



The Broken Path

Juvenile Violence and Delinquency in Light of Sociological Theories

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Abstract: An examination of the causes and effects of juvenile violence and delinquency through an exploration of the retributive Juvenile Justice System, the struggles of the urban poor and the effects of juvenile crime on the success of all of society. Drawing on the six key sociological theories, this paper will investigate the possible reasons behind current policies and crime itself.

I have always been interested in the study of people's everyday struggles and it had been made very clear to me from early on that education was the "key to success" in the United States; my parents made certain that this idea was etched in my mind. We emigrated from Russia when I was eight years old, and my parents knew that paying for me to go to college was beyond their financial means. Throughout my childhood, I saw my parents work long hours (at jobs that did not satisfy them mentally or financially) in order to give my sister and I a better future. My personal struggle has always been to put aside all of my vices in order to achieve the so-called 'American Dream' for me and to make my parents proud and justify all of the effort that they have put forth on my behalf.

I attended a very diverse (and very affordable) Catholic high school in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and it was there that

I first came to an understanding of just how fortunate I am. I only battle my own internal limitations in order to excel in life, but there are people all around me that have to struggle with their surroundings in order to 'make it' in this world. During my high school years I also spent much of my free time working as a mentor with underprivileged teen girls in a program run by a non profit magazine called *Teen Voices*. The girls that partook in this program were from impoverished inner city families and the program worked to focus the girls' attention on education as way out of their grim reality and into a better future.

Both in my high school and at *Teen Voices*, I saw how crime and violence impacts individuals' lives and hinders their opportunities for success. I developed many close friendships in these two areas of my life and had the opportunity to take a closer look into the lives of the people that

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seem to me to have been forgotten or discarded by the mainstream society. For the first time, I began to venture into the 'unsafe' neighborhoods of the city, and get to know the 'unconventional' families that had to struggle with what seemed to be all the problems of the world. These problems included a lack of economic opportunities, a lack of educational opportunities and (as a result of these) a high risk of violence and crime in their day to day lives.

I developed a close friendship with a group of girls who resided in the Mission Hill projects in Roxbury. Among these girls, Alexis became my close friend and my makeshift guide through the reality of life for the urban poor. Alexis has all of the internal qualities for success; she is intelligent, dedicated when she puts her mind to her work, confident despite her situation, attractive and in full control of her self image. Alexis would often tell me stories of her friends who had been killed in one way or another mostly by their own peers. With an almost matter-of-fact attitude, Alexis attended roughly six funerals of boys her age who were killed as a result of juvenile violence. When I asked about her cold attitude toward the death of her neighbors and childhood friends, Alexis replied that "when you see death, drugs and violence all around you throughout life, your heart turns from grief to anger and retribution." She said that if she allowed herself to ponder on the horrors of her surroundings, she would become depressed and 'crazy.' I began to take her approach to violence and crime, and found myself paying less and less attention to the newspaper stories and television news stories of people killed due to youth violence in the poor neighborhoods of Boston. I felt that although this violence was all too real, it was invisible for as long as I avoided it. I thought, "as long as I have my friends, classmates and neighbors, I don't need to focus on the rest."

All of that changed one night in the

summer of 2006. Alexis and I were spending some time with a few former classmates and catching up on life after high school. It was a hot July night and many people were outside of their homes in a little courtyard in the middle of the Mission Hill projects. As we enjoyed each others' company along with the beautiful summer weather, time passed unnoticed. Finally, Alexis, I and one other girl realized that it was getting late and decided to head over to the local pizza shop before it closed for the night. The streets were beginning less and less lively as people went inside for the night and we hastily headed over toward Boston House of Pizza to eat some late dinner. We left behind a small group of girls, one of whom was Anna, a former classmate who was that day mourning the one year anniversary of the death of her brother.

Once inside the pizza shop, Alexis received a frantic phone call from a friend who told her that Anna had been shot while we were gone. We rushed back to the little courtyard that we had abandoned just minutes earlier. There were people everywhere, and police were arriving on the scene to seal off the area where Anna had been attacked. She was being wheeled into an ambulance, as numerous people screamed and cried at the sight of this young woman covered in blood. Alexis decided to go to the hospital, but I chose to go home, feeling that the hospital is a place for family members and close friends. Later on that night, I received a phone call from Alexis, who coldly informed me that Anna had passed away.

