

Why I Study Criminology & Why I Think You Should Too

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Mayhem in the Middle Class: Money No Salvation

Some of the most interesting and revealing research in criminology can be found in “self-report” studies. Self-report research examines the extent to which various populations (often groups not defined as “at risk”) engage in certain types of risky or unwanted behavior. No surprise to you, middle class adolescents and adults reveal profoundly high rates of drug abuse and addiction, well-hidden domestic violence and child neglect, and a growing sense of disconnection between parents and children (see Elliot Currie’s new book, *The Road to Whatever*). Folks with resources are better able to hide the violence in their lives, are more empowered to deal with it in having resources to reach out for help or escape, but crime and violence are prevalent across American social class boundaries. Criminology reveals so many nominally-improbable realities about crime, that its actual patterns are often counter-intuitive: Most poor people don’t commit crime, but most people who end up in prison come from economically impoverished backgrounds. Poor folks are much more likely to be victimized by crime, but are less likely to report it. The longer someone spends in prison, the more likely they are to re-offend. As for the ultra-rich, how often does self-destruction follow them, particularly second and later generations of the quite wealthy? (The answer is: quite often.)

Perhaps the hallmark insight of criminology comes from “social control” theory: that informal social control *bonds* between individuals and family members, peer groups, and social institutions such as church, school, and workplace are far more powerful sources of behavior control than police, laws, and prisons. Strong social bonds best characterized by the love of family—but also available through churches, schools, caring friends, and other social institutions where individuals can get tapped into positive agendas for their lives, are the key. In short, people live by love or the lack of it, wherever they fall in the social class hierarchy. Structural biases do exist, but waiting for government to erase these is both disempowering and unlikely to happen in any case. Moreover, resources *are available* for those whom we can empower to use them.

A Constant Invitation for a Wake-Up Call

So, there are no quick easy answers, just “predictors,” “risk factors,” “social conditions,” and “individual resiliency.” And as criminologists will tell you (especially those “post modern” ones, but in language you can’t understand), there are more exceptions to the rules of crime causation than there are examples of them: most poor folks do not commit crime, most abused children do not go on to become abusers, most who suffer from mental illness are law abiding and hard working, most addicts strive to

¹ I generally believe that it is impossible to be “objective” or “value-free” in my work (as in caffeine-free) and frankly don’t want to be. Instead, I seek to identify my biases, remain open to all questions, and be willing to modify a position if evidence/argument suggest I should do so. This is all “objectivity” was ever really meant to mean anyway.

quit using and eventually succeed—provided they are not locked away into a system that will leave them isolated and with no social options.

Government programs fail at a tremendous rate and also often result in “unintended consequences” destructive to clients (see anything written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a liberal Democrat Senator with a PhD in social science). When social programs succeed—as they sometimes do—they often succeed for reasons beyond the design of the intended program, having more to do with characteristics of individuals helped than with the program itself. Our evaluation of Jacksonville’s \$3million federal Breaking the Cycle (drug treatment) project showed no significant difference between treatment and comparison group due to implementation problems, with qualitative data revealing success stories who had other things going for them (see Journal of Offender Rehabilitation <http://www.haworthpress.com/store/product.asp?sku=J076>). In this case, the high costs of bail bonds in Duval County, Florida, prevented a large enough sample of eligible offenders from gaining access to the program. Make no mistake: the costs of being socially isolated and poor are quite devastating.

Options: Finding Your Path/Your Own Positive Culture of Support

As unpopular as it may be, I’m a “bleeding heart conservative.” I don’t trust the existing structure to help people, really. There is no such thing as a level playing field and whatever one’s personal experience of exclusion, social isolation, abuse, predispositions and addictions, etc., government programs fail short of the decision by individuals to save themselves. The dynamics of our system do work to oppress the inactive and disconnected. The mass imprisonment binge we have been on the past 25 years is further completely destructive of social bonds. While most people don’t realize that the official recidivism rate for state prisoners falls just below 70% three years after release, recidivism is surely the most accurate of all measures of our efforts at crime control. What other social program could fail 70% of the time and command more resources year after year? Most of my own research is focused on this question of interest group politics and criminal justice policy, because these determine social policy far more than anything offenders are doing. Clearly, the big government of prisons (like the big government of welfare), involves social control of certain groups and not crime control for society.

Criminology to me has thus become the study of how best to convince people to save themselves by setting their own course and offers a dialogue about what resources are available (or not) to help them do so. I’m basically a conservative Jeffersonian Marxist: democracy is the lesser evil in re government (but government should always be “small”), money certainly influences outcomes, and individuals fare best when helped to stand on their own. If you believe resources don’t matter at all, or that social class is simply a fiction, or that policy is not influenced by economic interests (as with lobbyists, campaign financing, etc), please pick up and read any current newspaper. Marx and his ilk, however, got a whole lot wrong, ignored marginalizing forces beyond social class (i.e. gender and race) and underestimated both the power of the individual to overcome class bias when given legal rights, as well as the power of organized labor (whether it be the Fraternal Order of Police or the Teamsters) to make its own advances. By global standards, even the poorest among us in the US generally have access to basic resources of emergency food, shelter and medical care. Many among us, however, do not—and beyond access to emergency care, those among us who are not citizens (they probably

built your new house), have no basic rights—and suffer true neediness in health care, nutrition and shelter and education, often to wind up in for-profit prisons held without bond (the most lucrative of all populations incarcerated in private prisons). Read *In the Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter the American Community*, by Mary Pipher.

Our system still modestly works to maximize the life-chances of everyone co-existing on an unequal playing field. Jefferson saw no end to that strife, in any system. Helping people commit to finding their strengths and knowing their options, through small communities of engagement, is the key from my perspective. Thus, look at any program for offenders: Police Athletic League (<http://www.nationalpal.org/>), Matrix House (a therapeutic community run by JSO Dept of Corrections) (<http://tca.nonprofitoffice.com/index.asp?Type=NONE&SEC={546775EC-C34A-49CD-B6A9-B137A5ABDD1C}>) , or any faith-based program for offenders (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbci/> / <http://www.djj.state.fl.us/MediaRelease/2002/pr092502.html>). What is the goal? To connect people both to a community and to a process of re-direction. Young people especially need resources and people enough to help them find their way, to move beyond clear failures, mistakes, and setbacks. Interestingly, research documenting the successes of those few (30% of offenders) that succeed once released from prison, shows very clearly that they succeed because they have or have gotten the support of small networks that maintain strong social bonds (see Urban Institute research (<http://www.urban.org/justice/index.cfm>)).

This is an exploration that began for me many years ago by reading about Dorothy Day, Fr. Dan Berrigan, Robert Coles, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Jane Addams (among many others). Whatever the seeming contradictions among these thinkers, they all speak directly to the importance of community for individuals.