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THE MYTH OF SOCIAL CLASS AND CRIMINALITY: AN EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE*

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Thirty-five studies examining the relationship between social class and crime/delinquency are reduced to comparable statistics using instances where the relationship was studied for specific categories of age, sex, race, place of residence, data type, or offense as units of analysis. The findings from 363 instances are summarized and patterns are identified. The overall results show only a slight negative relationship between class and criminality, with self-report studies reflecting lower associations than official statistics studies. Moreover, analysis demonstrates a clear historical decline in magnitude of association to the point where both self-report and official statistics studies done in the current decade find no class variation. This historical trend is shown to be due to changes in the findings from studies using official statistics as indicators of criminality. Alternative interpretations are discussed, but all lead to serious doubts about the adequacy of theories of deviance that contain assumptions of class differences.

Social scientists long have assumed an intimate linkage between a variety of social pathologies and injustice or inequity in the distribution of societal resources. This is a reasonable assumption because differences in social power and advantage imply differences across the whole range of life chances. But a relationship between the distribution of social resources and behavioral manifestations is more easily

justified on theoretical than empirical grounds. For one thing, concentration of resources into distinguishable categories never has been measured clearly enough to permit firm conclusions about relationships. Indeed, controversy about the extent of resource concentration has pervaded the stratification literature. At one point social class was a widely accepted concept for describing such concentrations, but following a concerted attack in the late fifties and early sixties (e.g., Cutright, 1968; Glenn, 1967; Laumann, 1966; Ossowski, 1963; Nisbet, 1959; Rose,

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1958), the focus of research changed from classes to strata. And since stratum implies more ambiguous boundaries than does class, the hypothesis of behavioral differences among those in various categories of resource concentration became even more difficult to test. As a result, interest in the question diminished among students of stratification (cf. Glenn et al., 1970).

But in some subdisciplines interest in the purported relationship has continued to flourish. This is especially true for the field of deviance/criminology. Social class (however defined) has always been a central variable in studies of crime and delinquency, and has been important in almost every theory. Although several patterns of relationship between class and crime have been hypothesized (Hirschi, 1972) the most popular theories predict an inverse relationship between social position and criminality (Cohen, 1955; Gove, 1975; Merton, 1968; Miller, 1958). And despite some critical assessments (Box and Ford, 1971; Doleschal, 1970; Empey, 1967), a belief persists that the bulk of evidence actually demonstrates such a relationship (Bytheway and May, 1971; Cressey, 1966; Reiss, 1976; Rossides, 1976; Wheeler, 1966). So firm is this belief that at least one recent book has been written to account for the "diverse empirical findings that link social inequality and deviant behavior, particularly in American society" (Hewitt, 1970:3). Further, even though many acknowledge that self-report studies contradict the general hypothesis and are now careful to limit their generalizations to statements about social class and officially recorded crime or delinquency (Cohen and Short, 1971; Reid, 1976), confidence that at least that relationship has been unquestionably established is almost universal (Hood and Sparks, 1970; Reiss, 1976).

But despite general acceptance, there is good reason to question whether the evidence does in fact demonstrate that the social status of individuals is related inversely to criminal or delinquent behavior. For one thing, methodological limitations undermine the generalizability, applicability, or validity of much of the data. For example, many of the frequently

cited studies report relationships between class measures and crime for ecological areas rather than for individuals (Chilton, 1964; Lander, 1954; Shaw and McKay, 1969; Slatin, 1969; see also Gordon, 1967). Although there is legitimate sociological value in ecological analysis, it does not necessarily permit inferences on the individual level (Robinson, 1950). Lower status areas may have higher crime rates because a small proportion of people within those areas commit a lot of crimes or because outsiders come into these areas to do mischief. And, it is possible that people who live in low status areas and commit crimes are not necessarily themselves of low status, since the composition of urban units such as census tracts are often diverse. True enough, some observational data, victimization surveys, and official statistics concerning the characteristics of arrestees are consistent with an inference that ecological correlations reflect an underlying negative association between the social status of individuals and criminal behavior (Reiss, 1976), but many of these data are themselves questionable, and there is no direct evidence which demonstrates the individual-area connection. In fact, Johnstone (1977) reports data from a sample of youth in the Chicago SMSA that show a great deal of inconsistency between contextual status variation in self-report delinquency and variations by family status. Moreover, ecological correlations between crime and social status have been interpreted as self-fulfilling prophecies related to police deployment patterns and as functions of the greater visibility of criminal behavior by those who live in lower status areas (Chambliss, 1975:135). Hence, in the absence of direct evidence linking the ecological findings to individual characteristics and in view of contrary interpretations of the area correlations, the ecological evidence has to be regarded as problematic.

