

Developmental Theories and the Challenge for the 21st Century

Rebecca S Katz*

Department of Sociology and Criminology, Morehead State University, USA

Empirical research on developmental theories of crime first informed us that increase in social capital such as quality marriages, jobs or first time fatherhood would lead toward desistance, except among men who were substance abusers. However, the men in this notable work by Robert Sampson and John Laub were based on a cohort who came of age during World War two. While this seemed disheartening for those of us who hoped for social policies that might facilitate such attachment policies, at least in the United States where the incarceration mania continued until recently. Now new re-entry policies have begun to lead to de-carceration movements around the country. While this is laudable, job creation and treatment programs also must be created to facilitate successful reentry. The neighborhoods some of these form felons may not increase but rather decrease their social capital.

The unlikely success of newly released felons from prison is the result of failed city planners and policy makers. Specifically, developmental criminology and developmental sociology in keeping with the tradition of the Chicago ecological school of analysis and the early work of Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, recently produced a more nuanced examination of neighborhood contexts demonstrating the effects of de-industrialization in American cities, increased joblessness, ineffectual primary and secondary education, and the abandonment of the inner city by policy makers and arguably police and social service agencies. Robert Sampson's "The Great American City", illustrates that city policy makers attempts to eliminate dilapidated housing projects and provide new residents for those city dwellers was unsuccessful as it ignored job formation, police re-training, and educational transformation. More recently, Kathryn Edin's work in Philadelphia and New Jersey examining unwed fathers and unwed mothers among the very poor reveals similar dynamics of inner city abandonment by industry, racist police practices, and poor educational systems.

The individual effect of such black holes of extreme economic deprivation in inner cities across the country have led to a seventy percent high school dropout in Philadelphia alone, with similarly high dropout rates in other urban areas across the country. Additionally, her work illustrates that this extreme economic deprivation pushes people into cycles of despair in which brief sexual intimacy with another human being is the only thing that provides a sense hope for the future. The result has been an increase among unwed mothers among all racial and ethnic groups in the United States that ranges from twenty-two percent to forty percent of all women under twenty-five.

This staggering level of poverty in inner cities and joblessness as well as young unwed mothers with little education raising children without their children's fathers, who are also likely to have little education, is unprecedented at least since the economic depression in the early twentieth century. These dynamics do not bode well for the one of the richest and most powerful nations in the world. Arguably this crisis will bring untold damage to our children's futures as it leads to greater levels of economic political and social inequality and perhaps higher levels of crime. We as social scientists must begin to improve our ability to wield influence on policy makers, or the bankruptcies of inner cities and the bankruptcy of our children will continue and likely worse over the next two decades. Let this be a challenge to sociologists and criminologists everywhere, produce research that is aimed at social policy makers to improve the human condition not just intellectual fodder for those of us who live in ivory towers.

*Corresponding author: Rebecca S Katz, Department of Sociology and Criminology, Morehead State University, USA, Tel: 606-783-2241; E-mail: r.katz@moreheadstate.edu

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