

Class and self-reported juvenile delinquency: Evidence from Turkey

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between social class and self-reported various juvenile delinquent acts in Ankara, the capital of Turkey. Data included 1,710 high school students using a two-stage stratified cluster sample. Such uncommon measures of social class as students' perceptions of their family economic status, the type of place where middle school was finished, home ownership, and car ownership were employed as well as often used measures of social class. The findings indicated that most of these new measures were not related to delinquency and that the class variables had low explanatory power. Various indicators of social class also presented contrary results. While some indicators of class showed that the relationship between class and delinquency was positive, other similar measures indicated the opposite.

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Introduction

The relationship between class and delinquency had been one of the most important topics among criminologists. While this subject gained much attention in the West, there had been little knowledge on the topic in developing countries.

Although some research on the relationship between class and delinquency found that these variables were associated with one another, other research revealed that the association was weak or absent. This finding, however, was inconclusive and culture-specific. It reflected the findings of research in the West, especially the United States.

Unlike previous traditional social class measures, such uncommon measures of social class as students' perceptions of their family status, the type of place where middle school was finished, home ownership, and car ownership were also employed. Four measures of class variables had been traditionally used in the

literature: gradational (or continuous) measures (see Elliott & Huizinga, 1983), neo-Marxist class measures (see Brownfield, 1986; Farnworth, Thornberry, Krohn, & Lizotte, 1994; Hagan & McCarthy, 1992; Jensen & Thompson, 1990; Messner & Krohn, 1990), underclass measures (see Brown, 1984; Farnworth et al., 1994), and ecological or aggregate measures (see Tittle & Meier, 1991, and for further information on these measures see Farnworth et al., 1994; Tittle & Meier, 1990). Studies in the West heavily used such gradational measures as father's occupation (most prevalent), father's education, mother's education, father's income, and mother's income. In the current study, except for the Marxist measures, all of the above measures were utilized.

In the West (e.g., the U.S.), the most widely hypothesized relationship between class and delinquency was *negative*. That is, when the level of socioeconomic status increased, there would be a decrease in delinquency (hereafter, it is called "*negative thesis*," see Tittle, 1983).

The aim of this study was to explore a group of relatively more comprehensive class variables that

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might be associated with some delinquent acts (e.g., assault, school delinquency, public disturbance, and total delinquency) and to test the generally accepted hypothesis that lower class individuals are more likely to commit more delinquency than middle and upper classes (e.g., negative thesis) using a self-reported survey of high school students in a developing country, Turkey.

Class and delinquency in Turkey

The studies on delinquency in Turkey could be roughly divided into two groups: official statistics and individual studies, both of which were based mostly on samples of convicted youths.

Official statistics

The official statistics on convicted juvenile delinquents in Turkey involved educational and occupational information, but not income, of parents of juvenile delinquents as indicators of social class at the aggregate level. In this respect, there were some official statistics on parental class positions of juvenile delinquents: some studies were separate such as the studies conducted in 1972 and 1999, and others were routine data gathering in a series, like data pertaining to the period between 1988 and 1999. The Turkish State Institute of Statistics did not have a stable and consistent way of recording the social class variables in relation to delinquency even though it had been recording annual criminal/delinquent events/individuals since 1937. As discussed below, no stable or comprehensive recording of events/people was possible to obtain or use (for a similar point, see Taşkın, 2002). An incomplete portrait of the relationship between social class and delinquency was presented, though. One was a survey of 1,181 convicted juveniles. The data for the study were obtained from reformatories at sixteen cities in 1972 in Turkey by the State Institute of Statistics (1974). According to findings of the Institute, 80 percent of juvenile delinquents' mothers (n = 1,093) had no education, followed by 12 percent literate without a diploma, 7 percent primary school education, and 1 percent other. As for fathers' education (n = 1,053), 44 percent had no education, 34 percent literate without a diploma, 20 percent primary school education, and 2 percent other. Concerning occupational status of mothers of juvenile delinquents (n = 1,093), 79 percent were unemployed, 13 percent agricultural affairs, 6 percent non-skilled workers, and 2 percent other. With regard to fathers' occupation (n = 1,053), 54 percent were farmers, 12 percent craftsman, 10 percent

non-skilled workers, 9 percent shop owners, 7 percent official staff, 6 percent unemployed, and 3 percent other.

According to a series of official statistics (n = 6,795 covering twelve years, ranging from 440 to 706 and with a mean of 566 delinquents), which covered the period between 1988 and 1999 (State Institute of Statistics, 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 1996, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2001a, 2001b), fathers of juvenile delinquents who were farmers had the greatest mean (116), which was followed by state staff (74), construction workers (63), service workers (55), other (52), sales workers (49), unemployed (31), and so on. Fathers who held primary school diplomas, also, had the highest mean (209), followed by fatherless youth (152), illiterate (76), literate without a diploma (69), secondary school (29), unknown (22), high school diploma (15), and university (2). Mothers who were illiterate, moreover, had the highest mean (210), followed by primary school diploma (140), motherless delinquents (118), literate without a diploma (65), unknown (21), secondary school diploma (13), high school diploma (5), and university (0).

Still other official statistics, based on suspected or accused juveniles who were under custody of the police and gendarmerie, did not include social class information relevant to juvenile delinquents. Kinds of offenses committed by juveniles, nevertheless, implied that they had low social class backgrounds (Öztürk, 1997). According to the statistics, of the 14,065 accused juveniles in twenty-seven cities in 1997, 28 percent committed ordinary theft (not including theft from cars which was 4 percent) (Öztürk, 1997).

According to final available statistics which were originally obtained from gendarmerie and police records (State Institute of Statistics, 1999), of the 22,578 accused juveniles in twenty-seven cities in 1998, 32 percent were suspected of ordinary theft (as well as 5 percent theft from cars, and 4 percent car theft). Again, this suggested that one-third of suspected juveniles committed offenses out of economic necessity. In sum, official statistics revealed that Turkish juvenile delinquents had lower class family backgrounds.

Individual studies

Similar to official statistics, individual studies showed that juvenile delinquents originated from the lower class (Erkan, Bağlı, Sümer, & Ünver, 2002; Saran, 1968; Taşkıran & Ağaoğlu, 1943; Türk Kriminoloji Enstitüsü, 1953; Yavuzer, 1981). In one of the earliest known studies in the history of the Turkish Republic, Taşkıran & Ağaoğlu (1943) conducted a survey of

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