In addition, several ostensibly relevant investigations have not in fact employed indicators of individual status (Cohen, 1969; Conger and Miller, 1966; Garrett and Short, 1975; Meade, 1973; Wolfgang et al., 1972; Won and Yamamoto, 1968). For example, the massive work by

Wolfgang and his associates used census tract median income as a measure of family status rather than actual family income. Although tract data do allow investigation of contextual effects, there is good reason to question whether they are valid proxies for individual status characteristics. After all, census tracts are usually quite heterogeneous internally. The 1970 census reveals that 75% of all the census tracts in Philadelphia include families with incomes ranging from less than \$1,000 to over \$25,000. Thus there easily could be dramatic differences between the actual family income of subjects and the median income of the tract in which that family resides. As a case in point, only 52% of a sample of Chicago youth surveyed in 1972 had family status characteristics that were even in the same third of a distribution as the status characteristics of the census tracts in which they resided (Johnstone, 1977).

Further, some of the research is weakened by crude measurement of either social class (Hardt and Peterson, 1968; Polk et al., 1974) or crime/delinquency (Stinchcombe, 1964), and in several instances analysis has been primitive or attenuated (Conger and Miller, 1966; Winslow, 1967; Won and Yamamoto, 1968).

But apart from methodological questions, there is a second reason the evidence is unconvincing. That is simply that it is less voluminous and comprehensive than usually is thought. Although at least 40 studies of the class/crime relationship exist in the literature, there are glaring deficiencies in their representativeness. Many studies have been limited to only one racial/sexual category (Empey and Erickson, 1966; Reiss and Rhodes, 1961), and samples often have been less than comprehensive, even for the specific target population. About 85% of all the studies concern juvenile misconduct, and most focus only on white males. And despite frequent references (without citation) in the literature to "many studies," we are able to find only 16 investigations that used official police contact or court delinquency figures and only seven studies examining official arrest or conviction data for adults.

Finally, since the various studies use different methodologies, types of data, forms of reporting, samples, and statistics, it is almost impossible to draw meaningful general conclusions about the nature of the class/crime relationship that might be reflected in these 40 studies. For example, Tittle and Villemez (1977) prefaced their recent study with an attempt to summarize the state of knowledge by counting the proportion of studies that reported a general negative relationship between SES and crime/delinquency. But the weakness of this approach is obvious. It is extremely inefficient and likely to produce erroneous conclusions because it counts each study equally regardless of the nature and size of the sample, or of the magnitude of association revealed in each instance. But almost any other method would be equally inefficient since the studies are simply not comparable in their original form. The fact is, we do not know what accumulated research tells us about the relationship between social class and crime/delinquency because the available evidence has never been sorted out adequately.

The purpose of this paper is to bring order out of the existing chaos in two ways. First, we attempt to reduce the extant data to a single comparable base. And second, we treat the measures of association derived from the existing literature as dependent variables, and we attempt to account for variations in them by using characteristics of the various studies as independent variables. This approach allows the plethora of investigations to be weighed against one another in a meaningful way and permits nonpolemical assessment of the general findings as well as an analysis of trends in results.

METHODS

We attempted to identify every instance in the literature where the relationship between a measure of individual class position and crime/delinquency indicators has been reported (although we do not guarantee that we might not have missed something). Each report of that relationship for a specific category of age, sex, race, place of residence, data type, or offense was

treated as a separate "instance" and where no differentiation by these variables was made, the overall relationship reported in the study was considered one "instance." For each instance, data reported in the original study were rearranged into ordinal contingency tables and gamma measures of association were calculated. By this method we were able to reduce the evidence to 363 separate gammas that serve as independent indicators of the nature of the relationship between social class and deviance. Of course, some of the studies that exist in the literature do not report complete enough data to permit derivation of contingency tables, and some of the reported data are inappropriate for contingency table analysis. For example, some studies report only the measure of association or a statistical test without raw data (Cohen, 1969; Kvaraceus, 1944; Meade, 1973). Where the reported measure is something besides a gamma and the data are not reconstructable, we were unable to use the material in our scheme. Moreover, some studies analyse such things as variations in official rates of one kind or another, but in the absence of knowledge of the actual number of people in each SES category in the particular population, it is impossible to fill in the cells of a contingency table (Bonger, 1916; Clark and Weninger, 1962; Conger and Miller, 1966; Garrett and Short, 1975). One study reports only the percent of offenses committed by various status categories without raw data for individuals (Empey and Erickson, 1966). And one contemporary self-report study, based on a comprehensive sample of youth in the Chicago area, reports only mean delinquency scores for categories of social status (Johnstone, 1977). Nevertheless, the 363 gammas we were able to derive represent accumulated evidence from 35 separate studies.¹

