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SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION AND STAKE IN CONFORMITY: COMPLEMENTARY FACTORS IN THE PREDATORY BEHAVIOR OF HOODLUMS¹

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EDITOR.

The American standard of living is one of the highest of any nation, yet burglary, robbery, car theft, and other forms of larceny are frequent. These predatory crimes are, as a matter of fact, much more numerous than crimes against the person such as murder, rape, and aggravated assault. Furthermore, and this accentuates the paradox, in the United States a thief who steals because he is hungry or cold is a rarity.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL VIGILANCE

Why should so much stealing occur in a rich country? The age and socio-economic status of arrested offenders provide some clues. American thieves are usually young hoodlums from slum neighborhoods. An explanation of their youth and neighborhood of residence is that people are more prone to act upon their anti-social impulses when external controls over them are weak. Thus, one reason why adolescents are arrested more often than older or younger people is that adolescents are less likely to be under the influence of a family unit; they are becoming emancipated from the family into which they were born but have not yet married and got involved in a new family unit. Similarly, slum dwellers commit more thefts than suburbanites because stealing is not universally frowned on in deteriorated neighborhoods as it is in wealthier communities.¹ In short, predatory crime occurs when social vigilance is reduced.

Case histories of hoodlum type thieves generally support the "social disorganization" explanation of stealing. Commonly, the street-corner rowdy grew up in a chaotic household. His parents exercised ineffectual control over him, not necessarily because of indifference, but because they were overwhelmed by their own difficulties: chronic warfare in the household; death, desertion, or serious illness of the breadwinner; mental deficiency or disease; alcoholism; gambling; promiscuity; too many children for an unskilled father to support or a harried mother to supervise. Such problems not only reduce the effectiveness of parental control. By curtailing income

¹ It is of course possible to question these statements about the real incidence of stealing behavior. Data exist for arrested persons but not for offenders who eluded the police. WALTER RECKLESS, for example, speaks only of "categoric risks in crime," and thereby avoids the danger of unwarranted inferences. See his text. *THE CRIME PROBLEM*, 2nd ed., New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955, pp. 26-42.

and forcing the family to occupy the least desirable housing, they are indirectly responsible for ineffective community control, too. A slum is a neighborhood where houses are old, overcrowded, and in need of major repairs. But it is also a place where people with incapacitating problems are concentrated. Preoccupied with their difficulties, the residents of a slum are simultaneously ineffective parents and apathetic citizens. The larger the concentration of distracted persons in a community, the less capable the community becomes for united resistance to anything—including crime. "Horse rooms" and "cat houses" are able to locate in slums for the same reason that youngsters are permitted to "hang-out" on street corners: troubled people don't care. Thus, it is no accident when reformatory inmates come from backgrounds where neither family nor neighborhood influences posed a strong obstacle to taking other people's property.

The weakness of parental and community controls cannot, however, account for the fact that girls pass through adolescence and live in slums just as boys do, yet do not steal to the same extent. Nor does the weakness of external controls explain why only a minority of slum youths steal persistently enough to get caught.² Others grow up under similar circumstances and seem reasonably law-abiding. More must be involved in the creation of a hoodlum than the lack of vigilance of family and neighbors. What goes on inside the young tough? Is he mentally sick? A small percentage of the thefts which come to the attention of juvenile and criminal courts can be accounted for in this way. The psychiatrist explains how a neurotic need for love may drive a boy to take women's lingerie from clothes lines. More typically, however, the hoodlum is one of a group of friends all of whom steal. Moreover, he does not seem driven by a neurotic compulsion; he steals because his friends expect it of him.

But why? A little can be learned about the motivation of young hoodlums from examining their offenses. For the most part, their thefts are petty and crudely executed. A professional con man or safe-cracker would be ashamed to be suspected of activity so lacking in craftsmanship. They burglarize a grocery store; they drive off a car and "strip" it of radio, heater, and tires; they break into a house while the owner is away and look for valuables; they beat up a drunk on a dark street and take his wallet. Sooner or later they will be imprisoned, for not only are they unskilled in ways of crimes; they are chronically "broke"; they cannot bribe law-enforcement officers nor hire top-notch lawyers. Nor do they ordinarily have friends in high places who will intercede with police or prosecutor. They constitute the proletariat of crime. Unlike the Al Capones, who steal because enormous profits outweigh the risks of apprehension, their material gains are trifling; their risks are overwhelming. It almost seems that they want to spend years in custody; yet no one who has felt the tension in a prison or reformatory can doubt their desire for freedom.

