

# Social Class, Race, and Juvenile Delinquency: A Review of the Literature

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**ABSTRACT:** Though delinquency is a universal problem, standards for delinquent behavior vary, both intra- and cross-culturally. The urban juvenile, typically black and of low socioeconomic status, is at highest risk of participating in delinquent acts for which he will be adjudicated. A number of theories are reviewed in the light of recent research into the nature of the urban Negro family, the resurgence of delinquent gang activities, cultural conflict, and varieties of identity-corrective experiences sought by adolescent males.

Nearly every language contains a term or phrase labeling those youngsters whose actions and styles are sufficiently different as to provoke some suspicion or alarm. Standards for such behavior vary across and within cultures [1]. Though lawbreaking per se is not condoned by middle-class society, the escape of a government espionage agent in the employ of that society is lauded as a major victory. Marijuana smoking by lower-class boys is labeled delinquent and is severely punished, whereas the existence of "pot parties" in suburbia is denied or even tacitly condoned by parents and authorities alike. Amid the conflicting reports and assessments of juvenile delinquency, one fact becomes evident: each case is unique, and even when delinquent acts appear similar, each instance must be

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considered as singular and representative only of the individual performing the act [1].

Delinquency may be defined as “essentially a thrust against society and may be described as any act or series of acts of an individual or group that violates accepted social or moral standards and brings individuals into conflict with society” [2]. For purposes of this paper, *society* will refer to the collective cooperative unit of human beings so functioning as to maintain themselves and so perpetuate their species. *Culture*, an aspect of society, specifically refers to the “knowledge, beliefs, values, codes, tastes, and prejudices that are traditional to and acquired by participation in social groups” [3]. *Subculture* designates “a culture within a culture” and is a distinct cultural pattern contained within a larger cultural unit. The concept of *class* designates the socioeconomic level of a particular group within a society. *Status* is the relative significance given to a particular position within a group, and may or may not be related to class. Class is a broader term which “involves the position of the family in the social structure, particularly its status vis-à-vis other families, [and it] determines the experience and problems which all members of the family will encounter in their dealings with the world outside the family” [3].

Having defined operationally the common terms that will be used in this discussion, the next task will be to establish the extent of the problem. A recent assessment of juvenile delinquency was made by a committee of the Senate [4]:

The United States is confronted with a mounting problem of juvenile criminality. In 1962, the last year for which complete figures are available, cases coming before the juvenile courts increased 10 percent over the previous year, while police arrests of persons under 18 years of age increased 9 percent over 1961. . . . Court statistics collected by the U.S. Children's Bureau, together with the police arrest data issued annually by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, indicate that close to a million young people in the 10 through 17 age group every year come in contact with law enforcement agencies because of violations of one type or another.

The urban areas, in particular, reflect the epidemiology of delinquency. Lander [5], in his Baltimore study, found that approximately 40 percent of the Negro boys aged 14 to 15 and 26 percent of the boys aged 10 to 13 were registered in the Baltimore Juvenile Court on delinquency petitions. In contrast, of the white

male population in the city only 12 percent of the older group and 7 percent of the younger group were alleged delinquents. Lander's figures correspond to the overall population figures where the incidence of criminal behavior among Negroes varies between 1½ and 2½ times as high as for the entire population [6].

Delinquency rates are highest in the inner-city areas characterized by physical disintegration, industrial usage, and the concentration of other social problems such as poverty, suicide, adult crime, and mental illness. Negro delinquency rates are from two to five times higher than the rate of the general population. Presently, Negroes represent one-third of all inmates in training schools for juvenile offenders, and the urban Negro accounts for 60 percent of all arrests for crimes against persons [7].

Much has been written to explain the plight of the urban Negro. His delinquency record, in particular, has been the target of many an observer. Miller [8] sees the lower-class culture as a generating milieu for such behavior; he sees delinquency as part of a lower-class style of life. Cohen [9] finds working-class boys to be ill equipped to achieve in the middle-class superculture. Gang behavior and delinquency provide primary gratification for these boys, hence are adopted as a reaction against middle-class values. Cloward and Ohlin [10] find that blocked ambition and a lack of upward mobility produce a delinquent resolution. Finally, Moynihan [7] and Clark [11] suggest that the essential disintegration and lack of cohesiveness in the Negro family contribute substantially to the high incidence of delinquency in the urban slum ghetto.

