

Sociology *Shortcuts*

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Situational Action Theory

CRIME AND SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE

While the relationship between social disadvantage and crime has long been known, an important question that's often ignored is why only a relatively small proportion of the socially disadvantaged seem to engage in persistent criminal offending?

Wikstrom's Situational Action Theory provides an interesting, thought-provoking, possible answer...

THE CRIME PARADOX

Most A-level crime and deviance students will quickly come to understand the relationship between social disadvantage – what **Wikström and Treiber** (2016) term “*the comparative lack of social and economic resources*”- and various forms of persistent, mainly low-level, criminality, overwhelmingly committed by young, lower class, males.

Crimes that involve relatively small levels of economic reward (arson, vandalism, theft, shoplifting, robbery, car crime and burglary) or which involve routine low-level violence (assault). In basic terms, social disadvantage is generally seen as a cause of crime.

The problem with this characterisation, however, is that it's both *true* – statistically, most persistent offenders do come from a socially-disadvantaged background (at least as far as the kinds of crimes we've just listed are concerned) and *not true*: social disadvantage doesn't, in and of itself, cause crime because only a relatively small proportion of those classified as socially disadvantaged become persistent offenders.

The majority do not.

Which is not something we would expect if the relationship was a causal one.



Professor Per-Olof Wikstrom



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SQUARING THE CIRCLE OF CAUSALITY

How, then, do we square a circle that, as **Wikström and Treiber** argue, is based on *“the paradox that most persistent offenders come from disadvantaged backgrounds, but most people from disadvantaged backgrounds do not become persistent offenders.”*?

One obvious way to start is by investigating the idea that the role of social disadvantage in crime is both real – there seem to be very few persistent offenders who are socially advantaged – but not directly causal: disadvantage clearly plays some part, but what that part might be is neither simple nor clear-cut..

For **Wikstrom**, the problem is that although “social disadvantage has been a key criminological topic for some time, the mechanisms which link it to offending remain poorly specified”. What this means is that while we know there is a relationship between crime and social disadvantage, what that relationship might actually be has tended to be assumed rather than tested. Correlation has all-to-often simply been assumed to be indicative of causation.

While many late-20th – early-21st century explanations for crime, particularly those from a New Right perspective, have (rightly) rejected this idea, they’ve done so in ways that have tended, deliberately one suspects, to throw the offending bathwater out with the socially disadvantaged baby.

So to speak.

Or, to put it less obtusely, New Right perspectives have tended to reject the possibility of understanding the “root causes” of crime by rejecting the notion that criminal offending is underpinned and prompted by social causes (such as social disadvantages).

Something like **Routine Activity Theory** (RAT), for example, avoids the problem of causation by simply taking individual situations and motivations out of the equation.

In RAT world “everyone” is capable of committing a crime given the right conditions (such as the absence of anyone or anything to stop them) and so what motivates people to commit crime – their inner psychological demons or outer sociological conditions – are largely (mis)cast as irrelevant.

And while this neatly avoids the “problem of causation” it leads to both notable absurdities (in this instance, crime effectively becomes its own cause) and doesn’t satisfactorily confront the elephant in the room:

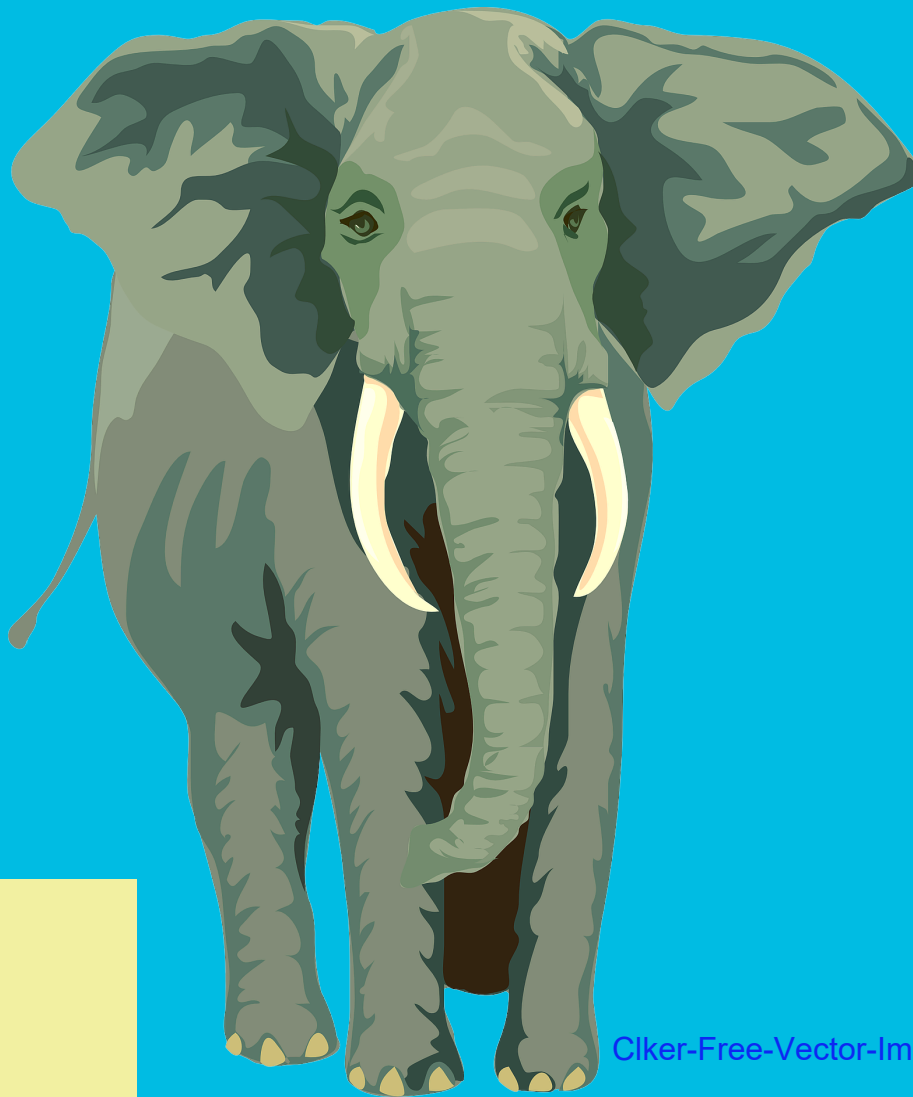
why are young offenders consistently and persistently drawn from the ranks of the socially disadvantaged?

While social disadvantage may not cause crime the close correlation between the two is surely something that needs to, at the very least, be explored in more detail?

This is the position taken by **Wikstrom** in that while he recognises the relationship isn’t a straightforward causal one, there’s enough of a relationship present to warrant further investigation.

To this end **Wikstrom’s** Situational Action Theory seeks to specify the mechanisms that link social disadvantage to offending using two testable concepts:

- **crime propensity**: the extent to which different individuals are attracted to and likely to commit, crime.
- **criminogenic exposure**: the extent to which individuals experience criminal ideas and behaviours.



Propensity

Crime propensity is measured in two ways:

1. **Personal morality** refers to the kind of moral outlook everyone develops throughout. In this context, if you see nothing morally wrong with criminal behaviour you will develop a higher crime propensity. Similarly, if you've been raised to see criminal behaviour as morally wrong you will have a much lower criminal propensity.

Although it's a significant variable in terms of whether an individual is likely to engage in criminal behaviour, propensity doesn't, of itself, determine criminality. Other factors are also at work here.

2. **Self-control** can be broadly defined as "the ability to manage impulses, regulate emotions, and exhibit restraint in the face of challenges" and in terms of criminal propensity it relates to two things: firstly, our ability to resist our inner impulses towards criminal behaviour and, secondly, our ability to resist the encouragement of others towards criminal involvement.



In this respect an individual's propensity towards criminal or non-criminal behaviour is the outcome of a complex interplay between their personal morality and levels of self-control. In broad terms someone with a high moral disdain for crime – and hence a low propensity for criminality – and strong self-control in the face of temptations towards crime is unlikely to become an offender.