¹ There were a total of nine studies (cited above) unusable for technical reasons. The 35 used include: Akers, 1964; Arnold, 1965; Belson, 1975; Berger and Simon, 1974; Cameron, 1964; Casparis and Vaz, 1974; Christie et al., 1965; Dentler and Monroe, 1961; Douglas et al., 1966; Elliott, 1962; Erickson, 1973; Gould, 1969; Gold, 1966; Green, 1970; Hardt and Peterson, 1968; Havighurst et al., 1962; Hirschi, 1969; Hollingshead, 1947; Kelly, 1975; Kelly and

This compilation of studies excludes those which report data representing ecological units only, because we believe that the connection between ecological level data and individual characteristics is too problematic to justify their inclusion. As noted in the introduction, it is easy to make an incorrect inference; there is no supplementary evidence which directly shows a connection between the two levels for the crime-delinquency/class question, and there are contradictory explanations of the meaning of area correlations. Moreover, heterogeneity of individual and status characteristics within most census tracts causes us to be even more skeptical of the ability to draw conclusions about individuals from that type of study. But even if it had been reasonable to consider the ecological studies, we would have found it impossible to reduce the data to a form that would permit gamma statistics comparable with the other studies included.

The set of usable studies does, however, include the Wolfgang et al. (1972) and Won and Yamamoto (1968) studies in which individual measures of social class were derived from census tract characteristics. In the beginning we intended to include all studies where there was an individual indicator of class, even if that indicator was estimated from aggregated data. But four of six such studies turned out to be unusable for one or another of the technical reasons stated before. Although we believe the Wolfgang type evidence is likely to be misleading, we considered those studies because they are nevertheless part of the collective pool of information from which inferences about the class/crime-delinquency relationship on an individual level can be drawn, in the same way that studies which suffer from poor sampling or crude analysis are.

Pink, 1975; McDonald, 1969; Nye et al., 1958; Polk et al., 1974; Reiss and Rhodes, 1961; Stinchcombe, 1964; Tittle and Villemez, 1977; Voss, 1966; Walberg et al., 1974; Warner and Lunt, 1941; Williams and Gold, 1972; Winslow, 1967; Wolf, 1962; Wolfgang et al., 1972; Won and Yamamoto, 1968; and part of the data from Empey and Lubeck, 1971. The Utah data reported by Empey and Lubeck appear to be the same as those analysed by Erickson (1973). Therefore we extract from Empey and Lubeck only those data gathered in Los Angeles.

Second, in an effort to explain variations in the magnitude and sign of the different gammas, we performed a multivariate analysis using the following as control or independent variables: (1) the type of sample; (2) the size of the sample; (3) the type of place where the study was conducted (rural, urban, or combination); (4) the size of the area from which the sample was drawn; (5) the area of the world or area of the country (for studies done in the U. S.) where the study was conducted; (6) the age, sex, and race of the persons in the given situation; (7) the type of date (self-reported, official, or combination); (8) the year the data were gathered; (9) the number of statuses differentiated in the measure of SES; (10) sophistication of the SES measure, as indicated by the number of dimensions considered and the method by which the data were combined; (11) the specific indicator or indicators of status used (occupation, education, income, other, or specific combinations); (12) the range of scores on the crime/delinquency indicator; (13) the kind of measure of crime/delinquency (incidence, frequency, or seriousness); (14) the sophistication of the measure of crime/delinquency; and (15) the type of deviance (major and minor youth offenses, personal offenses, property crimes, violent crimes, and undifferentiated official records).

