both the region's poverty and high violence rates.

Violence here shall be defined as physical rather than emotional or developmental damage. There is no doubt that physical violence and victimization can exact substantial emotional tolls. For example, children subjected to abuse frequently suffer accompanying damage to personality development, and many rape victims and some victims of other forms of assault are now thought to suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome. However, in this paper, we will limit consideration to the research literature that deals specifically with acts such as homicide, assault, and rape, and not with work that examines additional costs and consequences of violence. We also will not write here about "violence" perpetrated by corporations via acts such as the selling of faulty products or abusive marketing or distribution strategies, or illegal dumping. We will not discuss the literature that asserts that government policy towards people such as the homeless, the mentally ill, or prisoners, is violence. By defining corporate and government behavior outside of the scope of this article, we are not denying the damage of this behavior, or even that it constitutes violence. Our intention is only to limit the focus of the present discussion to a manageable scope.

We will also confine this discussion to acts of serious violence. An important debate which began in the mid-1970s illustrates the importance of this definitional choice. Tittle, Villimez and Smith (Tittle & Villimez (1977); Tittle, Villimez, & Smith (1978)) concluded after a review of the literature that socioeconomic status was not significantly related to crime. A number of scholars disagreed (e.g., Braithwaite, 1981). Hindelang, Hirschi, and Weis (1979, 1981) offered a solution to the debate, arguing that there appeared to be a class/crime correlation for serious crimes, especially violent crime. We will discuss this debate more fully below, but for the purpose of defining the scope of this paper, we will not discuss widespread forms of less serious violence typified by schoolyard spats. We are, however, concerned when what may have formerly been settled on the schoolyard with fists escalates to stabbings or drive-by shootings.

Defining poverty would seem to be more straightforward, but here too we should be clear. The U.S. government defines its official poverty level as an income below the amount

necessary to sustain a family of four. Other Western countries have similar designations. While this type of definition is useful when studying poverty within a single economic system, its major faults are illustrated when one compares the impoverished in Western industrialized nations with the poor in the developing world. A related problem is illustrated by comparing the urban poor of New York or Chicago with those of Appalachia or the American Deep South. The social reality of what it is like to live on \$13,000 per year will be very different in each of these locations. The faults of officially designated poverty levels spawned another important criminological debate. Blau and Blau (1982) asserted that absolute poverty, measured as the percent of the population living below the official U.S. government poverty level, was not the cause of violence (homicide in their analyses) but rather relative income inequality. Others (Messner, 1982; Williams, 1984) responded that indeed poverty rates are more important determinants of criminal homicide than relative deprivation and that the important question focuses on which mechanisms link poverty to violence. It is safe to say that the debate over whether absolute poverty or relative poverty is the most important cause of violence is not fully resolved among social scientists. Measures of income inequality and absolute poverty both appear in the extant literature. For our purpose, we will define the poor as those who live at the bottom of systems of economic stratification.

II. THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Much of the best research on poverty and violence has focused on urban areas. This is clearly a weakness in the existing literature, but application of some of the theories that have been developed need not be so limited. While some of them have been applied to rural areas (subculture of poverty), others such as those that describe an isolated underclass might help us to understand the relationship between poverty and violence in nonurban areas. Another weakness in the present body of literature is that much of the research has focused on Western industrialized nations. A challenge to scholars is to use what we have learned to gain a better understanding of processes that link poverty and violence in the less developed world.

1. The Relationship between Poverty and Violence

Economic factors have been a major focus of attempts to understand and explain violence since the birth of the social sciences. From the empirical work of Guerry and Quetelet in nineteenth century France (Vold, Bernard, & Snipes, 1998) to Durkheim's writings on anomie at the turn of the century (1897), through the Chicago School in the first half of the twentieth century, and on up to contemporary theories of the organization of employment (Colvin & Pauly, 1983; Crutchfield, 1989; Wilson, 1996), economic and employment stratification have played key roles in causal explanations of crime and delinquency. Despite a vast body of theory and research, there is little consensus or definitive conclusion concerning the relationship between economic factors, including poverty and violence.

For many decades the idea that delinquency and crime, both violent and nonviolent, are inversely correlated to social class was widely accepted in criminological theory. While exactly how social class and violence are related has varied across different perspectives,

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