

Violence and Social Class

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Violence is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property; action or conduct characterized by this; treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom.” Legally speaking, violent crime is composed of four types of offenses: murder/manslaughter, forcible rape, aggravated assault and robbery. **Social class** and **class status** are terms synonymous with **socioeconomic class status**, “a composite measure that typically incorporates economic, social, and work status ... measured by income, education, and work status [respectively]” according to the Center of Disease Control.

While violence broadly affects people across all socioeconomic classes, whether or not there exists a link between violence and class status (and how strong of one if so) depends on the type of violence (e.g. domestic violence, a violent criminal offense, etc.) and the specific factor of socioeconomic class status (e.g. education level, unemployment, income, etc.) being measured. Some comparisons yield extremely strong correlations between the measured variables, while others yield no correlation at all.

One relationship that has been found to have a particularly strong correlation is that between domestic violence and income. One study found that women who live in households that make under \$10,000/year are four times more likely to be the victims of domestic violence than women who live in wealthier households (Brown, Salomon and Bassuk, 1999). Homeless mothers also report experiencing violence at far higher rates than low-income mothers with housing. Other research suggests that the association is representative of a mutually reinforcing process rather than a simple causal relationship; that is, not only does economic stress lead to domestic violence, but domestic violence can also worsen economic insecurity as victims of domestic violence miss more days of work, arrive late to work more often and have more trouble in retaining their employment (Leone, Johnson, Cohan and Lloyd, 2004).

Dissimilarly, a comparison between violent crime and unemployment reveals a more complex relationship. For example, one study found the only positive correlation between unemployment and violent crime to be that between unemployment and robbery. No other type of violent crime (murder/manslaughter, forcible rape or aggravated assault) was found to correlate with unemployment (Raphael and Winter-Ebmer, 2001.) This suggests that people struggling to find work may only commit crimes at a higher rate that ease the economic stress they are experiencing. However, a state by state analysis rates by the FBI discovered a link between state unemployment rates and violent crime rates per-capita. Many southern states with the nation’s highest unemployment rates also suffered the highest violent crime rates, including Florida, South Carolina and Georgia. Conversely, most states with unemployment rates below the national average also had violent crime rates below the national average (FBI Uniform Crime Report – Crime in the U.S., 2011). While the Raphael/Winter-Ebner study only specially found a link between robbery and unemployment rates, the FBI study more generally shows a relationship between unemployment and all types of violent crime on a more macro, state level.

As seen from the Raphael and Winter-Ebner study, the links that do exist between violence and socioeconomic class may stem from the benefits derived from the specific crime. That is, people

of lower socioeconomic class status have an incentive to commit robbery, which could yield money and other goods of value, as opposed to aggravated assault. Also, this issue brief only examines the relationship between violence/violent crime and socioeconomic class, not links between socioeconomic class and burglary, shoplifting and other non-violent crime. Like robbery, many studies have found the aforementioned petty crimes to correlate with socioeconomic class, further suggesting that links between certain crimes and socioeconomic class are often hinged on economic motivations. However, the studies linking low income and to higher rates of domestic violence posit that low income and domestic violence are part of a mutually-reinforcing process, rather than a simple causal relationship as seen in the robbery/unemployment connection. Finally, the slight dissonance in results of the two cited violent crime studies (Raphael/Winter-Ebner and FBI Uniform Crime Report) is more broadly representative of the uncertainty regarding connections between violence and socioeconomic status. While many hold perceptions that violence is concentrated in America's poorest neighborhoods, researchers discover far more complex and enigmatic relationships between the different types and measures of violence and various components of socioeconomic status.

Works Cited

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