

ABSTRACT

An Empirical Investigation of Social Class and Crime and of the Major Class-Related Theories of Crime in a Caribbean Community

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In the theoretical and empirical literature on criminal behaviour, social class is central. However, in advanced industrial societies the existence of a class-self-reported delinquency relationship still remains inconclusive. It has been argued that in developing societies more discernible social class boundaries exist, and behavioural differences across class positions including that of criminal behaviour are more likely to be empirically supported. Yet there is no literature concerning social class and self-reported delinquency in the Caribbean.

This paper empirically tested the relationship between social class and self-reported criminal and delinquent behaviour in Barbados. The results of this study revealed that there was a negative relationship between parental SES and overall criminal involvement. However, this relationship does not appear consistently across crimes. In addition, for all types of offences other than drugs there were no significant differences between the rates of self-reported crime in two neighbourhoods that differed dramatically in social class.

This self report study also investigated several of the major class-related theories of crime; deterrence theory which focused on the impact of various forms of punishment threats on criminal behaviour; social control theory with its emphasis on family relationships and the school experience; status frustration theory which also deals with the school experience, and its effect on delinquent activity ; and the impact of delinquent friends on the criminal involvement of others which is central to the differential association theory. The results revealed that various theoretical factors were significant predictors of criminal behaviour, independent of the SES of the community.

Even though this study was conducted in a developing society, and attempted to meet the criteria by which a negative relationship between SES and crime is most likely to be observed, this self report study demonstrated that the relationship between measures of class and self-reported delinquency appears inconsistently and is weak. These findings question the major theories of crime which regard crime and delinquency as essentially a lower class phenomenon. This study introduces a Caribbean perspective to one of the most controversial issues in criminology.