Conversely, someone who sees nothing wrong with particular forms of criminality and has low levels of self-control in the face of temptation is highly-likely to develop some form of offending behaviour.

It's important to note crime propensity is not an all-or-nothing quality. Someone who, for example, has few moral qualms about drug dealing might be as appalled by the idea of assaulting or killing someone as those with a low crime propensity.

Criminogenic exposure refers to the extent to which individuals are exposed to criminal temptations through two main sources:

1. Peer-group relationships

This has similarities to Sutherland's notion of **Differential Association** and holds that individuals who socialise with those, such as friends and family, who are routinely and normally involved in various forms of criminal behaviour have a higher-level of criminogenic exposure than those who do not. This kind of routine exposure – or lack of same – impacts on the two dimensions of crime propensity we've previously outlined in various ways. It may, for example, weaken levels of self-control.

If crime is something everyone in our social circle routinely commits, it makes it harder for us to resist engaging in this activity. Similarly, if the significant others around us – such as parents, siblings and close friends – see nothing unusual or distasteful about petty crime we're highly likely to incorporate this view into our personal morality.



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2. Criminogenic settings

This idea draws on both **ecological theories** of space, organisation and disorganisation and Control Theories to argue that some social spaces lend themselves to encouraging criminal behaviour.

A simple example might be the kinds of **night-time city centre areas**, filled with bars, clubs and fast-food restaurants, that allow individuals and groups to move relatively anonymously through such spaces. This anonymity combined with relatively lax social controls – all kinds of behaviour that wouldn't be expected or tolerated elsewhere is either ignored or passed-off as normal – lends itself to various forms of deviant and criminal behaviours.

In this respect, the presence or absence of both formal and informal social controls in an area contributes to its criminogenic setting and the extent to which it encourages – or at the very least doesn't actively discourage – criminal behaviour.

Individuals who routinely find themselves in criminogenic settings – either through choice (*self-selection*) because they represent exotic and exciting spaces, or by following the choices made by their associates (*social selection*) – are much more-likely to engage in criminal behaviour than peers who shun such spaces and associations.

SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE

Although we'll develop the (empirical) relationship between crime and social in more detail later, it's useful to understand two things to complete this section:



Firstly, although we've been at pains to point-out social disadvantage doesn't *directly* cause crime, that's not to say it doesn't have an important role to play in our understanding of those causes. We know that concepts like personal morality, self-control and peer-group relationships are significantly influenced by social advantages and disadvantages.

In terms of personal relationships we know social class – a proxy for different types of advantage and disadvantage – plays an important, probably determining, role in the relationships we form: the socially advantaged tend to mix with those of a similar status and *vice versa*.

The implication here is that the socially disadvantaged have a much greater chance of forming personal relationships with those involved in crime than the socially advantaged: the circles in which young working-class move, for example, have a high probability of bringing them into contact with people for whom crime is, if not necessarily a way of life, an important aspect of that life.

This isn't to say socially disadvantaged teens inevitably become offenders because it's perfectly possible to form non-criminal relationships with similar-minded peers. Compared to their socially advantaged peers, however, there's a much greater probability that at least some peer relationships will involve criminal offending.





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This means that compared to their advantaged peers socially disadvantaged youth have a much higher *probability* of being drawn into persistent offending. And while probabilistic analyses of crime aren't necessarily causal we need to keep in mind that when explaining criminal involvement it's not something we should simply ignore.

Similarly, one of the classic distinctions between middle and working class behaviours is that of **immediate and deferred gratification**, the former being a characteristic of the socially disadvantaged. Mischel's (1972) **Marshmallow Test**, for example, not only demonstrated this distinction but also showed how differences in self-control revealed by the test translated in later life into things like different academic and social competences, plus greater or lesser resistance to frustration and temptation.

Social disadvantage, in this respect, strongly correlates with lower self-control.

Again, this is indicative not conclusive.



Cyndi Yoder

Self-control is, for example, something that can be learnt. Young children who seemingly lack self-control don't necessarily grow-up to be teens and adults who have little or no self-control. It's also important to note how self-control is in many important respects context-dependent: for lower levels of self-control to result in a greater willingness to give-in to the "temptations of crime" the individual has to necessarily find themselves in a criminogenic situation / context.