FINDINGS

The basic findings are presented in Table 1, which shows average gammas for various categories of age, sex, and race. Contrary to general theoretical expectations and widespread popular opinion, the data as a whole show only a very slight negative relationship between social class and crime/delinquency. The overall gamma for the 363 instances (fourth panel) is only $-.09$, a figure which indicates almost no relationship. Indeed, a gamma of this magnitude could result from a mere two or three point difference between the percent of upper and lower class individuals displaying criminal tendencies. Examining column totals in panel four, one can see that the relationship is similarly weak in instances where only males are in-

Table 1. Mean Class/Criminality Gammas for Studies of Various Age, Race, and Sex Subgroups

	Youth			Adults			Youth and Adults			All Studies		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)
White	-.15	-.17	-.03	-.03	-.19	-.06	+.05	-.09	-.02	-.06	-.13	-.07
(N)	(38)	(3)	(22)	(0)	(12)	(31)	(18)	(18)	(0)	(75)	(33)	(130)
Nonwhite	-.29	-.14	-.07	-.10	-.03	-.03	+.37	-.03	+.17	+.15	-.06	-.01
(N)	(3)	(2)	(19)	(0)	(0)	(0)	(6)	(6)	(0)	(9)	(8)	(36)
Both	-.11	-.09	-.04	-.09	-.46	-.46	-.63	-.54	-.70	-.11	-.10	-.12
(N)	(113)	(41)	(33)	(187)	(0)	(3)	(1)	(1)	(5)	(114)	(42)	(197)
Total	-.12	-.10	-.05	-.10	-.19	-.46	+.10	-.10	-.70	-.08	-.11	-.09
(N)	(154)	(46)	(74)	(274)	(12)	(3)	(25)	(25)	(5)	(198)	(83)	(363)

cluded (-.08), where only females are included (-.11), and in mixed-sex instances (-.10). Row totals show the same for instances of whites (-.07), nonwhites (-.01), and of both combined (-.12). In short, the variance about our average gamma is small. With more thorough breakdowns by age, sex, and race of subjects (panels one through four), some larger average gammas result, but there is no consistent patterning. Although the signs of most gammas are negative (indicating some support for an inverse relationship between class and deviance), the measures themselves are usually quite small, and the signs are not all negative. The most stable results are in instances where young males are the object of study. Yet for this category, 154 individual instances yield a mean gamma of only -.12. There are categories with larger negative average gammas (all adult-only instances, -.46; all youth-adult mixed instances, -.70) but those averages are based on small N's (three and five, respectively) and are therefore not impressive given the variance found in subgroups with many instances. In fact, except for the two cases mentioned, if we set confidence limits about any of the mean gammas, those limits would include zero in every case. Thus, support for an overall negative class/criminality relationship is at best slight when the data are considered simply as a collectivity of evidence.

Although the average of the gammas is a

small negative figure, the individual instances show some marked differences in the magnitude of association. In an attempt to account for these differences, we examined the mean gammas for categories of the 15 independent variables specified previously in the methods section. With two exceptions, the results appear to be fairly stable under a wide range of conditions, with only minor and unreliable variations like those mentioned for age, sex, and race occurring among the categories of the 15 variables. For example, analysis of variations by type of offense shows little real difference (Table 2). The mean gamma for instances where youth offenses only are considered is -.12 (N = 161); where personal offenses are examined the mean gamma is +.06 (N = 38); for property crimes it is -.06 (N = 105); and it is -.13 (N = 21) for violent crimes. And where there are noticeable differences they disappear when the other variables are held constant. The two exceptions to this are the type of data and the decade in which the study was conducted.

Those differences clearly stand out. Table 3 reports the relevant data. Variations in the mean gamma from decade to decade show a steady decline in strength from the 1940s to the 1970s. The average gamma for the three instances where data were gathered prior to 1950 is -.73; as we move forward in time, it steadily diminishes. In the decade 1950-59 it is -.31; in the decade 1960-69 it is -.13; and for

Table 2. Mean Gammas for Categories of Type of Offense Studies by Decade in Which Study Was Done

Type of Offense	Before 1950	1950-59	1960-69	After 1970	N
Youth Offenses	0	3	101	57	161
(\bar{X} gamma)	(-)	(-.14)	(-.15)	(-.08)	(-.12)
Personal Offenses	0	0	0	38	38
(\bar{X} gamma)	(-)	(-)	(-)	(+.06)	(+.06)
Property Crime	0	5	38	62	105
(\bar{X} gamma)	(-)	(-.35)	(-.09)	(-.01)	(-.06)
Violent Crime	0	0	3	18	21
(\bar{X} gamma)	(-)	(-)	(-.52)	(-.06)	(-.13)
Undifferentiated Record	3	2	12	0	17
(\bar{X} gamma)	(-.73)	(-.47)	(-.17)	(-)	(-.30)
Other	0	0	16	5	21
(\bar{X} gamma)	(-)	(-)	(-.11)	(-.04)	(-.09)

