

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Deviance and Social Control

Unit M2: The Social Distribution of Crime

Introduction

In this set of notes we are going to look at two aspects of the "social distribution of crime" in Britain.

Firstly, an overview of the basic patterns of criminal behaviour that exist in our society.

Secondly, an overview of various theoretical explanations for these crime patterns.

The Pattern of Crime

In relation to the social distribution of crime, there are two basic aspects at which we might usefully look:

1. Who commits crimes in Britain.
2. What types of crimes are committed in Britain .

Before we consider each of these ideas in more detail, a number of qualifications have to be noted:

1. Firstly, our knowledge about crime in Britain is based upon two main sources of information:
 - a. **Official Statistics** collected by the police and published by the government (these can be found in "**Social Trends**", published each year by HMSO).
 - b. **Self-Report** and **Victimisation studies**. This type of study is basically a social survey of people's experiences concerning crime in any one year. The largest and most authoritative of these studies is that of the "**British Crime Survey**" - a survey that has been carried-out for the Home Office every two years since 1982.
2. The type of source we use as the basis for an examination of the social distribution of crime will influence the theoretical explanation of crime that we, as sociologists, produce.

As we will see, for example, Official crime statistics indicate that in 1991 the number of crimes notified to the police was upwards of 5 million. according to the British Crime Survey estimate for 1992, however, upwards of 15 million crimes were committed in Britain.

We must, therefore, be aware that the type of source we use will be significant, since it has the potential to affect our understanding of just who are "the criminals" in modern Britain.

3. Furthermore, the way in which we define both crime and deviance will be an important consideration in relation to explanations for criminal behaviour (something we will consider in a later section in more detail).

4. For convenience, these notes will consider the social distribution of crime in relation to four main categories:

**Region,
Age,
Gender,
Class,**

before looking in more detail at self-report studies. In this way, it should be possible to illustrate the idea that:

- a. The way in which you measure crime will affect the picture you receive about its social distribution.
- b. It might be possible to arrive at a more reliable and valid picture of crime distribution by considering the two different sources together.

In addition to the above, it is necessary to consider the following:

1. Crime is a socially-constructed category:

Different societies define behaviour in different ways (such as, for example, the difference in relation to alcohol consumption between Britain and Saudi Arabia).

The same form of behaviour may be defined differently at different times in the same society (for example, until the early 1960's, suicide was a punishable offence in Britain. If you attempted suicide and failed, you were liable for imprisonment - a prospect that must have been designed to really cheer you up...).

2. Crime is obviously related to law (and therefore the concept of power, since someone must have the power to create particular laws / proscribe various forms of behaviour).

In this respect, the way we, as sociologists, theorise the nature and distribution of power in our society will have some affect upon the way in which we understand the nature of law, crime and deviance generally.

Keeping the above in mind, let's begin to look at the social distribution of crime in Britain by looking at what Official Statistics have to say on the matter.

Official Crime Statistics

1. Crime statistics are compiled in the basis of "offences that are notified to the police". In this respect, they provide evidence of crimes that:

- a. Are known to the police.
- b. Officially recorded by the police.

In relation to the above, three main qualifications have to be considered. For a crime to "officially" have taken place, it has to have been:

1. Brought to the attention of someone:

Not all crimes, of course, are notified to the police.

2. Reported / notified:

The police in Britain have a large area of discretion in relation to the recording of crime and it is evident that not all criminal acts are reported / recorded (for whatever reason).

This may not necessarily be very significant, but we must at least be aware of this idea.

3. Accepted that a law has been broken:

Strange as it may seem, many crimes that are committed may not ever be recognised by anyone as a crime (computer crime, fraud, making personal telephone calls whilst at work and so forth). Furthermore, given that large numbers of people routinely break the law but are never convicted, we have to be aware that not all "criminals" have been convicted of a crime.

Only people who are **convicted** appear in the Official Statistics (and since, on average, only about 30% of all known crimes are cleared-up in Britain there are clearly a number of people who have broken the law but never been caught). Why might the idea of "offences notified to the police" be significant in the context of our ability to explain criminal behaviour?

The Geographic Distribution Of Crime.