Each of these areas of inquiry—Negro family environment, slum gang milieu, middle-class superculture, and Negro identity conflict—will be explored in the following pages.

### Family and Home Environment

The family and home matrix is the earliest and most lasting social influence upon human development. According to Cavan [6], the attitudes and behaviors of an individual are closely linked to the social groups in which he is reared. The family is the key group, the first cultural matrix that leaves its impress upon the personality, and it remains a more or less constant influence through late adolescence.

Initially, three aspects of the urban Negro family matrix are related to the etiology of delinquency. First, the family mediates the transmission of lower-class culture. Second, it establishes the

interpersonal relationships that are associated with delinquency. Third, the family is a prime influence in the development of the child's concept of himself as a delinquent or a nondelinquent. "Negro delinquents originate in the same types of families as white delinquents, but [those] unfavorable conditions [that generate delinquency] are much more frequently found in the families of Negro delinquents" [12].

The harm that may result from rearing a child in an improper home environment has been researched at length. From the Spitz and Wolf [13] discovery of conditions that result in "anaclitic depression," to the overt statement by the Gluecks that "... delinquent boys come from homes broken by desertion, separation, divorce, or death of one or both parents" and that "... many of the breaches occurred during the early childhood of the boys" [14], the impact of the early external environment can be observed. With regard to the influence of criminal or deviant parents upon children, McCord [15] states that criminality "is largely dependent upon factors within the family." Current statistics on the urban Negro family present an appalling picture. Nearly 25 percent of all urban Negro marriages dissolve in divorce or separation. Hence, almost 25 percent of all Negro families are female based. A majority of all Negro children reach the age of 18 having lived most of their lives with at least one parent absent [7]. In addition to the correlated effects of parental absence, developmental theory describes parental absence as a deleterious influence which increases as the child matures. The mistrust and latent hostility established in infancy by a weak relationship with an inconstant and anxious mother may later produce a mistrustful and suspicious attitude toward the world [16].

When parents of delinquents were studied as to attitudes and characteristic behavior patterns, as a group they were found to be more punitive, less warm, and less affectionate than the parents of nondelinquents [17]. In a similar study exploring attitudes of delinquent boys and their parents, boys and parents alike felt that the boys were neither accepted nor trusted and that they had to be controlled by their parents [18].

In addition to the Spitz studies, the permanent effects of parental absence—father absence in particular—have been observed in both institutional and normal settings. Boys who had been separated from their fathers during World War II showed a lack of oedipal resolution and some subsequent identity diffusion [19]. A similar study on the longitudinal effects of father separation found that deprived males behaved more like girls, particularly in their fantasy

material, and they lacked aggression in overt behavior. In a follow-up study on a group of World War II soldiers' sons, it was found that the boys whose fathers returned developed fantasy material of a significantly aggressive nature [20].

Boys between 4 and 17 with a history of severe aggressive-destructive behavior were observed by Bandura and Walters [21]. Severely antisocial boys had experienced many conditions that were particularly unfavorable for socialization through identification. These subjects feared and avoided close dependent involvements. A severe hiatus in the father-son relationship had occurred in most of the cases. Gregory [22] confirms this data in his study of male delinquents. He found a common experience for the majority of his subjects had been early separation or loss of the father.

Broken, indifferent, and rejecting home environments make up the bulk of the family matrices from which delinquents come [23]. In general, delinquents have markedly less favorable attitudes toward their parents with neglect and rejection patterns appearing in reference to the father [24]. Similarly, delinquents express less open feeling and affection for their parents, in particular the father. The father's role is most often characterized by inadequate communication, poor training, and a lack of awareness of the youth's behavior [25].

With the high incidence of father-absent female-based households in the Negro urban community, it becomes unfortunately clear that the family matrix does in part relate to the high incidence of delinquency. "Female-based households and serial monogamy [are] closely associated with delinquent behavior. As a result of low income, chronic unemployment, and dependence upon women, the unstable family pattern has been reinforced" [7]. In particular, Erikson notes: "Father absence does belong in every index and in the agenda of national concern."