Table 3. Mean Class/Criminality Gammas for Studies Using Self-Report and Official Data by Decade in Which the Study Was Done

Type of Data	Before 1950	1950-59	1960-69	After 1970	N
Self-Report	0	3	124	175	302
(\bar{X} gamma)	(—)	(— .04)	(— .11)	(— .03)	(— .06)
Official Statistics	3	7	46	5	61
(\bar{X} gamma)	(— .73)	(— .43)	(— .22)	(+ .04)	(— .25)
N	3	10	170	180	363
% Self-Report	0%	30%	73%	97%	85%
\bar{X} Gamma	— .73	— .31	— .13	— .03	— .09

those instances based on data gathered since 1970 the gamma is $-.03$. Moreover, as most scholars have suspected, instances based on officially recorded data tend to show much more marked negative associations than do those based on self-reports. The mean association for 302 instances based on self-report data is only $-.06$, but the mean for 61 instances using official data is $-.25$.

These findings also are derivable from another type of analysis. We regressed the gammas from all studies on a series of seven independent variables representing characteristics of the studies from which the gammas were drawn.² These seven were those which were found to be most salient in the earlier analysis. The resulting unstandardized equation is:

$$\begin{aligned}
 G = & .52 + .02ST - .00SS - .00AS \\
 & \quad (.02) \quad (.00) \quad (.00) \\
 & - .10DT^* + .02YR^* \\
 & \quad (.03) \quad (.00) \\
 & + .02NC + .16TT^* \\
 & \quad (.01) \quad (.04)
 \end{aligned}$$

where * = double its standard error, and $R^2 = .26$, and ST = sample type, SS = sample size, AS = area size, DT = data type, YR = year of study, NC = number of social classes defined by the researcher, and TT = a time trend dummy differentiating those studies done prior to 1964 and

those done after 1963. The time trend variable was included because inspection of the data indicated that after 1963 the magnitude of the gammas began to decline markedly. The only significant coefficients found are those for type of data (official statistics vs. self-reports), year of study, and the trend dummy. Since data based on official statistics were assigned the higher number in the dichotomized code for type of data, the $-.10$ coefficient indicates that instances using official statistics tend to find negative class/crime relationships to a greater extent than do instances using self-report data. But because we are dealing with a dichotomous variable in which a unit change is the maximum possible, we can be even more specific. Given instances using two samples of exactly the same type and size, drawn from precisely the same size areas in a given year and employing the same number of defined social classes, the equation shows that we may expect the study employing official statistics to produce a gamma showing a $.10$ greater negative association for the same relationship than an instance employing self-report data.

The coefficient for the variable of the year of study indicates a trend toward a $.02$ per year decline in the size of negative gammas produced by all studies. But the time trend variable cannot be interpreted directly without further analysis. Following the technique employed by Masters (1975), we ran the regression: $G = a + b_1T_1 + b_2T_2 + b_3D$, where T_1 = the study years prior to 1964, numbered consecutively; T_2 = the study years including and subsequent to 1964, numbered consecutively; and D = a dummy variable coded

² The statistic gamma is not an inappropriate variable for regression analysis despite its clearly non-normal distribution. To have biased estimators it is necessary that $E(u) \neq 0$, and that condition has nothing to do with the natural distribution of gamma. Given our sample of studies and large N , we may safely assume the mean of the disturbance terms to be zero.

one if the data were gathered after 1963, and zero otherwise. The dummy variable allows independence of T_1 and T_2 , making significance-of-difference tests possible. Because the strongest interaction is between year of study and type of data (coefficients of a time/type multiplicative variable remained significantly greater than zero net of all mentioned variables), two separate time trend equations were run: one for official statistics instances ($N = 61$) and one for self-report instances ($N = 302$). Examining unstandardized coefficients for self-report studies, we find:

$$G = 1.01 - .01T_1 + .02T_2^* - .16D, R^2 = .04; \text{ and for official data: } G = .19 + .07T_1^* + .11T_2^* + .16D, R^2 = .56; \text{ where } * = \text{double its standard error.}$$