By avoiding criminogenic exposure, for example, the individual will not have to exercise self-control.

Finally, while concepts of personal morality are just that – particular to each individual – concepts of right and wrong don't simply develop in a social vacuum.

On the contrary, they are influenced by primary sources like parents and peers as well as secondary sources such as social media. In addition, our personal experiences in-and-of the social world influence how our personal morality develops. This, in turn, suggests that advantageous and disadvantageous social experiences play a major part in shaping how we see and think about the world.

In basic terms, therefore, someone who sees certain types of offending as part of the normal run-of-the-mill experience of social life is more-likely to involve themselves in this world than someone who doesn't have this view or experience.

Although it is, of course, possible that the former may be as repelled by that world as seduced by it, the balance of probability suggests the latter is the more-likely outcome.

“social disadvantage is linked to crime because more people from disadvantaged versus affluent backgrounds develop a high crime propensity and are exposed to criminogenic contexts”.



Secondly, in the broader sense, **Wikstrom and Treiber** clarify the relationship between social disadvantage and crime by noting how:

“social disadvantage is linked to crime because more people from disadvantaged versus affluent backgrounds develop a high crime propensity and are exposed to criminogenic contexts”.

In other words, they explain the relationship between social disadvantage and crime as one where the socially disadvantaged are more-likely to engage in criminal activity because social disadvantage leads to a higher crime propensity (people are less-likely to have significant moral qualms about committing crimes) and lower levels of self-control (they are more-likely to be affected by social and economic frustrations such as low-paid, menial, jobs / casual work / unemployment and give-in to the economic temptations of living in a consumer society without the legitimate means, such as highly-paid work, to satisfy their consumer cravings).

Types of Selection

This over-representation of the poor and disadvantaged in criminal offending is further explained by two types of selection:

- **social selection** refers to the objective conditions of an individual's life, where young people are born (selected) into disadvantaged families and consequently suffer a socially and economically disadvantaged upbringing.

- **self-selection** refers to the decisions made by socially disadvantaged individuals to actually seek-out and engage in opportunities for offending.



Cord Allman

Offending is, in this respect, something consciously chosen, not automatically given. Although, as we've argued, even this kind of individual action is heavily-dependent on situational factors.

These selection processes represent a combination of structural (social selection) and action (self-selection) processes that can be used to explain how and why some individuals and groups come to involve themselves in persistent offending:

Firstly, it explains why the socially disadvantaged have higher rates of offending (*"processes of social and self-selection place the socially disadvantaged more frequently in contexts conducive to the development and expression of high crime propensities"*).

Secondly, it explains why only a relatively small proportion of socially disadvantaged individuals engage in criminal offending.

To take one example, the statistical analysis of offenders shows young males are far more likely to be involved in criminal offending than young females, even where they occupy the same economic positions.

Young women have a much lower propensity for crime for a range of reasons, not the least being the kinds of peer group relationships they develop. These are neither conducive to crime nor do they tend to place young women in criminogenic settings that make offending more likely.

An End Has A Start...

Although Situational Action Theory asks important questions about crime and causality and has a certain plausibility (or face validity) in relation to the answers it proposes about the relationship between social disadvantage and crime it would be useful to look at empirical examples of research carried-out in this area.

As luck would have it, Wikstrom's ground-breaking longitudinal study of youth crime, the **Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development Study (PADS+)** goes some way to providing such evidence.



One of the more-interesting things about the use of Situational Action Theory (SAT) to explore the relationship between crime and social disadvantage is that it developed alongside **Wikstrom's** Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development Study (PADS+).

This longitudinal study of young people's behaviour in the early part of the 21st century has proven to be both a valuable resource in its own right and, more-importantly perhaps, a rich source of empirical evidence with which to test many of the hypotheses Wikstrom developed out of his application of SAT to an understanding of how and why youth crime occurs.

As **Wikstrom and Trieber** (2016) argue, the objective here is "to advance knowledge about the relationship between social disadvantage and crime involvement through the application of situational action theory (SAT) and the analysis of data from a random sample of U.K. adolescents from the longitudinal Peterborough Adolescent and Young Adult Development Study (PADS+).".

