GLOBAL JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY SOCIAL SCIENCES
(Published By: Global Institute for Research & Education)
www.gifre.org

Urban Crime, Unrest and Social Control

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Abstract

While it is not entirely certain to what degree the actual rate of crime is greater in cities than in less urbanized places, a number of social and physical characteristics of cities may very well generate the kinds of conditions conducive to violations of the law.

Urban life is commonly characterized by population density, social mobility, class and ethnic heterogeneity, reduced family functions, and greater anonymity. When these traits are found in high degree, and when they are combined with poverty, physical deterioration, low education, residence in industrial and commercial centers, unemployment, unskilled labor, economic dependency, marital instability and a cultural minority of inferiority, it is generally assumed that deviance is more likely to emerge.

Theoretical Framework

Virtually all contemporary social problems have in one way or another been associated with the process of urbanization. A large number of these have been alluded to or implied throughout some writings, although they are not intended to suggest that urbanization can best be understood in the context of the problems or crises it is alleged to generate. The relationship between a very broad and general social process such as urbanization and the much more concrete examples of social problems such as those that are commonly classified within the framework of social disorganization, deviant behavior, or value conflict are very difficult to observe directly, and there is a very complex and indirect chain of events by which these two levels of social behavior can be said to be even remotely connected.

The purpose of this study is to understand some of the general theoretical perspectives within which the link between urbanization and social problems can be better explained and to follow this more general discussion with a review of two commonly recognized urban social problems—crime, and ethnic and race conflicts.

Urbanization and the related industrial or technological forces that accompany it are often referred to as major sources of distruption in western society. While there is some truth in this judgment, it is not the city or metropolis as such, any more than it is technology, that directly causes such problems as ethnic and racial tensions, crime, or poverty. Problems such as these are aberrations of a process that on the whole produces more in the way of stable and constructive changes than the reverse. Inherently there is no more reason for urbanism to be associated with social disorganization or personal pathologies than there is for rural life. Rural environments are as prone to manifestations of social and personal disorganization as are cities.

But even though the physical facts of urbanization and industrialization are not themselves necessarily involved in creating social problems, certain historically related social process definitely can be implicated. Nisbet(1966) has identified four such processes that are particularly significant here: 1) conflict of institutions;2) social mobility;3) individuation;4) anomie. Although these processes are rarely found in isolated distinct forms, they will be discussed separately for clarification.

Problems

Conflicts of Institutions

What has emerged in modern urban society is a plurality of social institutions, each with its own authority and functions, each limited or constrained by the presence of others, with all forming together the larger patterns of authority, functions, and allegiances by which a society comes to be known. Such pluralism has certainly been a major feature of urban society. In the pre-industrial urban communities, kinship and religion are the dominant institutions that probably wielded the greatest influence on the lives of the people (Gist,1994). Since the advent of industrialization, economic, political, and social service oriented institutions have separated from kinship or religious groupings to become competing institutions in their own right. Self-engulfed and transformed by larger, more complex, and more elaborately differentiated forms of organization.

Institutional pluralism cannot be overlooked as a background to modern urban social problems, for it is frequently at the bottom of the conflicts and dislocations forming the substance of many kinds of deviant behavior (Johnson,2005). The resultant conflict of institutions is deeply involved in the migration of people from the old world to the new; in the passage of American society from rural to urban; in the changed position of the generations and the sexes to one another; and in the rise of such new institutions as the corporate bureaucracy, public education and welfare, mass communications, political parties, labor unions, and the suburban complex. This pluralism is characterized by a wide range of competition and social strain, leading to an almost endless conflicts of goals and behavior patterns.

Nowhere has such conflict been more vivid and agonizing than in the transplanting of peoples from Europe, Africa, or Asia to the United States, or from rural to metropolitan areas (Grimshaw,1991). These dislocations are often reflected in the minds and personalities of the people concerned sometimes in epic and compulsive degree as they react to changes involving intrusions into, or alterations of their social and physical environments. The conflict between established habits and new values, between old and new allegiances, often becomes incorporated in people's personalities and thus comes to exert confusing or ambivalent influence on their behavior (Butler,1997).

