

The Class/Crime Debate

People from different disciplines often have opposing perspectives on whether social class is relevant to crime and criminal justice. Some hold that there is a link between social class and crime, while others firmly believe that the class question is out of place in discussions about crime.

In this first edition of Views and Reviews, we have invited two prominent academics to use FORUM as their "forum" to debate the class/crime issue.

Ross Hastings of the University of Ottawa argues that the question of class is fundamental to any discussion of crime. Don Andrews of Carleton University holds that class and crime are separate, unrelated issues. Corrections with Class Ross Hastings
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An emerging certitude among criminologists of all stripes is that we should re-engage in the challenge of doing applied criminology. More particularly, there is a commitment to working in smaller, more specific areas.

For rehabilitationists, the approach is to focus on the individual rather than to depend on situational reform. For critical criminologists, the approach is to focus on local communities and inter-agency partnerships rather than broader levels of class relations.

The problem is that this shared commitment to action does not reflect a common theoretical perspective. The result is a series of acrimonious and, sometimes, very silly debates. A good example is the current argument about whether social class matters.

The answer, in my view, is yes - class has a significant impact on rates of crime and victimization among different social groups. The key is to demonstrate how it makes a difference.

The recent work on behalf of rehabilitation argues that individual differences are at the root of criminal behaviour, and that programs can be designed to treat those differences and thereby reduce recidivism. However, this work rarely identifies the relationship of these factors to social class.

Individual differences are critical, of that there can be no doubt. However, these differences are not randomly distributed. Certain social groups suffer much higher rates of the differences that "make a difference" because of the social and economic stresses they experience.

Not only must we recognize the impact of class, we must integrate it into our analyses and responses to crime. Until we do, it is unlikely that programs aimed at rehabilitating individuals will fulfill their potential. This is in large part because they will fail to address the kinds of problematic situations to which these individuals must respond in their daily lives.

The result is that our rehabilitation programs may help some individuals for a little while, but they won't make much difference in our ability to prevent crime or make our communities safer and more vibrant. Socio-Economic Class of Origin and Individual Criminal Conduct Don Andrews

The unequal distribution of societal wealth, power and prestige is a major social problem with some tragic personal and familial consequences. Poverty and the abuse of power are not to be condoned, and efforts to redistribute wealth and power more equitably are highly valued.

As important as these concerns are, social class of origin is not a major correlate or predictor of criminal behaviour. Thus, much of sociological criminology - the class-based anomie/strain, subcultural, labelling and critical/Marxist perspectives on individual criminal conduct - rests on a very weak empirical base.

Consider the large-scale quantitative reviews of the literature on this issue. In 1978, Tittle, Villimez and Smith reviewed a number of empirical studies, concluding that the average correlation between class and crime, at about $-.09$, offers little support to class-based theories.

If social class is considered in predicting criminal behaviour, Rolf Loeber and colleagues estimate that the relative improvement over chance (guessing) in making a correct prediction is about 18% - once again, a minimal association between class and crime.

A 1991 study by Gottfredson, McNeil and Gottfredson looked at the socio-economic characteristics of neighbourhoods and reported minimal effects on criminal behaviour.

In brief, the assumption that class - defined by parental, educational, occupational or financial indices or by the socio-economic characteristics of neighbourhoods - links with criminality remains empirically unfounded.

Social class of origin is not a major source of variability in the criminal behaviour of individuals. The major sources of such variability are the personal, interpersonal, familial and structural/cultural factors identified by general personality and social-psychological perspectives on criminal behaviour.