### Gang Influence

The prevalence of father-absent female-based households in the urban Negro community provides the basis for male sex-role conflict which, in turn, necessitates resolution. Particularly, membership in a violent gang and the compulsive rejection of anything feminine especially as seen in women and effeminate men, laws, morals, religion, school, and occupational striving are common reactions for such young men [26].

A pattern involving rejection of things feminine and gang influence is characteristic of the delinquent subculture which Cohen [3] finds to be "a normal, integral and deeply-rooted feature of the social life of the modern American city." This subculture is nonutilitarian and negativistic; hostility marks its relationship to most other groups, nongang members, and adults. This group's reaction to the prevalent societal norms is remarkably reminiscent of Erikson's "negative identity" concept. In both reactions, the norms of respectable society are nullified and transgressed.

The delinquent gang flourishes in the interstitial urban areas, particularly in the borderline zones which include both lower-working-class housing and industry. Gang delinquency is generally a working-class phenomenon with poverty as the overwhelming characteristic of the represented population [27]. Several schools of thought are offered to explain delinquent gangs. Thrasher [28] found that Chicago gangs were primarily concerned with stealing for survival. Whyte [29] found the gang to be a constant social milieu that was based upon friendship, social activity, sports, and occasional illegal practices. Yablonsky [30] has found gangs to be quite different in nature. They are primarily organized around violence.

The gang emerges as a subcultural refuge from a conflict with the larger society that it opposes, and becomes, for a dissociated youth, his primary identification group. In this context the gang becomes a basic primary group necessary for self-sustenance, and all outsiders become targets for hostility and aggression. The police, in particular, tend to be viewed as a symbol of outgroup hostility and clearly become an enemy. [30]

The individual gang member, according to Yablonsky, is a suspicious, fearful individual who is "unwilling or able to establish a concrete human relationship." The organization of the gang is particularly suited to the defective personality, the sociopath or psychopath, and is limited to the social activity of such youths.

Cohen [3] finds delinquent gang behavior an attempt at identity problem solving. The most common problem confronting the lower-class adolescent is one of status. Early in life he learns that he is denied status in society because he cannot meet the criteria of the respectable status system. Delinquent subcultures provide criteria for status that he can meet.

Juvenile gang activity is not a modern phenomenon. In the

middle ages, gangs were common and had more or less specific functions. In many ways their social structure and ceremonies were similar to those of the unmarried men's clans in primitive society. In this sense, gang activity may be interpreted as a survival of an archaic organization of society by age groups [31]. Block and Niederhoffer [32] find "ganging" a culturally determined mechanism for the attainment of manhood. This device is most often found in cultures where the adolescent male is prevented from achieving manhood for a prolonged period of time. Ceremonial rites, rituals, and patterns of behavior are prescribed for initiation. When society does not take proper steps to provide such experience, equivalent forms of behavior arise spontaneously among the adolescents themselves.

Whiting, Kluckhohn, and Anthony [33], similarly concerned with male adolescent initiation rites, found that such phenomena invariably occur in those societies that foster a close mother-son relationship. Mores of these cultures included an extended post-partum sex taboo and a sleeping arrangement involving the exclusion of the father. The adolescent puberty rite thus provides a mechanism for role adjustment. Such ceremonies usually involve dangerous endurance tests, genital operation, and residence change from the house of the mother to the house of the initiated males. In short, boys tend to be initiated into male groups in those societies that institutionalize early father absence and extended dependence upon the mother. Whiting further suggests a correspondence between the function of the group initiation in the primitive society and delinquent gang membership in lower-class urban society where the cross-cultural factors appear to be similar.

Unfortunately, in the comparison in function between the delinquent gang characteristics of lower-class societies and the male initiating groups of primitive societies, the urban version has the effect of generating more delinquent behavior whereas the primitive ceremony repairs society. The mere observation of aggressive, destructive, and delinquent responses by a model has a facilitating effect on an individual's reactions in the immediate social setting [34].

