
How Strain Leads to Crime

Many of us doubtlessly face strain throughout their lives, it depends on our way of coping to determine if we will commit crime or simply resort to work harder. The strain theory was developed by Robert K. Merton. My perception of strain theory is that it implies that social values and norms cause people to commit crime due to a gap between goals and their current achievements. Furthermore, the theory argues that acceptable goals include money and education and correct means of obtaining them include work and honesty. However, people from different socio-economic groups have different likelihood of achieving these goals and those who are not able to achieve them are significantly more likely experience strain. My way of interpreting the question is "is strain theory generally a good explanation as to why individuals to commit crime?" I believe that strain is significantly convincing as to why individuals commit crime, although not directly because it is the coping strategies that lead to crime. This will be explained by stating 1. Strains that most often lead indirectly to crime, 2. Factors that lead to strain and 3. Coping strategies.

This shows a sequence which should imply that factors or circumstances lead to strain, strain leads to coping strategies which then lead to crime. In a way both the factors and strain indirectly lead to crime. Coping strategies lead to crime as opposed to strain directly leading to crime.

Individuals may come to face strain when they are unable to reach goals through acceptable means. Among these goals are financial stability, material goods and improvement of social status. Society emphasizes that these goals, among others, should be obtained through honesty and hard work, however society has systems and laws that prevent those of lower socioeconomic status from achieving these goals. One of the most well-known systems is the school to prison pipeline which refers to an almost direct path from the education system to the juvenile or adult criminal justice system. According to a study on discipline and socioeconomic status by Verdugo and Glen, those who receive reduced school lunch are more likely to be suspended from school. (Verdugo & Glenn 8). When an individual is suspended they may be labeled in negative ways. As a result, they may begin to express the primary deviancy because of labeling. This basically means that they will begin to behave in the negative way that they are labeled. To review, lower socioeconomic status means it is more likely for individuals to be disciplined in school and develop negative behaviors that prevents them from achieving their goals, therefore leading to strain. Additionally, society makes it extremely difficult to achieve social status through cultural acceptable means. Many scholars argue that people from lower socioeconomic groups especially juveniles, tend to resort to gangs to gain respect, money and social status through unacceptable means rather than coping in positive ways (Anderson 75).

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Elijah Anderson goes on to argue that these individuals must “campaign” for respect in the streets. Gaining respect through these means causes individuals to constantly be involved in crime. Therefore, individuals who are unable to gain respect or social status through cultural acceptable means tend to resort to crime. As I mentioned before, discipline that is harsh, negative secondary school experiences, among others are proven in fact to lead to crime (Agnew 2005, 2006b). Additionally, strain leads to negative emotional reactions which in turn lead to crime; a way of escaping the strain instead of coping through positive means. (Agnew and Brezina 104). These strains are all highly likely to lead to crime when people are unable to obtain their goals and are unwilling or unable to cope through positive means.

Generally, strain is very likely to lead to negative coping and crime when an individual sees the following factors; the strain is unjust, when the individual experiences too much strain, and when the individual has low social control. When people work hard and are still unable to reach their goal they may see it as unjust and believe that it is tolerable to obtain their goals through unacceptable means. For instance, a well-qualified candidate, most commonly a minority, goes to apply for a job that relates to their skills or education. They are called in for an interview which they attend, it may or may not go well but days later they will most likely receive the news that they were rejected by the company. Now, this happens frequently, and it may happen to anyone for any reason. However, discrimination is nonetheless one of the most common reasons why people are not able to find jobs (Baron 425). In this case, unemployment because of discrimination is unjust without a doubt, but society is structured in this way. While some people may respond by continuing their job search, others may instead respond with frustration which is far more likely to lead to strain. We see that discrimination is a factor that leads to unemployment which is a type of strain.

Moreover, when there is a great amount of strain, the individual may resort to crime after coming to the realization that they are unable to achieve their goals on various occasions or if there is a huge gap between their current state and their goals. It is commonly believed that people are generally more likely to engage in crime when they are unable to reach financial stability. “drug dealing is more likely when unemployed people have stopped looking for employment and when they are extremely unhappy with their monetary situation” (Baron 420). In other words, individuals who are living in extreme poverty are facing the strain of high magnitude and are in a position where the gap between their goals and current state is extreme. While I agree with this statement, it is missing the fact that money isn’t the only reason why people engage in drug crimes, it may also be for respect in the street system as I mentioned before. They may resort to drug dealing not only to gain wealth, in the case that they are in gangs it may also be to seek respect. Moreover, low social control is another factor that leads to negative coping. To illustrate this, an individual may be rejected by family or peers throughout life and develop this sense of low socialization with others. As a result, when they encounter a scenario where they are unemployed or lack social status, they respond with anger and

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frustration as a way of coping. Without a doubt, this would lead to crime. With discrimination as an unjust factor of strain, extreme poverty as high magnitude factor, and rejection as a low social control factor, we see there are many extreme factors that lead the affected people to become a bit more likely to face strains which in turn lead to crime.

There are many coping strategies that lead people to commit crime rather than resorting to hard work or to acceptance of these strains. One way of coping with strain in a ritualistic or positive way is to lower one's expectations. Many scholars argue that lower class individuals do not experience strain because they lower their expectations (Agnew 67). However, what happens when the individual does not simply just lower their expectations? Involvement with delinquent peers and negative emotions, but why do some portray this, and others don't? It is clearly difficult for lower class individuals to gain social status of middle class so many scholars argue that they develop a coping system to achieve their goals. Cohen argued that lower class individuals may develop a status system, this involves gangs (Agnew and Brezina 98). By way of explanation, through gangs these lower-class individuals achieve their "alternate" status. To add on, involvement with delinquent peers also makes it more likely that individuals may resort to crime. As previously mentioned, low social control can be a type of strain that leads to crime.

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