As a general rule, more crime takes place in urban than rural areas. A number of possible reasons can be advanced to account for this observation:

1. There is more opportunity for crime in urban areas:

In this respect, there are more people, more places in which to commit crimes and so forth.

2. There are more police resources in urban areas:

This tends to increase the possibility that crime will be notified to / by the police, but it is also interesting to note that, in relation to the more visible forms of crime that take place in our society, there is a greater likelihood of detection / police involvement.

3. In rural areas, patterns of association tend to be characterised by informal social controls, whereby in relatively close-knit communities people are able to exercise far higher levels of personal social control over people that they know.

In urban areas, the opposite may be true, insofar as most social relationships tend to be relatively impersonal and hence lacking in close personal ties. In such areas, the influence of informal social controls may be much weaker.

Ferdinand Tonnies expressed this difference in the basic form of social relationships by arguing that **rural** areas tended to be characterised by "**Gemeinschaft**" type arrangements:

These are defined as small-scale, close-knit "community" types where "everyone knows everyone else" and people make it their business to know what is going-on in their community.

He contrasted this with "**Gesellschaft**" type arrangements that he argued tended to exist in **urban** areas:

These are defined as large-scale, loosely-knit "association" types, whereby people come into contact with large numbers of other people in their everyday lives on a relatively impersonal basis.

Talcott Parsons ("The Structure of Social Action") characterised these relationships as being "**instrumental**" and characteristic of **secondary socialisation** (the process whereby we learn how to deal with people on an impersonal basis).

Finally, an alternative explanation (if we assume there really is less crime in rural areas) might be that people deal with various forms of minor law breaking in ways that do not necessarily involve the police, or that the police themselves (because of their closer personal ties with people in a community) are less likely to invoke the criminal law over minor infractions - preferring perhaps to caution the offender etc.

The Age And Sex Distribution Of Crime.

Statistically, most crime in Britain is committed by young males (those between the ages of 14 - 21). For example:

In 1983, of those found guilty / cautioned for all types of crime there were:

a. 210,000 males between the ages 14 - 21

225,000 males aged 21+

b. 37,000 females aged 14 - 21

47,000 females aged 21+

Thus, for both males and females roughly 50% of those found guilty / cautioned were between the ages 14 - 21. The ratio of male - female offenders, however, was approximately 5:1 in favour of males...

In terms of **longitudinal studies** of crime (that is, surveys which aim to build-up a comparative study of crime over a period of time), for people born in 1953:

30% of these males had a criminal record.

6% of these females had a criminal record.

(and it wasn't "Two Little Boys" by Rolf Harris or "Deck of Cards" by Wink Martindale - although these are, by any standards you might choose, criminal records)

As you might expect, a number of **qualifications** have to be noted in relation to the above. This is mainly because we cannot simply assume, from the statistics, that young males are more criminally inclined than older males or females:

1. Courts may deal more-leniently with females (much female crime seems to be relatively petty, non-violent and so forth (the two most popular tending to be shop-lifting and prostitution - the latter being an interesting example of a double-standard, whereby women can be criminalised for selling sex whilst men can't be criminalised for buying it...)).

In relation to shop-lifting, there has been a recent tendency, by the courts, social workers and so forth, to see this type of female behaviour more of a "cry for help" than outright criminal behaviour. Again, this may simply represent sexist attitudes towards female behaviour or indeed the "medicalisation" of some forms of crime, whereby criminal behaviour is seen to be a symptom of some form of psychological malaise.

In relation to prostitution, quite apart from the double-standard in relation to behaviour, most female prostitutes end-up in prison because they could not afford to pay the fine levied on them (which suggests that large numbers of female prostitutes may make very little money from their activities).

2. Female forms of crime may be "less visible" to the police etc. This is especially true in relation to crimes of violence, where women tend to be the victims rather than the perpetrators (especially in relation to domestic violence where it is estimated that 95% of violence within the family is directed by males at females - how reliable such a statistic might be I leave to you to judge).

3. A great deal of female crime tends to involve "sexual delinquency" (especially "status offences" - running away from home, being in "moral danger" and so forth). In short, it involves behaviour which, in the adult world is not classified as criminal / delinquent. This may account for a great deal of young female "crime" and also explains why older females do not appear to commit as much crime as older males.

How significant do you think are the ideas of "age" and "sex" as a factor in criminal behaviour?