These equations reveal several interesting outcomes. First, the $T_2 - T_1$ difference for official data is over four times the magnitude of that difference for self-report data. Second, the coefficient of T_1 for self-report instances hardly differs from zero, indicating stability in the magnitude of the gammas from year to year up to 1964. And after that point there is but a slight decline in the size of the gammas. Thus, over the entire time period the gammas for self-report data have remained relatively constant. But gammas derived from official data show strong declines in both time periods with considerable escalation of the rate of decline after 1963 (an additional .04 per year). Although this $T_2 - T_1$ difference is not statistically significant ($t = 1.5, .10 > p > .05$), the time trend differences between self-report and official data gammas are significant (for $T_1, t = 3.5, p < .001$; for $T_2, t = 3.8, p < .001$). Finally, the time trend explains only 4% of the variance in gammas from self-report studies, while it alone explains 56% of the variance in gammas from official data.

It is interesting to note in passing that the only other coefficient of all those considered which approaches statistical significance is that for the number of classes that were differentiated by the researchers' measure. It produces a nonsignificant b , but the coefficient is of a size (relative to its standard error) to suggest

that, *ceteris paribus*, the use of a larger number of class categories in a study tends to lead to the discovery of a weaker class/criminality relationship. None of the other independent variables representing characteristics of the particular investigation shows a statistically significant net impact on the resultant gammas. Thus the only clearly important variables of those included are the type of data and the year of study. These two alone explain 19% of the variance in gammas, compared to 21% when all others (excluding the trend dummy) are added.

INTERPRETATION

Observing the large difference between the magnitude of the mean gamma revealed by self-report studies and that revealed by official statistics might tempt one to think that the observed historical decline in association between social class and crime/delinquency is an artifact of the greater use of self-report data in recent decades. But comparison of the results of the regression analyses for self-report and official statistics data as well as tabular analysis clearly disputes such an interpretation. There is a substantial year by year decline in the magnitude of gammas derived from official statistics with only slight variation in those from self-report studies. And, as Table 3 shows, the mean degree of association revealed by official data declines monotonically over the four decades from $-.73$ through $-.43$ and $-.22$ to a $+.04$ in the seventies, while from the fifties through the seventies it remains relatively constant at a low level for self-report instances ($-.04, -.11, -.03$). Thus the remarkable historical downward trend revealed by the data as a whole is actually because of declines registered by instances where officially recorded data were used to measure criminality. Furthermore, this historical trend is apparently not the result of other characteristics of the studies that might have varied over the decades. For example, Table 2 shows that this general pattern of declining associations has occurred within categories of offense, although not monotonically in every single situation. Thus instances where property crimes were studied show

variations from $-.35$ in the fifties to $-.09$ to $-.01$ while violent crimes show change from $-.52$ in the sixties to $-.06$ in the seventies. Similarly, controlling for the other characteristics of the studies does not affect the pattern of historical variation.

It is possible that the historical trend is an artifact of the volume and range of data that have been gathered in each decade. There are only three gammas available for the pre-1950 period, only ten in the fifties, but 170 in the sixties and 180 thus far in the seventies. It could be that the earlier data revealing high negative associations were simply unreliable and that as a greater range and number of data have been gathered the true low magnitude of the association has emerged. After all, the total number of instances by decade bears a monotonic negative relationship with the magnitude of the mean gamma, and the variance around the mean gamma has become smaller from decade to decade. But it is our opinion that changing reliability does not account for the historical pattern. This opinion is based on observations of the pattern of results. There is a consistent decline from decade to decade despite the magnitude of differences in number of instances on which the mean is based. For example, from pre-1950 to 1950 there is a substantial decline in mean gamma although the number of instances increases only from three to ten. And the mean gamma declines consistently from the sixties decade to the seventies although there is only a slight increase in the number of instances on which the figures are based (170 to 180), and that decline is about the same as between the fifties and sixties where there is an enormous increase in the number of instances used to calculate the mean (10 to 170). Furthermore, the trend is evident even when the number of cases declines from 46 official data instances in the sixties to only five in the seventies. Therefore we believe that the historical pattern of a declining association between social class and crime/delinquency is not simply a matter of reliability or of type of data.