### The Middle-Class Superculture

The essential quality of the lower-class delinquent subculture involves "a wholesale repudiation of middle-class standards and the adoption of their very antithesis" [3]. In essence, the lower-class

delinquent resists the influence of middle-class morality and standards. He has legitimized the very opposite. By contrast, for the middle-class male physical prowess and aggression are channeled to pastime and leisure activities; character and discipline are significant masculine qualities. What is suggested by these simple differences is the cultural conflict theory. This theory holds that delinquency is primarily defined by the standards of the middle-class society. Since the behavior of the lower-class adolescent is in reaction to stimuli peculiar to the lower-class environment, it is by nature at variance with the middle-class standards and by definition delinquent. "Delinquency is predominantly a lower-class phenomenon related to transiency, poor housing, and economic indices" [35].

Unfortunately, the nation's schools serve to reinforce the gap between lower and middle classes. "The orientation of our schools at present is almost entirely toward middle-class values and way of life, which sometimes have not concrete meaning to the lower-class child . . . children from lower-class and culturally deprived environments are more limited in access to new knowledge and in opportunities for new experience, and this is even more true in a racially encapsulated community" [36]. Erikson [37] finds that

minority groups of a lesser degree of Americanization (Negroes, Indians, Mexicans, and certain European groups) often are privileged in the enjoyment of a more sensual childhood. Their crisis comes when their parents and teachers, losing trust in themselves and using sudden correctives in order to approach the but pervasive Anglo-Saxon ideal, create violent discontinuities, or where indeed, the children themselves learn to disavow their sensual and overprotective mothers as temptations and a hindrance in the formation of a more American personality.

Thus, from both directions there exists a powerful press that elicits ambivalence regarding identity from the adolescent.

Subtle but measurable reactions occur in this conflict. For example, there is a positive correlation between Negro achievement and dialect spoken. With intelligence, grade point average, sex, and other relevant variables constant, those subjects who were high in achievement manifest a less "southern" speech pattern than the low achievers [38]. Patterns of school attendance similarly suggest the influence of culture conflict. From ages 7 through 19 Negro children attend school in proportion to whites. However, when education ceases to be free, the ratio becomes disproportionate in favor of the



whites. Narrow gains are found in the technical and professional areas; however, economic pressure seems to rule the Negro out of the nonpublic, noncompensatory education field [39].

At the other end of the educational spectrum is the school dropout. "Approximately 45 percent of those children who complete the fifth grade do not graduate from high school. Usually the youngster who drops out is lower class, culturally" [27]. In a cross-sectional attitude sample of Negro children from kindergarten through fifth grade, the older children expressed more negative attitudes than did the younger children. When tested clinically, the children, increasingly with age, viewed themselves in negative terms as unacceptable, disapproved, and often angry or unhappy [40]. These findings parallel the Deutsch study [36] which stated that two-thirds of the Negro children in the population had negative self-concepts. The dropout leaves school to escape from an atmosphere of conflict and failure in an educational program not designed to keep him in school [41]. However, of itself, this fact does not establish a positive correlation to the delinquent response. In fact, the delinquency rate is higher for boys while they are in rather than out of school [42].

The perception of opportunity accessibility seems related to the deviant solution. "The more an individual revealed lower family or school expectancy, or higher attribution to either family members or social agencies, the more likely he was to be a delinquent" [43]. Consistent with the work of Cloward and Ohlin [10], Short, Rivera, and Tennyson [44] found that gang members perceived legitimate opportunities as available less often than did nongang boys. Lower-class boys perceived fewer opportunities than did middle-class boys, and Negro boys perceived fewer opportunities than did white boys. Hypothesizing that Lewin's concept of goal accessibility and motivation operates for lower-class Negro delinquents, Barndt and Johnson [45] studied time orientation in delinquents. They concluded that orientation toward the future is acquired through incidental learning during childhood and adolescence. A pattern of deferred gratification common to the middle class was lacking in the lower-class sample. Delinquents characteristically have short time perspectives and seem more controlled by immediate impulse gratification.