With reference to the data just presented, what other factors associated with age might explain the large numbers of people aged 14 -21 involved in crime compared with their 21+ counterparts.

In the above respect **age**, per se, may not be such a determining factor in relation to crime since it is clear that age can be correlated with other factors such as:

1. Lifestyle:

The young may find themselves, because of their lifestyle, in situations where they are exposed to criminal forms of behaviour (especially violence and petty crime, joyriding and so forth).

Thus, it may be that criminal behaviour has no clear-cut, causal, relationship with age (that is, people do not commit more crime just because of their age). Rather, the fact that young people may be involved in public drinking, night-clubbing and the like, may simply mean that they are more likely than, for example, an old age pensioner, to find themselves in an environment conducive to criminal behaviour.

2. Policing Strategies:

Just like everyone else, the police have an ideological conception of both crime and criminals, which they use as a guide-line in their work. The more that the idea of an association between young males and crime becomes established, the more the process of criminalization begins to resemble a self-fulfilling prophecy:

Young males need to be policed because of their heavy involvement in crime. The police know they are heavily involved in crime because large numbers are arrested and convicted.

Therefore, the more young people are closely policed, the more any involvement in crime is picked-up...

3. Nature of crimes:

Most young male / female involvement in crime is extremely petty - much of it involves behaviour that could be dismissed as "high jinks" or simply part of the process of growing up. In some circumstances it is seen as exactly that - students celebrating the end of exams or "rag week" tend, for example, not to be arrested for behaviour that, if indulged in by non-students, could well lead to arrest.

If we now turn towards an examination of **female** involvement in crime, a couple of things are immediately apparent:

1. Firstly, although females generally appear to commit less crime than males there has been, according to official statistics, a significant increase in female criminality over the past thirty years. Whether or not this increase is more apparent than real we will examine in a moment.
2. Secondly, when we look at self-report studies relating to crime we note that:
 - a. Female involvement in criminal activity is not restricted to a few areas. Whilst females do not tend to commit crimes of violence (violence by females tends to occur within the family, mainly as a final response to male violence), they are involved in a wide cross-section of crime.
 - b. In relation to male criminality, women appear to commit far fewer crimes (not just in categories that you would expect - sexual crimes, for example - but also in categories that tend to be traditionally associated with women - shop-lifting, for example, is carried-out predominantly by men).

As with the concept of age, we have to be careful about how we explain gender-based involvement in crime. The methodological implications of using concepts such as age and sex mainly relate to the difference between causation and correlation:

1. It is clear that, from official statistics, there are a number of clear correlation's between age, sex and criminal behaviour.
2. However, we have to be clear that there is something about being young, male or female and the relationship between such categories and crime before we can say that being any of these things causes criminal behaviour.

In this respect, as I've suggested with the concept of age, there is nothing particularly inherent in your biological sex that predisposes you towards crime. For example, there is no evidence (of any validity) that shows that women have different inherent personality predisposition's than man.

In terms of their personality, for example, women are just as capable of behaving criminally as men...

3. In this respect, all that we can say, methodologically, is that age and sex correlates with crime - but since not all young people or all males are involved in crime (at least, not according to official statistics) we have to look at factors related to age and sex that might allow us to explain non-criminal and criminal behaviour. In relation to females, for example, we can explain their involvement in criminal behaviour in a number of ways.

1. Socialisation / Social Control:

This form of explanation focuses upon the idea that females in our society are socialised differently to males. In this respect, female socialisation clearly stresses passivity as a feminine characteristic (which might help to explain something about the relative lack of female violence) and it is evident from studies analysed by feminist writers such as **Abbott and Wallace** ("An Introduction To Sociology: Feminist Perspectives", 1990) that female behaviour tends to be more-strictly controlled within the family, for example. .

This is especially true of female sexuality which tends to be more heavily "policed" than young male sexual behaviour, for example. The following reading from Abbott and Wallace looks more closely at some general theoretical explanations of the relationship between females and crime.

Can you identify any ways in which female socialisation might stress passivity in their relations with others?

This "social control" argument does, of course, work both ways. In any social group where control is tightly enforced, there is less likelihood of certain types of crime being committed (by males as well as females). This applies to any social situation:

If opportunity is denied, then a particular form of crime (whether it be petty theft or whatever), does not occur.