Social Mobility

With the advent of modern democracy and legal egalitarialism and a general rise in humanitarialism in advanced urban-industrial societies, rigidly fixed social status has been supplanted by a high degree of geographical mobility and vertical social social mobility for thousands of groups (Gist and Fava,1994). Geographic mobility has released many groups from social and cultural isolation, as have the newer forms of mass communications. Throughout history there has been a striking tendency for religious, ethnic groups, social classes, and other social groups to maintain privacy from one another and to guard their respective cultures from externally produced changes. In rapidly growing urban communities, such previously isolated groups often find themselves in direct competition for living space or for access to the rewards and amenities of urban living. As groups having different backgrounds converge on the same neighborhoods or areas of the metropolis, misunderstandings, suspicion, and hostility often develop among them. Whereas assimilation or integration of racially, religiously, or ethnically distinct groups previously may have been forbidden by law or custom, new and uncertain rules or understandings must be worked out by trial and error. In this process, the legal, economic, and social positions of ethnic and racial groups have been altered; relationships of social classes have been profoundly changed, and patterns of influence, prestige, power, or wealth have been transformed or sharply modified. These changes have afforded a relatively high degree of vertical social mobility for countless numbers of individuals but not without a real or threatened loss of social status and influence for countless others (Horton,2004).

With the blurring of traditional social class lines and the removal of the more flagrant legal and economic privilege of certain classes, a marked change has occurred in the whole status structures of modern urban society. As fixed social status is displaced by emphasis on upward mobility and the ethic of success, intensive striving for status naturally becomes an obsession for large numbers of people, not all of whom are successful.

Individuation

One of the fundamental characteristics of urban society is the relatively high degree of people's legal and moral autonomy. Tonnies, Durkheim, and Simmel were among the first sociologists to foresee a decline or weakening of the individual's ties to such social groups as the extended family, neighborhood, guild, or parish, and the maximization of the autonomous individual and the impersonal, atomistic, and mechanical relations of contract or of choice, detachment from the traditional forms of association has also led to loneliness, depersonalization, and alienation for many. As people seek new identities, statuses, or affiliations of their own choosing from among the wide variety of new social forms available in urban communities, which are in themselves not necessarily deviant or pathological, many will fail to make stable social ties and will succumb to patterns of delinquent behavior (Levin,2007;Dentler,1997). While it would be easy to exaggerate the extent of excessive detachment from meaningful social groups or its negative consequences, it is nevertheless true that such estrangement is not uncommon in modern urban communities and is regarded as problematic.

Anomie

All human behavior is normative. It is directed to goals or values, and draws its meaning and importance in terms of those values. When moral values are widely accepted in a society, they form the basis on which the society achieves consensus and integration. Such values are also essential to the integrity and success of individual personality. When values become confused, when they are in conflict with one another, or when they lose their immediacy to human beings, the resultant condition can be referred to as a state of normlessness or anomie (Merton,1976).

Much of the history of modern urban society is the history of the breaking of traditional values. The rise of capitalism, religious individualism, and democracy have inevitably affected the traditional values of church and kinship, and such urban-industrial doctorines as critical rationalism, utilitarialism, and science also have challenged traditionally sacred value systems. The conflict between the old and the new or the sacred and the secular are just a few of the many value conflict arenas. Anomie, with nits implicit tensions of moral conflict, alienation, and meaninglessness, is a notable and persistent aspect of modern urban societies and contributes to the creation of their widely recognized social problems.

What is common to the major social processes discussed above is that all imply rapid and massive change. Largely unplanned and unanticipated, such change moves unevenly through society, affecting some parts differently than others. The speed and unevenness of social change rather than urbanization per se underlies most of the social problems commonly identified as characteristics of modern living (Butler,1997). Even the most stable and unchanging societies could never be completely problem free, since any particular type of social structure tends to generate its own particular type of social problems.

Urban Crime

Any discussion of crime as a social problem must begin with an agreed-upon definition of the nature of the problem, for crime is apt to mean many different things to different things to different people. Strictly speaking, any act that violates the law of the political jurisdiction in which it takes place and that is punishable by that political jurisdiction in a legally prescribed manner is a crime (Boggs,1985). Under this definition, any act meeting the above criteria is a crime, no matter how innocent, innocuous or abhorrent that act may appear to interested parties. Such an act is a crime whether or not an arrest or conviction has been made, or whether or not the act has been observed by legally reliable witness or reported to the police. This definition is objectively the most usable because it gives us the best basis foe estimates of the actual amount of crime committed independent of the subjective impressions of how extensive different people with different standards think crime is. Public perceptions of crime as a social problem may vary drastically from its actual incidence.