It turned out that Anna who had managed to overcome numerous obstacles in her short lifetime was killed by her ex-boyfriend in an irrational display of rage. Anna was a good student, who managed to go to school while raising her daughter (one she gave birth to at the age of sixteen). I still remember the sight of Anna carrying her daughter up to the podium with her during our high school graduation ceremony. She

then attended college, worked, and raised her then four-year-old child. Anna was even able to overcome the grief that comes along with losing a brother (who was killed on the same day one year prior to her death). However, despite her internal strength of character and will to succeed, external circumstances ended her life and left her daughter to struggle in this cruel world without a mother.

This situation affected me more than I would like to admit; it became a moment of epiphany for me. It made me realize many things about life and it made me appreciate every minute of it. I was removed from the crime scene for just a few minutes, but it was those minutes that turned out to be crucial in determining Anna's fate as well as mine. Anna was an example of a 'success story' in the projects, but despite all of her inner success---being able to raise a child, she motivate herself to finish school and attend college and had the capacity to not allow the sorrow in her life to bring her down---she paid the ultimate price due to youth violence. My inner success had always been enough to get me through because I did not have to deal with other variables such as crime, drugs, violence and gangs in my everyday life. It became clear to me then that 'education is the key' was not enough to achieve success in this life for the unfortunate bunch that ended up at the socioeconomic bottom. Violent crime, which arises from many external and internal causes (often during one's youth), can be a lethal stopper in the flow of success even for the most determined individuals.

Anna's emotionally disturbed and trigger happy assailant had many excuses for his behavior. He is the child of a poor urban family; he grew up with many psychological problems and had disrupted any educational and economic opportunities that he might have had by becoming a juvenile offender at a young age. The state did not treat his psychological and social problems

and helped to send him on his way into a lifelong criminal career by placing him in an institutionalized correctional facility for minor crimes he committed while still a child (under the age of 17). Anna's killer's case makes one wonder: What could have been expected of this psychologically disturbed person whose emotional state was hindered, rather than being helped, by the Massachusetts Juvenile Justice System?

The Juvenile Justice System in this state, as well as most others, still highly favors the retributive justice model, which has proven to be ineffective for many reasons. Incarceration has many long lasting negative effects on the offender, the public and social trends in general. These effects are especially visible in the Juvenile Justice System because juvenile offenders are basically children from the ages of seven to seventeen.

The most visible impact of incarceration is a dramatically higher rate of recidivism when compared to community based programs for juvenile offenders. A youth who is sentenced to serve time in jail is much more likely to be a repeat offender and even to develop a criminal career. This high recidivism rate is primarily due to a lack of behind-the-wall programs which prepare youth for reentry (Jenson, 1998). There is also a large amount of brutality in correctional facilities on the part of offenders and staff members. This leads youth to become affiliated with behind-the-wall gangs for protection, to develop violent and antisocial tendencies and to foster high rates of distrust and anger toward people in general (Patchin, 2006). The disconnection with the community also leads to high recidivism rates because prior offenders have little concern for the community and the community gives them little support when they are released (Christian, 2003).

The costs associated with incarceration are also drastically higher than costs of community correctional programs. The cost of juvenile incarceration is estimated at

\$43,000 per person annually; however there are programs which cost as much as \$64,000 per person annually. A large percentage of the yearly cost of incarceration for juveniles goes toward operation costs, medical care, and supervision (Einstein Law, 2007). Contrary to public opinion, youth correctional facility costs are driven down when educational programs are implemented in these facilities. Aside from actual operational costs of incarceration, it is important to consider the costs that are associated with re-offending; which include victim damages, court costs and community costs (Knoester, 2005).

Despite the high costs of incarceration, many studies suggest that the threat of incarceration is not a good deterrent for youth (and for adults) (Pettit, 2004). The model of retributive justice (under which incarceration falls) has the negative effect of separating 'criminals' from the rest of society and leads to a stratification of society. This makes it difficult for 'ex-criminals' to reintegrate into society and become positive contributing members of their communities (Christian, 2003).