To this end we can have a look at a broad overview of what, according to **Wikstrom**, PADS+ data tells us about both criminal involvement and its relationship to social disadvantage.

The Study

Wikstrom's longitudinal study followed a randomly selected sample of 716 young people, aged 12 – 16, living in and around the English city of Peterborough over a period of 13 years (roughly 2002 – 2015). One of the unique features of the study was that, in line with Wikstrom's focus on the idea of situational action, it was interested in studying the participants as both individual actors (their sense of moral purpose in particular) and the social environments (situational settings) in which they lived and



General Findings: the crime paradox

We referred earlier to the paradox at the heart of our understanding of youth crime, namely that while certain types of routine street crime are committed by socially-disadvantaged working class youth, social disadvantage is not, in itself, a simple cause of crime and criminality. Data from the Peterborough Study is instructive in this respect:

- Around one-third of the teenagers in the sample committed no crimes at all over the period of the study.
- The vast majority of teens committed a very small number of minor crimes – at most one or two a year – over the period in question.
- A small group, 4% of the sample, committed around 50% of the crime detailed in the study. This group were also responsible for the majority of the more-serious offences, such as burglary, robbery and car theft. This group also tended to commit a far wider range of crimes than their peers, indicative of a much greater level of commitment to criminality.

While this data is interesting, it's not in itself conclusive. While it suggests all kinds of positive correlations – between age, gender, class and crime for example – it doesn't tell us why people with similar social characteristics seem to behave in very different ways when it comes to crime.

Specific Findings: resolving the crime paradox

Although **Wikstrom and Treiber** (2016) note

“the correlation between disadvantage and crime involvement is decidedly small”,

this doesn't mean social disadvantage isn't an important factor. It simply means there is no direct, overt, relationship between the two. And this really shouldn't be too surprising. Very few, for example, would seriously argue gender, *per se*, is a causal factor in crime, even though boys accounted for 85% of all arrests of young people in England and Wales in 2022.

In this instance we would probably look to all kinds of mediating factors to explain the precise relationship between boys and

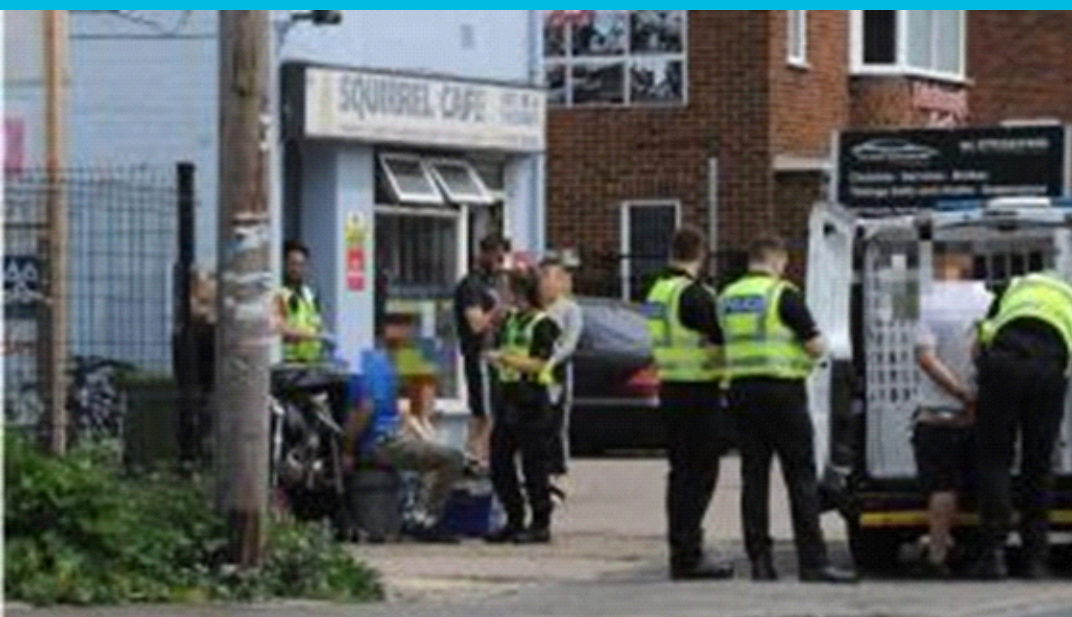
crime (from their class background, through different levels of social control placed on young boys and girls to the attitudes of control agencies like the police towards female criminality) and the same is true with the relationship between disadvantage and crime.