A further possibility is that measures of social class and criminality have become more independent over time. Since earlier

data were produced by sociologists investigating social stratification, it is possible that an artificial negative relationship was inadvertently created. For example, if status is determined by community reputation or rating, then one's status may reflect noninvolvement with the police. And to the extent that reputational methods for determining class position declined historically as criminologists using "objective" criteria became more involved in the question, then the apparent class/criminality relationship would disappear as well. But this type of artifact could not account for the overall historical trend. The only instances included here where class was measured by rating methods involve data gathered before 1950. There was no tapering off of the use of rating methods over the four decades, hence this type of contamination might explain the initial change from before 1950 to the fifties but it could not account for continuation of the initial trend during the three most recent decades.

Fourth, it does not appear that this historical trend is the result of actual changes in the behavior of the various social classes. If it were, it would seem that measures based on self-reports would manifest temporal patterning. But as Table 3 and the regression analysis shows, the mean gamma for self-report instances has actually remained fairly constant from the fifties through the current decade. Since the historical decline is not a result of greater use of self-report data or of characteristics of the various studies, and is probably not the result of greater reliability or independence of the data or of actual changes in the behavior of the various classes, we are forced to conclude that the historical declines in association between social class and criminality must be because criminal justice agencies have changed the way they deal with members of the various classes. Indeed, this interpretation is supported by impressionistic consideration of historical events. It is reasonable to assume that the increasing consciousness of and publicized concern with individual civil rights, culminating with significant governmental action and landmark court decisions in the 1960s, has had some effect on the way criminal jus-

tice agencies conduct and report their business (see DeFleur, 1975). If publicity did make the police and lower courts more self-conscious of the rights of deprived members of the population, it would show up in official statistics. In the past, police no doubt could get away with closer surveillance of lower status persons and with making arrests on flimsier evidence than they now can. Moreover, expanded guarantees of due process surely have led to greater concern with judicial equality for all statuses. Certainly our empirical documentation of an accelerated decline in the class/criminality relationship in official statistics studies after 1964 lends plausibility to this interpretation.

But acceptance of this argument mandates an even stronger rejection of the class/criminality relationship hypothesis than that derived from the overall association of $-.09$ for the 363 research instances in the literature. Interpreting the historical trend as a result of changes in criminal justice biases implies, first, that contemporary instances based on official statistics more clearly reflect the true class/criminality relationship than did studies conducted in the past; that is, essentially no relationship (mean gamma = $+.04$). Second, if the relatively constant level of relationship revealed by self-report data is accepted as also being a fairly accurate reflector of the same class/criminality relationship (mean gamma = $-.06$), we must assume that the true relationship is somewhere between $+.04$ and $-.06$, or essentially zero. Third, this interpretation implies that the true relationship has remained consistently near zero and has only appeared to be greater because official data reflected biases in the law enforcement process which have now been ameliorated. In short, class and criminality are not now, and probably never were related, at least not during the recent past.

But this interpretation may not be accepted by all. Some will question whether self-report data are accurate enough to serve as a basis for establishing the true behavior of the classes over the three decades for which such data are available. Without this assumption, one would have to interpret the changes in the results of

official data studies as indicating actual changes in the behavior of the classes. Thus some will be willing to conclude only that social class is apparently not now related to crime/delinquency, although it may have been so related in the past. If this conclusion is correct, then it means that over the past three decades social class differences in life style, values, or constraints have become less important as predictors of criminality. Perhaps those of the higher classes have become less obedient to the law or those of the lower statuses have become more law abiding, or perhaps some of both changes have taken place. But regardless of the specific changes that may have accounted for this putative reduction in class differentiation, the net effect is consistent with findings by students of stratification. A number of scholars have commented on the decreasing significance of class in modern times (Cuber and Kenkel, 1954; Giddens, 1973; Jackson and Curtis, 1968; Landecker, 1960; Pfautz, 1953; Stone and Form, 1953). It is said that as advanced industrial societies become more culturally homogenized, the impact of stratum lessens. In a society where classification sorts people at birth into subcultures differing significantly in their definitions of reality, in their values, and in their socialization practices, class is likely to be a significant variable. But in a "massified" society where all but the extremes have the opportunity to accept or reject a single mass culture, class is likely to have significantly less impact. There are indications that industrial societies inexorably move, in Dennis Wrong's phrase, toward "inequality without stratification."