The problem of juvenile delinquency is ever present in the society of the United States. Although much has been done to reduce juvenile delinquency and to throw out the retributive justice approach to crime in general, youth crime and especially violence is still very real in our society. There are six major theoretical approaches which can be utilized to answer two key questions regarding juvenile delinquency. The first question is the possible causes of and justifications for juvenile delinquency and especially violence, on a micro or internal level. The second question is the possible causes and justifications for juvenile delinquency and especially violence, on a macro or societal level.

The theory of **Functionalism** in sociology, although coined and developed after WWII by Talcott Parsons, may be said to

have originated in the works of early sociologist Émile Durkheim, who examined the division of labor in our society and stated that this division of labor creates **social solidarity**. The idea of **organic solidarity** also arose from this theory because Durkheim insisted that the division of labor into specific functions performed by individuals causes interdependence among individuals and leads to organic solidarity. Functionalism examines the many functions that occur within society and establishes the benefits and consequences of these functions for specific groups and individuals. Functionalism, especially in its later varieties such as that found in the works of Robert Merton, holds that while some functions are positive in their effects for one group or set of individuals, the same functions could produce negative effects for other groups or individuals.

There are many varieties of functionalist theory, which were developed after the creation of Durkheim's original model. Later sociologists created the theory of **structural functionalism** which examined how social order is maintained and created through the maintenance and promotion of societal structure. Structural functionalism also devoted much attention to the phenomenon of **social change** which is a process of 'evolution' in which **social institutions** become highly functional through their differentiation as well as their adaptation of common norms. **Neofunctionalism** is a later development of the functionalist social theories, holding on to the core of functionalism but going into a deeper exploration of social change and social conflict and the incorporation of various micro perspectives. Functionalist theorists examine social practices and their impact on society and the individual and define these social practices as any social occurrences that have a pattern and are repetitive in their nature. These social practices include **social roles, social structures, social norms** and social institutions. The later version of

functionalist was synthesized with conflict theory by Lewis Coser in order to come to a better understanding of the function that conflict plays in modern society (Wallace and Wolf, 2005; Farganis, 2004).

According to Functionalism, juvenile delinquency serves a function both for the offender and for society as a whole. There are many cited studies that prove that politicians use the perception of high crime rates as a platform for their elections. These false uses of important issues are visible in poll data through participants' higher interpretation of crime rates during election years. Taking attention away from the real issues at hand, and concentrating instead on crime and violence which is usually 'battled' with the increase of incarceration rates (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999).

Juveniles use violence and therefore crime to serve many functions; in order to belong to a group, to defend themselves against their environment, in order to get monetary benefits that they are unable to attain through other means and as a way to express and filter out their internal rage (Tetlack, 1984).

The **Conflict Theory** in sociology is comprised of four major propositions. First, that social life is predominantly shaped by social *conflict* among individuals and/or groups. The conflict arises from the presumed fact that individuals and/or groups are in competition for limited resources. The second major proposition of this theory is in regard to what constitutes the essence of the conflict; the assumption is that the fight is essentially over power and economic resources. The third proposition holds that the conflict over resources results in the formation of dominating or controlling groups in society, and this pattern continues over long periods of time. The fourth major proposition of conflict theory is the disproportionate influence that the *dominant societal groups* have in society. The dominant groups shift the structure of society through the control of major re-

sources and their allocations.

There are two major branches of the conflict theory in sociology; the first is the Marxian view of conflict theory which holds that the division of social classes based on economic interests causes the majority of conflicts in society. The second view held by sociologists such as Max Weber and (later) Randall Collins, proposes that not just, or primarily, the economic, but as well political, ethnic and religious *ideologies* (or sets of beliefs) can cause social conflict and the creation of social classes, status groups, and parties in society. These later sociologists hold that conflicts arise due to major societal factors, but are not limited to the economically based social class divisions. They also believe that conflict is a permanent part of society and can not be eliminated with the removal of social classes in society. Weber along with his counterpart theorists strongly believed that bureaucracy and its' desire for order often increases and produces conflicts, while Marxist theorists subject the behavior of *bureaucratic organizations* to the nature of economic forces (Wallace and Wolf, 2005; Farganis, 2004).