FRUSTRATION AND REBELLION

What possible explanation can there be for such seemingly irrational behavior? When asked why they steal, they say, in effect, "Bad companions," "For excitement,"

² Even in the worst "delinquency areas," juvenile court cases never constitute more than one-fifth of the juvenile population in a given year. CLIFFORD R. SHAW AND HENRY D. MCKAY, *JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AND URBAN AREAS*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942, p. 154. And, of course, other activities besides authenticated stealing find their way into juvenile courts.

or, "I needed money." Yet other youngsters find nondelinquent friends, different kinds of excitement, and other ways to make money. Are they indeed "rebels without a cause"? Certainly there is more evidence in favor of the notion that they are hostile to conventional values than that they are for anything. After all, they not only steal; they curse; they destroy property maliciously; they philander; they create public disturbances; they band together in gangs to fight other gangs; and they are insolent to teachers, policemen, social workers. Perhaps they reject conventional values because in terms of conventional values they are failures. They went to the movies and learned that American men should have convertibles and handsome clothes. They also learned, as they got into the teens, that their prospects for legitimate success were poor. Somehow they had been deprived of the chance to "get ahead" and enjoy a luxurious style of life. "Borrowing" flashy cars is, from their point of view, a way of tasting the good things America promised them.

True, in the United States, even slum youths are in no danger of starving. They are well off by comparison with the poor of Europe or Asia. But this is small comfort; they compare their lot with that of the most successful and glamorous Americans, not with downtrodden "foreigners." Relative to movie stars and captains of industry, they feel underprivileged, and it is how they feel that counts. Resentment against a social system has little to do with the objective deprivations it imposes. Resentment arises when deprivations are greater than people believe they ought to be. In the United States, where the ideal is social ascent, poor climbers may be more bitter than poor eaters in other societies. And, paradoxically, the considerable amount of upward mobility in America increases rather than decreases the resentment of those trapped at the bottom. After all, it dramatizes their failure. Faced with the alternative of blaming themselves or of feeling robbed of their birthright, they prefer to believe in injustice.

EDUCATIONAL OBSTACLES TO SOCIAL ASCENT

They are partly right. Youngsters get trapped at the bottom of the socio-economic heap largely because they do poorly at school. In all fairness, however, it should be remembered that the basis for school adjustment is laid in the home and the community. If a child's parents and friends hold education in awe and encourage him to bend every effort to learn from the teacher, he will value gold stars and high grades and being "promoted." If the child is sent to school because the law requires it (and because his mother wants to get him out from under her feet), he may regard the classroom as a kind of prison. Thus, family background is important to the youngster's adjustment in the crucial first years of school. Parents who see to it that their son keeps up with his work in primary school may make it possible later for him to pursue a business or professional career. Parents who permit their boys to flounder in the early grades unwittingly cut them off from the main path of social ascent.

Even an intellectually superior youngster can become a school "problem" if he is not properly motivated in the early grades. Forced to come at set times, to refrain from pinching his neighbors, to keep quiet so that the teacher can instruct the class as a group, he perceives school as a discipline imposed on him rather than an exten-

sion and development of his own interests. If no one at home or in the neighborhood makes school effort seem meaningful to him, he lacks the incentive to learn—no matter what his intellectual potentialities. The vicious circle of neglect and failure tightens. Within a few years, he is retarded in basic skills such as reading, which are necessary for successful performance in the higher grades. Whether he is promoted with his age-mates, "left back," or shunted into "slow" programs, the more successful students and the teachers consider him "dumb." This makes school still more unpleasant, and his disinterest increases.

By adolescence, he may well decide that he is fighting a losing battle. Is it surprising that he truants and becomes a disciplinary problem in class? Having learned little in school except how to annoy the teacher, he has neither the prerequisites for further education nor the courage to attempt to make up his deficiencies. It is too late for him to use the educational route to a high standard of living. But what other routes are there? Professional sports? The entertainment world? Politics? The opportunities in these fields are extremely limited. Pathetically, youngsters who think to escape from a pattern of defeat by withdrawing from school and going "to work" find that educational failure is predictive of occupational failure. Except for unskilled labor, high school graduation is required more and more, and college increases occupational prospects further. The youngster who quits school upon reaching the age when state law no longer compels attendance needs lots of luck if his goal is a well-paid job. The early school leaver usually gets unskilled work that offers little chance for advancement: stock clerk, delivery man, soda jerk, pin boy in a bowling alley. (His failure to complete high school, the competition of older and more experienced workers, and the stipulations of the child labor laws make employers reluctant to hire him—unless no one else is available.) He does not get along with supervisors any better than he did with teachers. He changes employment frequently. After several months of frustration, he may lose interest in steady work and instead take odd jobs when pressed for money.