Urbanization and Crime

While there are several categories of crime such as white collar crime and organized crime that are more damaging and costly than the type of street crimes routinely measured by the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, we must still come back

to street crime because it is the type of crime most closely linked in the public mind to city life and urbanization (Schuessler,2002).

The recorded data do clearly indicate that rates of crime known to the police historically have been higher in urban areas and higher in metropolitan areas than in smaller urban areas (Boggs, 2005).

Most experts conclude that available data support the notion that the true rate of crime is probably directly related to the degree of urbanization. After observing that crime rates rise consistently with city size, Wolfgang (1969) has suggested that the regularity and consistency of the data lead to the conclusion that "criminogenic" forces were probably greater in the city than in less urbanized areas. Palen (1997) has concluded that even with the serious biases and problems of obtaining reliable crime data, the national problem of crime is clearly an urban problem to a disproportionate degree. Gist and Fava (1994) also conclude that even after allowing generously for inadequacies of incomplete data, the differences in crime rates between rural areas or small towns and the larger metropolitan areas are quite impressive.

However, not all observers are equally convinced that the actual rate of crime is clearly greater in the city than elsewhere. For example., Horton and Leslie(2004) said that cities show higher crime rates than rural areas, but it is probable that rural crime is less fully reported. The city also attracts people intending to commit crimes, as it provides more opportunities for crime and provides greater anonymity for those seeking an unconventional mode of life. But there is no evidence that country- reared persons are conspicuously less criminal than their city-reared compatriots.

The Criminogenic Forces of the City

While it is not entirely certain to what degree the actual rate of crime is greater in cities than in less urbanized places, a number of social and physical characteristics of cities may very well generate the kinds of conditions conducive to violations of the law. Here again, speculation is widespread, but convincing proof is in short supply. Nevertheless, it is useful to review some of the more commonly held views of criminogenic forces.

Urban areas with mass populations, greater wealth, more commercial establishments, provide more frequent opportunities for theft. Victims are impersonalized, property is insured, consumer goods are in greater abundance; they are more vividly displayed, and they are more portable. Urban life is commonly characterized by population density, social mobility, class and ethnic heterogeneity, reduced family functions, and greater anonymity.

When these traits are found in high degree, and when they are combined with poverty, physical deterioration, low education, residence in industrial and commercial centers, unemployment, unskilled labor, economic dependency, marital instability and a cultural minority of inferiority, it is generally assumed that deviance is more likely to emerge.

Because of the very fact that cities are characterized by a wide variety of subcultures, each of which has a certain degree of freedom from constraints and controls by the larger society, it should be no surprise that at least some subcultures will adopt values and behavior patterns that are at variance with those of the larger community. Lacking strong external controls and strong motivations to conform, such subcultural groups at least have the potential to develop traditions of lawlessness or delinquency when it serves their purposes. The urban gang would be a good case in point. With the appropriate frustrations and motivations, the opportunity to innovate or experiment in lawless behavior are easily are easily available to the urban gang. And as Thrasher(1964) found, the gang is an important factor in the organization of crime in big cities.

With greater urbanization, formal legal controls, based on rules that are explicit and that have special machinery for enforcement, become more prominent; informal mores and folkways become less so. In the city,a wide range of formal social control specialists arise, including the police, department store and hotel detectives, security officers and guards for such private organizations as manufacturing plants, houses or warehouses, electronic surveillance devices and alarm systems, and communication devices such as telephones or short wave radio. All of these make the reporting of crime more efficient and instantaneous.

In big cities, the formal and more bureaucratic agents of social control are more likely to report committed crimes in official bodies of crime statistics, whereas minor law violations in small towns or rural area are more likely to be handled without resort to official police action (Clark,J and Wenninger,E.,2002). Thus the very presence of the more formal and secondary kinds of social control agents is more likely to produce higher recorded crime rates in the city than in the country.

Conclusion

Changing public perceptions of and reaction to crime as a problem may be a more significant factor in the impact that crime has on urban society than the actual incidence of crime itself. If past patterns of public response are any clue, the high level of public concern and anxiety over urban crime may have been another public opinion fad that will diminish or increase, regardless of actual crime trends.

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