One of the best explanations for high incarceration rates is provided by the Conflict Theory because it holds that human groups are in constant competition, and therefore the dominant societal groups work to oppress the underclasses. In this case, dominant classes work to further oppress the poor classes that tend to have the highest instance of youth violence and delinquency. By incarcerating youth, we are limiting their chances at future success. We are therefore further oppressing the underclasses and ensuring that they remain in their current underprivileged states.

Juveniles are also in competition, but they are on the losing end of the battle with underqualified schools, lack of legitimate economic opportunities and struggles to keep themselves physically safe. Therefore, they turn to violence as a way to improve

their situation and to release inner psychological and emotional problems (Knoester, 2005).

Theories of Rational Choice state that humans are rational creatures that function by making calculated, rational choices based on the set of *norms, beliefs* and *values* prevalent in society. Values are developed through a person's participation in a particular group, as well as natural selection of traits that are instilled in each individual. Value factors are at the core of rational choice theoretical explanations because they are a major guide in the human decision-making process. Rational choices are those that are carefully calculated based on the above mentioned factors, and are used to maximize *utility*. Utility is defined as that which creates the most positive outcome or effect for an individual or group. Rational choice theories assume that humans always have the capacity to calculate their choices based on their desired utility and the consequences that may come with specific choices, and therefore this set of theories are labeled *means-end-theories*. In other words, rational choice theories describe the means (rationalized calculations and choices) by which humans work to obtain their desired ends (which are within their sets of values, beliefs and norms).

This set of theories can be applied to *social dilemmas* or situations which create a conflict between individual interests and those that are collective (interests of groups). In such situations, rational choice theories make it easier to distinguish between individual utility and the utility as determined by larger societal structures. However, rational choice theories are best used when they are applied to *face to face interactions* and *small group interactions*. Many sociologists criticize these theories because there is much research which supports decision making based on formulated *schemas* or sets of beliefs which are developed throughout life and used for categorization purposes. These critics claim that

choices are made mostly based on our schemas and for the most part, lack rational calculations of utility. Rational choice theories go outside the science of sociology into economics and political science because schemas are not likely to impact decision making in these fields, and choices become more black and white (those that increase utility and those that hinder it) (Wallace and Wolf, 2005; Farganis, 2004).

Rational Choice Theories are often used in Criminology to identify and understand the motives behind crime. However, they do little to help us understand why society continues to incarcerate youth. Incarceration of youth does not lead to positive utility, and therefore is not a rational choice (Deschenes, 1998). However, in the case of juvenile delinquency; crime is often the rational choice. When youth are faced with external factors that prevent social success (such as lack of education, dangerous living environments and no hope of attaining economic success through legal means) and internal factors (such as mental illness, childhood trauma and a lack of sufficient motivation), crime seems to be an easy means by which to attain desired utility (Knoester, 2005).

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective which explores how humans through the use language and *symbols* develop their senses of self, ability to think, and to communicate with others. Herbert Blumer coined the term symbolic interaction after George Herbert Mead's work in theorizing the self and how it develops. There are three parts to Blumer's theory; first, humans act based on the meanings that they assign to things; second, these meanings are formed through interpersonal interactions; and, finally, the definition and meaning of things is in a constant process of modification because human interpretations of events are constantly changing and evolving. This is a *social-psychological perspective* because symbolic interactions deal with an individ-

ual's internal thoughts and feelings in the context of his or her interactions with others. Opinion formation is an important part of symbolic interactionist theory because it holds that we form our interpretation of events based on the meanings that we have assigned to things. Symbolic interaction theorists believe that we live in an active environment, where change is constant; therefore the individual as well as society is in a constant process of change and development. In my interpretation of the theory, there are four key terms in symbolic interactionist theory; **process**, **agency**, **conditionality**, and **collective action**. Process refers to the ever changing and developing nature of symbolic interactions. Agency is the idea that humans have the potential to control their own actions, thoughts and feelings as well as their surrounding environment and those around them. Conditionality is the idea that humans are part of a society that has conditions to which they have to adjust, respond and get accustomed to. Collective action is any action that is taken by multiple participants; whether a few individuals or large groups. This type of action requires supervision, planning and good timing in order to be effective. On an individual level, symbolic interaction theories are some of the first to include emotions as an important aspect of human dealings with one another (Wallace and Wolf, 2005; Farganis, 2004).

