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Research Preview

Jeremy Travis, Director

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Labor Markets, Employment, and Crime

Summary of a Presentation by Robert Crutchfield, Ph.D., University of Washington

Social scientists generally agree that unemployment, especially persistent unemployment, leads to individual poverty and that residential concentrations of poverty lead to higher crime. However, studies about the relationship between unemployment and crime have produced inconsistent results. This led Dr. Robert Crutchfield and his colleagues to believe that other economic factors must affect the crime rate in poverty-stricken neighborhoods. They began with the notion that a person's occupation conditions his or her routine daily activities. The routine-activities perspective claims that crime is more likely with the confluence of motivated actors, potential victims, and an absence of guardians.

Dr. Crutchfield turned to the dual labor market theory, which distinguishes between good and bad jobs. Good jobs, known as primary-sector jobs, pay reasonably well, have good benefits such as paid vacation, and, most important to the study, offer future economic advantages. Bad jobs, or secondary-sector jobs, on the other hand, are low paying, have few benefits and rarely paid vacation, and, most important again, offer little or no future. Applying control theory and bonding theory, the researchers expected that the primary-sector jobs would be more likely to build attachments and commitments to the job and secondary-sector jobs would be less likely. The good job would offer a "stake in conformity" because it has a future and the employee would feel that there is something to lose.

The following scenario illustrates this hypothesis: Two 18-year-old African-American males with similar educations are neighbors. One has a good job working at the Boeing Company; his neighbor works at McDonald's. Friends ask them to go out drinking one night, and they have opposite reactions to the offer. The one with the good job wants to keep it because good jobs are hard to get. He has a stake in conformity, and he turns down his friends because he must work the next morning. The neighbor figures that if he's late or has a hangover the next day, he can just get another job at another fast-food place. He has no stake in conformity. He and the others gather behind the local convenience store to hang out and drink. The circumstances now include the three factors that make crime more likely: motivated actors (intoxicated 18-year-olds with bad jobs or no jobs), potential victims (store customers or each other), and an absence of guardians (no family members, adults, or police nearby).

Labor market instability predicts crime in Seattle

The research team next analyzed violent crime rates in 121 census tracts in Seattle, Washington, to test these theories. The variables they considered included the poverty rate, income inequality, percentage of the population represented by young males, percentage who were African American, and the rate of labor market instability (a combination of the unemployment rate and percentage of the workforce in service-sector jobs). The analysis revealed the following:

- Neighborhoods with high levels of labor market instability had significantly higher rates of violent crime, property crime, poverty, and income inequality.
- High rates of poverty or income inequality alone could not predict violent crime and property crime. Unemployment and marginal employment (expressed as labor market instability) appeared to have direct effects of their own.

Long-term data on 18- to 24-year-old youths

The researchers also analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), which was designed to study the work experiences of young adults ages 14 to 24. Analysis of the NLSY crime data on 18- to 24-year-olds from 1979 and 1980 (the only years for which crime variables were collected) revealed the following findings:

- People employed in secondary-sector jobs spent more time out of the labor market than those employed in primary-sector jobs.
- Time out of the labor force and expected job duration were modest but significant predictors of criminal involvement.
- Young people in this age group who were currently students were significantly less likely to be involved in crime.
- Members of the military were no less likely and, under some circumstances, somewhat more likely to engage in crime.
- A tendency toward criminal activity could be predicted by an individual's time in the labor force when coupled with the percentage of the adult population in the person's home county who were outside of the labor force. The relationship between an individual's work situation and that of persons living nearby held, however, only in counties with higher unemployment rates. This finding showed that it is not necessarily the work circumstances of the individual that matter, but rather the individual's work circumstances in the context of the work circumstances of those who live around him.

Long-term data on 14- to 17-year-old youths

Because youths under 18 may have different attitudes about attachment to work than those over 18, a separate analysis was conducted. Tentative findings in regard to NLSY youths ages 14 to 17 included the following:

- A good predictor of juvenile crime was school performance, reflected by measurements such as grade point average.
- Youths who worked while in school were more likely to commit crimes than those who did not. (Some researchers theorize that work pulls them away from school.)
- Youths who neither attended school nor worked were the most likely to commit crimes.
- Educational and occupational experience of parents was a significant predictor of children's school performance. When a parent was out of work, a child did not do as well in school.
- A "county effect" existed with the younger age group as well; children had higher rates of crime in counties with substantial unemployment levels.

Violent crime in three cities affected by school dropout rates

Crutchfield's theory of labor market instability and its relationship to criminality was next applied to an analysis of census tract data on education, employment, and crime in Seattle, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C. This study found the following:

- In the initial analysis without the education variable, the results were mixed. In Seattle, the average violent crime rate was 7.04 per 1,000 population in census tracts with stable employment and 35.8 in census tracts with unstable employment; in Cleveland, 15.86 and 32.25, respectively; and in Washington, D.C., 39.45 and 53.57, respectively. The theory appeared to work well in Seattle, marginally in Cleveland, and not at all in Washington, D.C.
- When adding the factor of education into the analysis, specifically school dropout rates, the analysis showed a clearer pattern and the theory again appeared to work in Seattle and Cleveland. In Washington, D.C., however, the analysis showed a pattern with two extremes: Some neighborhoods had very low dropout rates, while many had very high dropout rates.

The researchers speculate that the Washington, D.C., data may not have fit the pattern because of the city's extremes in income and education levels, with a disproportionately large number of residents falling in the low ranges. Joblessness, marginal employment, and poor educational systems have characterized many neighborhoods for so long that that negative pattern may have stressed those communities in many ways, including causing increased rates of crime.

This document is based on Robert Crutchfield's presentation to an audience of researchers and criminal justice practitioners as part of NIJ's Research in Progress Seminar Series. Dr. Crutchfield is a professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Washington. A 60-minute VHS videotape of the seminar *Labor Markets, Employment, and Crime* is available for $19 ($24 in Canada and other countries). Please ask for NCJ 161259.

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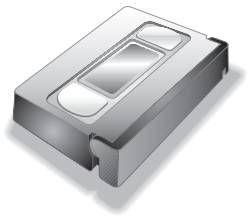

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