THE GANG: AN ALTERNATIVE TO LOW STATUS

Psychically uncommitted to school or job, such a boy "hangs out" on the street corner with other unsuccessful youngsters. He needs their approval as a compensation for the rejection of school authorities and employers. The price for their approval runs high. He must show that he is not "chicken," i.e., cowardly, by manifesting a reckless willingness to steal, to fight, to try anything once. He must repudiate the bourgeois virtues associated with school and job: diligence, neatness, truthfulness, thrift. He becomes known as a "loafer" and a "troublemaker" in the community. When family and neighbors add their condemnations to those of teachers and employer, all bridges to respectability are burned, and he becomes progressively more concerned with winning "rep" inside the gang. For him, stealing is not primarily a way to make money. It is primarily a means of gaining approval within a clique of outcasts. The gang offers a heroic rather than an economic basis for self-respect. Of course, if a holdup or a burglary nets a substantial amount of money, the hoodlum has the best of both worlds. But for most hoodlums, the income from crime is pitifully

small.³ Only occasionally does a gang member graduate into the ranks of organized crime, as Al Capone did, and thereby become a financial success. Capone was an exception among hoodlums as Rockefeller was among businessmen.

Further insight into the motivation of the hoodlum results from contrasting him with the law-abiding adolescent. Clinical study reveals that the impulses to steal and murder and rape are universal. Apparently, the difference between the law-abiding adolescent and the hoodlum is not that one has impulses to violate the rules of society while the other has not. Both are tempted to break laws at some time or other—because laws prohibit what circumstance may make attractive: driving an automobile at 80 miles an hour, beating up an enemy, taking what one wants without paying for it. The hoodlum yields to these temptations. The boy living in a middle-class neighborhood does not. How can this difference be accounted for? Do shade trees, detached houses, and other economic advantages reduce envy, hatred, maliciousness? Or is it rather that middle-class youngsters have more to lose by giving rein to deviant impulses? What they have to lose should not be measured exclusively in material terms. True, the middle-class youngster has a spacious home to live in, nutritious food to eat, and fashionable clothes to wear; but he usually has social approval in addition. He comes from a “good” family. He lives in a “respectable” neighborhood. He is “neat and clean.” Finally, he is likely to be a success in school. His teachers like him; he gets good marks; he moves easily from grade to grade. He has a basis for anticipating that this will continue until he completes college and takes up a business or professional career. If he applied his energies to burglary instead of to homework, he would risk not only the ego-flattering rewards currently available but his future prospects as well.

STAKE IN CONFORMITY

In short, youngsters vary in the extent to which they feel a stake in American society. For those with social honor, disgrace is a powerful sanction. For a boy disappointed of already, there is less incentive to resist the temptation to do what he wants when he want to do it. Usually, the higher the socio-economic status of the family, the more the youngster feels he has to lose by deviant behavior. For instance, middle-class children are more successful in school, on the average, than lower-class children, although some lower-class youngsters fare better in school than some middle-class youngsters. To determine the stake which a youngster has in conformity it is necessary to know more than the level which his family occupies in the economic system. His own victories and defeats in interpersonal relations can be predicted only roughly from family income or father's occupation.

Some individuals have less stake in conformity than others in every community, but communities differ in the proportion of defeated people. A community with a

³ It is difficult to secure accurate data on the earnings of hoodlums. However, it is a fact that many indicted offenders languish in detention facilities prior to conviction because they are unable to raise money for bail. This is one indication of low earnings. J. Edgar Hoover addressed himself to the question of the rewards of crime in a popular article published in *WOMEN'S DAY* in 1950. The title is a clear statement of his point of view: *The Poorest Paying Job in the World—the “Wages of Crime”*.

high concentration of them has an even higher crime rate than would be expected from adding up the deviant predispositions of its individual members. Thus, the small incidence of stealing in suburbs is due not only to the scarcity of youngsters with little stake in conformity but also to the fact that a potential rebel is surrounded in school and in the neighborhood by age-mates who are motivated to compete within the framework of the established social system. They frown upon stealing because they do not need to rebel. On the other hand, in deteriorated neighborhoods, the concentration of defeated persons is greater. Therefore, a youngster needs a larger stake in conformity in the slum than in the suburb in order to resist temptation. In short, there is a social component to stake in conformity; the youngster meets defeat in isolation but does not usually become delinquent unless he obtains the support of his peers. In neighborhoods where most boys feel capable of competing in the educational-occupational status system, those who do not may be unhappy—but are not usually delinquent.

To sum up: the social disorganization approach can explain why community "A" has a higher crime rate than community "B" but not why Joe becomes a hoodlum and Jim does not. The differential stake in conformity of the individuals within a given community, on the other hand, can account for varying tendencies to become committed to an anti-social way of life.