However, either of these interpretations of the data has serious implications for theories of deviance. If we interpret the findings to suggest that class differences in criminality actually have diminished, then we must acknowledge that theories of deviance have been time and culture bound. On the other hand, if the first conclusion—that class is not now and has not been related to criminality in the recent past—is accurate, then we have to question theories of deviance on more fundamental grounds. They are not time and culture bound but are simply erroneous. One may

not want to go that far, but it is difficult to avoid rather harsh imperatives. Certainly the general lack of predictive success of theories of deviance is consistent with this conclusion. Perhaps this failing is precisely because most deviance theories do rest on an assumption of class differences which has not in fact existed in recent history (Tittle and Villemez, 1977).

But whichever specific interpretation of the historical trend we choose, it is clear that contemporary data do not support the conclusion of a negative relationship between social class and crime/delinquency. Therefore it would seem that some shift in theoretical focus is called for. But that implication may be premature. The overall results of accumulated research, even of contemporary work, actually may be misleading. All studies included in our analysis were treated equally even though some were methodologically stronger than others. Although we controlled for some of these variations and found the results to be essentially unchanged, there is still the possibility that a negative relationship between class and criminality reflected in some of the studies is the "true" one, but is diluted by the inclusion of a number of other, perhaps less methodologically sophisticated pieces of research.

Second, none of the studies examined have adequately measured all the dimensions on which the classes might differ. Those of different status levels might vary in the cumulative probability of having done criminal or delinquent things by particular ages although not differing in the probability of committing misdeeds within a specified time interval (Gordon, 1976). They might differ in the ages at which criminal acts are first done or in the length of the period in a life cycle in which criminal or delinquent acts occur. Or they could differ in the total number of deviant acts committed by particular ages (Reiss, 1976). Furthermore, none of the studies takes into account the possibility of subtle variations in the ways in which deviant acts might be committed, nor do they include a broad enough range of kinds of offenses to capture all of the logically possible class variations. All of these might be especially important in accounting for the observed historical trends.

After all, if the character of social classes has been changing as many believe, the nature of current class influences on conformity might well be apparent only with precise and more focused measurements.

Nevertheless, it seems to us that the sociological community would do well to develop theories that emphasize variables which operate independently of supposed class differences. Such theories can be produced either by reconceptualizing the ones we have or by looking to new horizons. Actually most of the current class-rooted theories need not be so constrained. For example, members of all classes can experience inconsistency between goals and means which is contingent upon aspirations rather than objective circumstances. The key variable is not class position but rather discrepancy between aspiration and accomplishment, a variable which can vary nonsystematically over the class spectrum (see Keller and Zavalloni, 1964). Moreover, definitions favorable toward deviance are now widely distributed over the classes. Differential association may now be more a matter of the absence of countervailing interpersonal influences than of class position or place of residence. Similarly, other theories can be interpreted to emphasize generic processes rather than class related variables. Our findings suggest that this type of conceptualization is desirable.

But that may not be enough. We also need to identify more generic processes. What these processes might be we do not know, but we are confident that they will not be found as long as sociologists cling to the belief that almost everything ultimately can be reduced to a class variable.

SUMMARY

Studies examining the relationship between social status and crime/delinquency were reduced to comparable statistics using instances where the relationship was studied for specific categories of age, sex, race, place of residence, data type, or offense as units of analysis. The overall mean association (γ) for 363 instances was found to be only $-.09$. In addition, the magnitude of association was

found to vary by type of data examined in the study as well as the decade in which the study was conducted.

Accumulated data suggest that for the past four decades there has been a monotonic decline in association between social class and crime/delinquency, with contemporary (those done since 1970) self-report and official statistics studies finding essentially no relationship between class and crime/delinquency. Moreover, these historical changes are found to be attributable to changes in findings by studies using official data. Further, analysis reveals a pattern of results which can be interpreted in either of two ways. One interpretation, contingent on confidence in the validity of self-report data, is that data never did demonstrate a negative relationship between status and crime/delinquency, and that in previous decades research appeared to show such a relationship because of biases in the criminal justice process which now have been corrected. Another interpretation, contingent upon confidence in the validity of official data, is that a class relationship did exist in the past, but no longer exists because social class generally has become less important.

But whichever interpretation is accepted, the implications undermine the purported class/criminality relationship which has fueled so much theoretical activity in sociology. Thus, numerous theories developed on the assumption of class differences appear to be based on false premises. It is now time, therefore, to shift away from class-based theories to those emphasizing more generic processes.

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