Symbolic interaction theories are very applicable to criminology and are often used to explain why individuals commit crime. Youth in underprivileged life circumstances look to their relationships as a guide for behavior. Since many are surrounded by criminal activity, gang participation and drug use; they too partake in these behaviors (Patchin, 2006).

The retributive model of justice can also be attributed to symbolic interactionist theories because society as a whole is primed to fear crime, seek retribution and believe that underprivileged youth are

more likely to commit and re-commit crimes. This process of priming occurs largely through the media due to its disproportionate coverage of minority crime. There is a high salience of crime in our society, but very little attention is given to the community based approach to solving the problem of crime and violence. Therefore we are only 'interacting' based on the negative ideas and trends in society rather than expanding our knowledge of the positive possibilities (Ditton, 2004; Goidel, 2006).

Phenomenology is the sociological theory that is based on the idea that human reality is comprised of events, objects and feelings which are perceived just as they are understood by an individual's **consciousness**. Therefore, this theory gives special attention to the internal consciousness and subjective nature of an individual. The main technique in phenomenology is to explain the process of how one's consciousness of everyday life develops. Edmund Husserl is the founder of phenomenology and known mostly for taking the concept of **intentionality** as the independent variable in his studies. Husserl believed that humans often experience the world in a spontaneous way with little reflection and calculation, therefore opinions of reality and an understanding of the world is formed through the process of **natural attitudes**. Alfred Schutz took Husserl's approach further by making human experiences concrete and open to empirical investigation. Schutz claimed that although human **subjects** were given free will to interpret and partake in the world, their actions and views can also be **objects** of scientific investigation. This social actor experiences the world from his/her natural attitudes and often does not interpret it in a questioning way (Wallace and Wolf, 2005; Farganis, 2004). Harold Garfinkel has developed the phenomenological approach further by seeking to understand everyday human behavior by problematizing and intentionally disrupting, for the purpose of

study, what we usually take for granted as our commonsense social reality. This way, the nature of social reality as what Berger and Luckmann refer to as having been, and being continually, **constructed** and reconstructed becomes evident.

Phenomenology makes it possible for us to see how the everyday lives of violent youth, as well as the institutional frameworks and processes of the Juvenile Justice System, are not natural orders of things but ones that are socially constructed, and thereby can be further reconstructed and transformed. Narrowly interpreted and practiced, however, phenomenology may make the ideas of justice and crime fully subjective and malleable to different interpretations. If not careful, we may condemn youthful offenders to a life of crime by interpreting their behaviors as emanating from a subjective thought process (Zimring, 2006). As such, we take what we have narrowly learned about crime, about youth and about justice and formulate large scale opinions which influence policy.

When we attempt to examine the reason behind youth crime through phenomenology, we may notice that there is little rationality present in these criminal activities and they are largely spontaneous events shaped by internal forces and ideas. However, such criminal ideas and behaviors are a product of many years of seeing 'the negative side of life,' and learning to live in a way to accept the world around them as a subjective reality (Patchin, 2006).

All of the above theories provide some insight into the causes of crime and violence as well as the reasons for our perception of the need for incarceration and for the lack of focus on community-based programs for our underprivileged youth.

The death of my classmate Anna has made me realize the many external factors that hinder the success of the urban poor. Among these problems is the crucial issue of juvenile delinquency and violence. This

problem makes it almost impossible to be sure of a positive future for those that are forced to live in unsafe communities. In the United States, little is being done to combat the problem of juvenile delinquency and violence for the urban poor. Instead, this population is deprived of successful and positive educational environments, economic opportunities and the possibility to have strong, supportive communities. All of these problems help increase juvenile delinquency and violence because youth begin to see violence as their only way out of economic struggles and emotional and psychological issues.

A possible way to help in the reduction of juvenile delinquency and violence is to reduce the current trend of incarceration and to begin implementing community based intervention and residential and reintegration programs. These programs will allow youth to gain the skills and knowledge that they need in order to gain economic success. They will address the psychological problems that plague many children growing up in the stress of problematic family lives, poverty, and lack of self esteem. And finally, they will create a community network and greater awareness of the problems that face this nation and the world.

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