

# THE CRIME OF POVERTY

## A view from Easterhouse

9 am on a Sunday morning. A trembling woman comes to our flat to phone the police. She had been woken by smoke and discovered a room ablaze from a burning missile thrown through a window. The previous evening a gang had attacked her partner outside the chippie leaving him with 44 stitches. The police interpreted the fire as a warning from the gang not to give evidence against them. Within hours, the family had been moved away to a bed and breakfast establishment. Soon they will be transferred to another flat. The children, who had been so happy in our clubs and the local school, will face yet more upheavals.

Another neighbour obtained a job as a security guard at £1.90 an hour. She was alone in a dis-used building when five raiders burst in. While two held knives at her throat, the others made off with the gas cooker. A mother, having just left her child at the creche run by the local community association, was knocked to the ground by two men who made off with her purse. The next day, the Salvation Army captain tells me that yet again his old van has been stolen. He grins, "They didn't get far this time. It broke down."

These crimes occurred within a few days in one district of Easterhouse, a peripheral Glasgow estate where unemployment is high and where over half of all schoolchildren receive clothing grants, and come from families with very low incomes. From here, the claims about a lack of connection between crime and social deprivation must be challenged. For me, there is incontestably a relationship between them.

### The underclass school

However, in establishing this relationship, there is a danger of providing ammunition for the underclass school. New Right gurus, led by Charles Murray, claim that British inner cities and peripheral estates are being taken over by a growing underclass of feckless young men who refuse to work and irresponsible lone mothers who fail to bring their children up properly. Supported by welfare benefits they seek pleasure in drugs and further income from crime.

The underclass explanation of social problems has been accepted by many politicians of the right to argue that social security benefits should be cut so as to drive the unemployed into low paid jobs, that welfare should be transferred to a private market which can create those jobs, and that social workers should be more ready to coerce the young "barbarians", as Murray calls them, into acceptable life styles. The underclass pro-

ponents thus link poverty and crime in order not to reduce poverty but in order to attack the deprived.

If Murray lived in Easterhouse he would have learnt these lessons. Young people may be unemployed but not from choice: most want desperately to work and even compete to delivery newspapers or cut grass. Most children live with two parents. Most residents, including lone parents, care deeply about family and community life. After all, they are the ones who suffer from local crime. Consequently, many take counter action like the father who has never known employment but works four evenings a week in youth clubs so that kids have an alternative to the street. He is not unusual. Easterhouse is not being over-run by an underclass. That is a myth. The reality is of a majority of ordinary and decent citizens who yet find themselves in the midst of crime and vandalism.

### Explanations

If an underclass is not the explanation, why are social deprivation and crime connected? A partial answer is that poverty and inequality generate circumstances which facilitate rather than deter crime in a number of ways.

Firstly, many people, especially young people are just bored. Few go on to higher education. Few go on to 'real' jobs. Most enter unsatisfying low-paid posts at best and unemployment at worst. Consequently, teenagers hang about the streets and shops. They want excitement, diversion, anything, and inevitably some turn to crime. It is a minority but a minority can commit a lot of offences.

Second, drugs are readily available. The drug barons, as the police call them, do not stay in Easterhouse. They arrange the delivery knowing that some bored

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young people will be an easy prey. Their consequent drug abuse does not make them members of an underclass any more than university students who partake. It does make them criminals both as takers of illegal drugs, with ecstasy and heroin on the increase, and as petty dealers. Their involvement can then stimulate further crime.

Third, desperation. Poverty has now reached depths unknown to me in my previous 30 years in welfare work.

Fourth, opportunity. Buildings make crime easy. Security doors are often bro-

ken. Once inside the common closes, the housebreaker is hidden. Front doors, which most occupants can not afford to alarm, can be quickly forced. With many flats abandoned, empty rooms offer easy passage to occupied dwellings via thin walls or through the lofts. TVs and giros are favourite spoils. Then the cashing of giros makes for easy game.

Fifth, the culture of inequality. On TV and in popular papers, residents can perceive and resent the growing inequality of our society. These inequalities may not excuse crimes but they do throw light on why a sense of injustice makes them more likely.

Crime then can not be attributed to the birth, in poverty-stricken areas, of a new breed called the underclass. Rather, social deprivations generate a futility which makes some prey to drug exploiters, a desperation which compels others to take advantage of the many means of stealing, and a sense of grievance which both can incorporate to justify their actions. Hence the association between poverty and crime.

### Countering crime

What can be done about the high levels of crime in socially deprived areas? The police are aware of the problem. They have initiated many approaches. Nevertheless they do require extra personnel for one of the most effective deterrents to crime is the probability of being caught. However, in conditions of vast poverty they can deal only with the expression not the cause of crime.

Nor can responsibility be foisted on to the local community. Many residents are already involved in countering crime. Community action is deserving of greater resources but it can only alleviate not redress social deprivations. Something more fundamental is required.

Crime prevention can best be tackled by poverty prevention. Houses with gardens rather than tenements with closes. Social security reforms. Jobs and career opportunities for those young people whose lives are wasting away on the dole. These reforms will not remove individual responsibility. On the contrary, they will enable parents and youngsters to exercise it more fully. They will not eradicate crime but they will reduce it in the inner cities and out-lying estates.

Of course, it will be argued that money is not available for such changes. Nonsense. It is political will, not cash which is lacking.

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