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Exploring Theoretical Foundations of How Environmental Factors Affect Likelihood to Commit Crime: A Systematic Review

Joanna Lee

Blair Academy, United States

Abstract

1.8 million people are incarcerated in the United States (2024). In New York, there were 122,304 people arrested and prosecuted in 2024, and in Los Angeles, 192,305. These highly populated cities serve as a benchmark of society in many ways, however their quality of life widely varies by social class, specifically for the incarcerated. Thus, as asked in many sociology and psychology studies, it is important to explore how criminalization occurs within a society. Extant research focuses on criminal predispositions related to social class and poverty, while accounting for the sociological ingredients of criminal behavior, in the form of mental disorder presence or demographic variables. In this paper, we focus on various relevant theories that explain the emergence of criminal behavior within many societal structures, and highlight both qualitative and relevant quantitative findings. This paper is a theoretical account of how aspects of one's environment such as education received, community's influence, and financial desperation forms a person's psychology, predisposing them to commit crime. We focus on theories such as Broken Window Theory, Social Control Theory, and Strain Theory, as they set a foundation for the specific mechanisms by which such environmental factors are associated with criminal behavior. In addition, we discuss the structure of Norway, Japan, and Denmark in addition to the United States, in order to capture a more global perspective within the study of criminal behavior.

Keywords: Crime, Incarceration, Sociology, Poverty, Psychology