We know one exists.

We're just not sure about its precise nature.

The real question here, therefore, is not whether something like social disadvantage *causes* crime but how it relates to and impacts on criminality.

And for Wikstrom this relationship operates, as we've seen, through two ideas: **crime propensity** and **criminogenic exposure**.



In terms of propensity (a combination of levels of personal morality and self-control) analysis of PADS+ data revealed two distinct groups:

1. **Crime-averse** youth rarely, if ever, committed crimes. This (majority) group held personal values and moral beliefs that closely-aligned with law-abiding behaviour. In general they saw crime as morally wrong and exerted a level of self-control over their behaviour that avoided law-breaking even when they found themselves exposed to criminogenic settings. The most crime-averse young people in the sample, around 15% of this group, accounted for less than 1% of crime.

2. **Crime-prone** youth, on the other hand, held personal values and moral beliefs that saw nothing particularly wrong with certain types of crime and were not particularly concerned about breaking the law.

This group had far lower levels of self-control and their behaviour tended to be impulsive and opportunistic.

This was particularly evident in highly criminogenic settings: the most crime-prone 15% of this group, for example, were responsible for around 60% of all youth crime.

“Many young people are ‘crime-averse’ and simply don’t perceive crime as a possible course of action – it doesn’t matter what the situation is”:

Per-Olof Wickstrom

FINDINGS

More-generally, **Wikstrom** found that socially disadvantaged individuals with high levels of offending had both higher crime propensities – “weaker personal morality and ability to exercise self-control” and higher levels of criminogenic exposure (“more crime prone peers and exposure to criminogenic settings”) than non-offenders drawn from the same or similar backgrounds. The latter “demonstrate average levels of personal morality and ability to exercise self-control more consistent with young people from the least disadvantaged backgrounds”.

A further interesting finding is that *“regardless of their levels of disadvantage, young people with a high crime propensity and high criminogenic exposure report high rates of crime involvement (practically 100%) and extremely high crime frequencies”*.

These findings suggest that while the key variables in understanding youth crime are propensity and exposure – variables that can be applied to almost any social grouping, regardless of factors like age, gender and class – something like social disadvantage has a strong mediating effect on these variables that explains why socially-disadvantaged young people are more-likely to engage in offending than their advantaged peers.

The socially disadvantaged, for example, have far more restricted choices of action than their advantaged peers. The latter have far greater opportunities for educational success, something that insulates them to some extent from criminogenic exposure (they spend more time in school and in the company of non-criminogenic adults and peers) and encourages lower crime propensities: the ability to exercise higher levels of self-control, for example, is much easier in situations where others – particularly parents and peers – are encouraging the development of this characteristic.



CONCLUSION

Wikstrom notes how social disadvantages are played-out in relation to criminogenic exposure:

“Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds spend more time on average in leisure activities, including socialising, than young people from more advantaged backgrounds, and more of this time is unstructured.

Disadvantaged young people also spend more time on average unsupervised, and in particular unsupervised with their peers,

and those peers are more likely to be crime prone”.

Finally in this respect, **Wikstrom and Treiber** conclude:

“The impact of social disadvantage on young people’s crime may be primarily through disadvantage-induced selection processes which place disadvantaged young people more often than others in developmental contexts that are conducive to the development of a higher crime propensity.”

Conclusions

We can sum-up these ideas in a very simple way by noting:

- Crime propensity and criminogenic exposure are causes of criminality.
- Social disadvantage influences crime propensity through its impact on things like the ability to self-control and attitudes towards crime and the law.
- Social disadvantage impacts on an individual’s criminogenic exposure through the greater likelihood of being exposed to crime – both physically, in the sense of being in places conducive to criminality and mentally in terms of higher levels of association with criminally-minded peers.



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