The observable class differences in motivation and perception may unfortunately be reinforced by the present welfare system, the effect of which appears to be contrary to its purpose [46]. In some cases public welfare becomes an insurmountable obstacle to the

family's ultimate rehabilitation, for the fact of dependency upon relief subverts the family's autonomy. Institutional designs for correction and rehabilitation are also found to reinforce the criminal and delinquent response. Frequently, such institutions punish responses that conform to the lower-class subcultural standard [47].

Finally, even the mass media, in particular television which plays to an audience regardless of age, color, or class, has a marked influence upon the lower-class Negro. Gerson [48] discloses that Negroes more than whites are "media socializees." Norms, values, patterns of behavior, and other models are transmitted through television especially for this group. If this is true, and the Negroes learn middle-class models through television, what aspect of the middle class are they being exposed to? Miller notes that television reinforces the "obsessional concern for masculinity" through its models of daring, lusty adventure, and it places great value in physical skill and prowess.

In addition to the position of violence as a prestige symbol in the gang, the larger society covertly approves of, or is at least intrigued by, that which is depicted in literature, radio, television, the movies, and other mass media. Although on the surface most members of society condemn violence, on a covert level, there is a tendency to aggrandize and give recognition to perpetrators of violence. The sociopathic personality who commits intense, sudden acts of violence is the "hero" of many plays and stories portrayed in contemporary mass media. [30]

### Self-Concept and Self-Identification

Each factor discussed thus far—the family environment, the gang milieu, and the middle-class cultural press—has a distinct influence upon Negro identity. Boys from fatherless homes must "painfully achieve a masculine self-image late in their childhood after having an original self-image on the basis of the only parental model they have had—their mother. Several studies point to the applicability of this sex-identity problem to lower-class Negro males" [49]. Further, "a socially appropriate or inappropriate concept of self and other is the basic component that steers the youthful person away or toward delinquency" [50].

Self-concept characterizes delinquent and nondelinquent individuals so as to distinguish them. A Norwegian study of self-concept

among delinquent girls found delinquency to be the expression of impaired ego function. Inadequate reality testing, impulse control, social relations, defense mechanisms, and unstable identifications were symptomatic of this condition [51]. Erikson [52], commenting on the plight of the Negro adolescent in America, finds that the problems of Negro youth "span the whole phenomenology of aggravated identity confusion and rapid new identity formation cutting across phenomena judged antisocial and prosocial, violent and heroic, fanatic and ethnically advanced."

In effect, the Negro's identity becomes precisely what it is held to be by the pervasive middle-class society. The young Negro male adopts what Erikson terms a "negative identity." Within the sociological dichotomy of good and evil prototypes, wherein the "good" model is difficult or impossible to attain, feelings of self-hatred and rejection act upon the individual to induce a massive reaction-formation which becomes his identity. He becomes everything that society hates him for being [16]. Another possibility is the nonidentity that is seen in the lower-class Negro's sense of "nobodyness." In either the nonidentity or the negative identity, Erikson finds the Negro identity problem not only symptomatic of alienation in a white society but also a corrective trend in Negro psycho-social evolution.

When delinquent acts were studied racially, it was found that 71 percent of the Negro boys committed "substantive" crimes, such as crimes against persons and property. In contrast, 63 percent of the white sample were "technical delinquents," that is, guilty of breaking significant social norms. The Negro substantive delinquents had higher racial awareness scores, and the white substantive delinquents showed the highest measured loading of racial prejudice. Thus, the importance of race membership as a variable relating to delinquency has been established. Over 85 percent of the Negro boys in the study did not perceive themselves as having the same chance as whites to "get ahead." The lower-class Negro youth feels out of the mainstream of American society [53].

When Miller [8] examined the lower-class culture as a milieu for generating delinquency as an identity solution, he found an obsessive concern for masculinity to pervade. Among its most important components were physical prowess, "evidenced by demonstrated possession of strength and endurance, masculinity symbolized by a distinctive complex of acts and avoidances (bodily tattooing; absence of sentimentality; non-concern with art, literature, conceptualizing

of women as conquest objects); and bravery in the face of physical threat.”