However, as females are given more freedom we would expect them to become involved in various forms of criminal behaviour. In this respect, police and judicial expectations may be significant, since if the police start to perceive females differently, the likely development is greater levels of arrest and criminalization. As I suggested earlier, this does indeed appear to be happening, insofar as more females are being subjected to a process of criminalization.

What we have to try to understand, as sociologists, is whether or not increased levels of female criminalization represents:

A real increase in female criminality.

A greater awareness, on the part of control agencies like the police, that women are involved in various forms of crime (and always have been).

We can look at this idea in relation to a second aspect of female involvement in crime, namely,

2. Opportunity Structure:

In terms of the ratio of conviction between females and males, where women have similar opportunities for criminal behaviour in relation to males, their respective patterns of crimes appear to be broadly similar:

For example, where female crime most-closely approximates to male crime is in relation to shop-lifting and it's no coincidence that in this area of their social lives women have similar opportunities for crime to men.

Similarly, where opportunity structures differ, so too does the pattern of crime:

For example, burglary is predominantly a male crime and one way of explaining the difference is to note that this type of crime tends to be a relatively solitary pursuit that takes place late at night. A female alone late at night is both more-likely to:

1. Attract attention.
2. Involve some degree of personal danger.

As **Ian Marsh** ("Sociology In Focus: Crime", 1986) notes:

"In areas where females have similar opportunities to men they appear as likely to break laws. The high incidence of shop-lifting among women, for example, reflects the day-to-day activities in which female criminality is liable to be expressed. In the world of organised, professional, crime, sex-segregation is the norm. Women are likely to be viewed in terms of traditional sex-role stereotypes, as unreliable, emotional, illogical and so on. Moreover, males tend to see the crimes they commit as too dangerous for women, or too difficult, or their masculine pride may not be willing to accept women as organisers of crime, as 'bosses'".

In general terms, therefore, it may not be sex that is the deciding factor in criminal behaviour. The opportunity to commit various forms of crime may be much more significant. For example, in relation to employment related crime:

- a. Fewer women than men work, therefore, less opportunity exists.
- b. Women who do work tend to occupy less powerful positions within an organisation. They are more-likely to be subject to close supervision, have less opportunity for acting on their own initiative, unsupervised and so forth. Hence, they generally have less opportunity for committing "white-collar" crimes such as fraud, embezzlement and so forth.

Whilst the above explanations may have some currency, a further factor has to be considered in relation to male / female criminal behaviour, namely:

3. The Underestimation Of Female Crime:

Police / judicial stereotypes may be a factor here. If various control agents have stereotyped views about "typical criminals", they may not place women so easily into this type of category. They may, therefore, be:

Less likely to suspect / arrest females.

Less likely to punish females through jail sentences (since women may not be perceived as "real criminals").

As I've already noted, the police / courts and so forth appear more-willing to adopt a "medical model" of female crime, whereby women who commit crimes are believed to be acting "abnormally"; therefore a medical explanation for their behaviour appears "more-appropriate" in this context - women "couldn't help themselves" and they therefore require treatment rather than punishment.

This may represent a form of "**reverse sexism**", whereby women receive lighter punishment for their behaviour than men because, by transgressing against male norms regarding female behaviour men have to explain this behaviour in terms of "sickness", "emotional stresses" and so forth.

In this respect, the clear underestimation of female involvement in crime is probably a mixture of all of the things I've discussed in this section:

Stereotyped beliefs about women held by powerful (male) control agents.

Tighter social controls on many female activities.

Limited opportunity structures for women to engage in criminal behaviour.

Briefly explain the concept of "reverse sexism" and, using examples, show how this concept may work:

a. To women's' advantage.

b. To their disadvantage.

Social Class And The Social Distribution Of Crime.

As we have seen in relation to age and sex, in relation to conviction rates there is a clear relationship between crime and class, insofar as the majority of convicted offenders are drawn from the working classes. As might also be expected, there is a clear correlation between type of crime and social class. For example:

Crimes involving violence, theft from property, etc. are mainly associated with the working class.

Fraud, embezzlement and so forth are mainly middle class crimes.

Corporate crime (involving such things as insider trading, environmental crimes, market-rigging and the like) is mainly an upper class phenomenon.

