IVY LEAGUE DELINQUENCY: A SELF-REPORT ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1940s, self-report technology has been utilized to improve our understanding of the frequency and distribution of crime and delinquency. Findings based upon self-reports have called into question the traditional class-based view of criminality. It is now apparent that middle- and upper-class young people are involved in delinquent activity, although the precise extent and nature of such involvement remains unclear. The research detailed in this report attempts to add to our understanding of class and illegal activities by examining a sample of Ivy League undergraduates for evidence of participation in serious forms of delinquency. It can be argued that such a sample is especially interesting both because these respondents represent the "best and the brightest," and because they possess relatively advantaged positions regarding access to conventional kinds of power and success. The findings indicate that serious delinquency is by no means rare among these youth. Involvement in violence, however, appears to be relatively infrequent and weighted toward the less serious end of the continuum of violent delinquency. In addition, the delinquent activity of this sample was highly diverse. Even for the most serious offenders the results provide little evidence of offense specialization.

The notion that class and crime are causally related extends back to well before the emergence of modern criminology. Early nineteenth century English perceptions of the causes of crime emphasized the involvement of the impoverished segments of the population (Ignatieff, 1978). In America an entire set of institutional mechanisms, including the penitentiary, developed in response to the popular perception that those at the lower end of the class scale required special kinds of monitoring and control (Rothman, 1971). Criminological work conducted in the first half of the twentieth century
provided evidence consistent with the notion that both crime and delinquency are class-related phenomena (e.g., Shaw and McKay, 1942). By the middle portion of the century the notion had become part of the conventional criminological wisdom.

Interest in the class distribution of delinquency experienced a revitalization with the appearance of the critical work of Tittle et al. (1978) in the late seventies. They argued that the perceived relationship between class and crime was little more than myth. Furthermore, the persistence of this myth could be explained by the general class prejudice of sociologists and criminologists. The arguments put forth by Tittle and his colleagues, and the evidence adduced in their support, provoked a flurry of criminological enterprise. The debate over the relationship between class and crime was vigorously renewed.

This paper reports the results of an effort to gather data on a wide range of offenses perpetrated by non-lower-class respondents. Although previous self-report studies have been conducted on the delinquency of non-lower-class citizens, this research effort is distinguishable from much of the early literature in at least two ways. First, serious offenses, such as those included in the F.B.I.'s Crime Index, offenses which have typically been excluded from self-report surveys (Hindelang et al., 1979), are included in the research design. The focus upon serious offenses is especially important in light of the public policy interest in serious forms of law violation.

Second, although non-lower-class citizens have been subjected to self-report surveys, perhaps most comprehensively in the National Youth Survey (e.g., Elliot and Ageton, 1980; Elliot et al., 1983), the character of the sample utilized in this project permits the examination of a special subset of non-lower-class citizens. Undergraduates at an Ivy League university were surveyed regarding their participation in delinquent and criminal activity. It can be argued that such a sample of young citizens represents the "best and the brightest" that American society has to offer. Admissions standards to the University are rigorous, graduating seniors are aggressively courted by major corporations, and substantial numbers of graduates continue their