Recognition and achievement, particularly within the structure of a gang, provide identity resolution for some adolescents. Yablonsky [30] notes that the personalities most amenable to membership in violent gangs are the psychopathic, the morally incapacitated, or the constitutionally inferior. For the psychopath or sociopath, the gang can serve as a “social narcotic,” a device enabling the psychopathic youth to move into unreality and to avoid the anxieties generated by normal social responsibilities which he is unequipped to meet.

When teacher-nominated subjects in a high delinquency area were sampled in an attempt to discover what isolates certain boys, it was found that “self-concept, undoubtedly a product of favorable socialization, veers slum boys away from delinquency, while a poor self-concept, a product of unfavorable socialization, gives the slum boy no resistances to deviancy, delinquent companions, or delinquent subculture” [54].

### Summary and Conclusion

In comparison to the youth population as a whole and to other minority populations, the abnormal position that the Negro group occupies in American life is apparent. Minority racial status affects the Negro's personality development and his position in the overall class structure. Frequent family disorganization, lower-class status, low income level, dysgenic influences in the Negro community, and low educational status are important factors; it is difficult, however, to state specifically what measures of each obtain.

In describing American society, Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal probes the economic basis for the American class structure. He concludes that the growing economy of this country cannot coexist with its poverty problem. The economic organization of American society bears heavily upon lower-class family structure as has been noted.

Welfare and rehabilitation programs which were envisioned to restore the fabric of the family merely add to its disintegration. Institutions offering corrective vocational training and rehabilitation to young offenders fail more often than they succeed. Police practices in dealing with juveniles have been studied and found to

contribute to the very problem they should contain. Typically, when Negro and white youths exhibit recalcitrant behavior commonly associated with confirmed delinquents, the Negroes were treated more severely than the whites [55].

The public school system further represents a conditioning agent for delinquency. Suggested plans for intervention at this level include reconstitution of curriculum in high poverty areas and the institution of therapeutic counseling services for remedial adjustment [41]. In theory, it is suggested that juveniles should learn a sense of worth and identity in the classroom.

Unfortunately, elegant school or community strategies are only as effective as the reality of the opportunity structure which prevails long after the program has been completed. Moynihan [39] finds that opportunities for the bulk of the Negro labor force in the lower wage and training categories have not improved, and in some respects the condition has worsened. Twice as many Negroes as whites are unemployed at any given time, even with the impetus of new education and rehabilitation programs. Failure within the system seems the rule for the majority of these people as it is the most consistent model that they confront. Presently, the Negro adolescent has a future containing twice the unemployment and an appreciably shorter life expectancy than a white youth in similar circumstances. Fundamental in the pathologic tangle is the position of the Negro male. He holds jobs with minimal prestige and income. With the added stress of the middle years, he disappears out of the labor roles.

Occasionally, programs have been successful in meeting the complex problem of the urban Negro delinquent. The HARYOU (Harlem Youth) Project was funded by the borough of Manhattan and a cooperative association of organizations and institutions. It presented a democratic and humane approach to the youth problem of the ghetto as it intended nothing more than the preparation, respect, and environmental enrichment of the youth. The goal of the program was to make purposeful citizens out of the young people [56].

In a large measure, the program that Clark describes operationalizes what Erikson suggests in theory as the type of approach needed in confronting the Negro identity problem. HARYOU provides the young person with an opportunity to discover his "inclusive identity" as he asks the question "What do I want to make of myself?" rather than the unanswerable "Who am I?" [16].

The direct approach to these problems has of late appeared most successful. Gottesfield and Reissman [57] have utilized parent

surrogates as agents in crisis intervention with delinquents. They have found that these youngsters reject roles of "pals" and other professional guises. They seek a mature adult who is concerned and willing to give some instruction to the adolescent in social adaptation.

Indeed, one must remember that not every minor who breaks the law is a delinquent. The behavior of adolescents, in particular, rarely conforms to the standards and expectations of adults. For the delinquent in the urban ghetto, it appears that coordinated programs of education, counseling, and financial assistance will not solve the problem of delinquency until the family is restored, the milieu is made wholesome, the superculture develops a supportive and accepting attitude, and identity is restored to the male American Negro.

[References are available from the author on request.]