This relationship is hardly surprising given the idea of different opportunity structures in our society (working class males and females, for example, are not, by definition, in positions of sufficient power to allow them to carry-out elaborate company frauds). However, simply because more members of the working class are convicted of crimes than the members of other social classes doesn't mean that we can automatically assume that the working classes are somehow "more criminal" than the middle / upper classes. In this respect, a number of ideas are significant:

The type of crime committed is an important factor:

The working class, for example, tend to be involved in crimes that are highly visible (crimes of violence, for example). In situations where there are clear victims and little attempt to hide criminal behaviour (for whatever reason), it follows that detection / arrest and conviction rates are likely to be higher.

Crimes such as fraud, insider dealing and so forth tend to be much less visible to the police, general public and so forth. Since the police do not routinely involve themselves in companies, offices and so forth, greater opportunity exists for this type of crime.

In this respect, the policing of these types of middle / upper class crimes is much more difficult - policing is reactive (that is, responding to a report of crime) rather than overly-active (policing an area where crime is likely to occur).

Finally, many forms of middle-class crime may not be defined as crimes at all. These include many forms of petty theft (making personal phone-calls at work, using the company's photocopier for personal work and so forth), as well as more-complex and serious forms of crime. Computer crime, for example, tends to be underestimated in crime statistics because, even when it is detected, a company may prefer to sack the employee rather than involve the police because the attendant publicity surrounding a major fraud may be considered more damaging to the company than the crime itself...

Note: A useful reading in this context is "Business Crime" by Michael Clarke"

Using the information we've just discussed - and from elsewhere if necessary - outline the methodological reasons for the observation that there is a correlation, rather than a causal relationship, between concepts such as age, sex and class in relation to crime

Having outlined a number of ideas relating to the social distribution of crime as it relates to official statistics, it might be useful to look at the picture of criminal behaviour and involvement that emerges when we use **self-report** or **victimisation** studies as the basis of our analysis.

British Crime Surveys...

At the start of this section I noted that our information relating to the social distribution of crime was highly dependent on official statistics. What we can do, however, is to look briefly at an alternative form of knowledge - "victimisation" or self-report studies. It is, of course, important to remember that, just as we have cast doubts upon the reliability / validity of official statistics, these kinds of study are by no-means perfect - we must be aware that there are a number of ways in which they may be deficient.

However, the most extensive form of self-report study carried-out biannually in Britain is the "British Crime Survey" (BCS) and, from this survey, we can note a number of significant things:

1. The BCS estimates that, in 1991, there were 15 million crimes committed in Britain. The figure we get from official statistics is approximately 5 million.

The BCS figure may represent a "normal" level of crime in Britain, which in itself suggests two significant ideas:

a. Firstly, that crime and criminality is far more widespread than we might hitherto have imagined (which may have implications for a simple "criminal" / "law-abiding" dichotomy - we may not be able to say that those who have not be convicted of a crime are necessarily law-abiding).

b. Another explanation, however, is that people may not simply commit one crime and get caught - it's possible (probable?) that people involved in crime commit many crimes for which they are not convicted.

c. Thirdly, however, it does suggest that any increase in police activity / resources and so forth is likely to lead to an increase in reported crime. Thus, an increased police presence will lead them to discover more crimes (since they are digging-into the "hidden crime rate" revealed by the BCS). Thus, in statistical terms, the

more police there are the more likely they are to reveal the true extent of crime and, of course, the more-likely they are to be criticised for "failing to control criminal behaviour".

Explain how increased police resources may lead to an increased level of reported crime.

2. As official statistics suggest, most crime is directed against property and involves relatively minor offences.

3. Potential problems in relation to the reporting of sexual crimes may still persist, mainly because of the way in which the survey is carried-out in people's homes:

The usual problems of "embarrassment" exist, for example (people may not like to admit to a stranger that they have been raped or assaulted).

However, since it is evident that a great deal of violent behaviour (rape, assault and so forth) may not be reported through the BCS, mainly because assailant and victim will be sitting in the same room, they may not define their behaviour as criminal, etc.

4. As with official statistics, the BCS tells us very little of any significance about crimes of the powerful - people who have the ability to hide their crimes and so forth.