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## **REVIEWS**

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### **Individual Behaviour, Social Interactions and Crime**

*Don Weatherburn and Bronwyn Lind, **Delinquent-Prone Communities**,  
Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2001.*

*Reviewed by **Flavio Menezes***

This is an interesting, well-crafted book aimed at understanding the link between economic duress and crime. The authors, who work at the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, clearly have an impressive knowledge of the theoretical and empirical criminology literature.

The main thesis of the book is that the channel by which economic stress is translated into criminal behaviour is through the disruption to parenting. Under economic or social duress parents devote less time to their children, for example, by allowing juveniles to return home late at night or by allowing them to miss school. Of those juveniles susceptible to be involved in crimes, some will get involved in criminal activities but others will not. Therefore, an additional step is necessary to link economic stress to crime. This is accomplished by appealing to peer-group pressure. Those juveniles who, in addition to lacking parental supervision, are associated with criminals will engage in crime. Those who lack parental supervision but are not direct associated with criminals will not engage in crime.

The theory put forward by Weatherburn and Lind is at the same time complex and intuitive. It provides a viable framework to analyse the interplay between economic and social conditions, individual and collective incentives and participation in crime. I will come back to this point in more detail later in this review.

The book is organised in eight chapters. In the first chapter the authors review some of the theories and evidence related to the argument that economic stress motivates individuals to offend – the economic stress-induced offender motivation (ESIOM) paradigm. They point out five *anomalies* between the ESIOM paradigm and the existing empirical evidence: (1) the lack of consistent evidence both at the individual and aggregate level that economic adversity is positively correlated to crime; (2) the strong correlation between violent (non-utilitarian) crime and economic adversity; (3) the fact that many processes that might influence one's involvement in crime precede one's entry into the labour market; (4) the evidence that economic stress in the neighbourhood appears to influence individual's offending rates; and (5) the possibility that income inequality might be a better

predictor of area offending rates than levels of income. These five anomalies provide the motivation for an alternative theory to link economic duress to crime.

Chapters 2 to 6 review existing studies with the aim to provide support for the main thesis of the book. Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature on the effects of economics and social stress on parenting. Chapter 3 presents evidence that is consistent with the hypothesis that the missing link between economics duress and crime is related to both parental supervision and peer group processes. In Chapters 4 and 5 the authors report the results of individual and aggregate-level research they conducted that again lends support to the main thesis of the book. They based their individual-level study on a large 1993 Western Australia epidemiological survey of child health and well-being. The lessons from the analysis based on this representative household survey are clear – around 20 per cent of 12-16-year-olds from single parent low-income families are allowed out most evenings, whereas less than 4 per cent from any other combination of family type and income are allowed out frequently. Over 40 per cent of those allowed out most evenings have been related to criminal activities, while less than 20 per cent of the better supervised 12-16-year-olds were involved in crime. Moreover, those living in crime-prone areas are twice more likely to be involved in criminal activities than those who live in other areas.

Chapter 5 combines aggregated data on neglect, abuse and juvenile participation in crime for New South Wales with census data on poverty, unemployment, single-parent families, stability (measured by changes in address) and crowded dwellings (those with more than 1.5 persons per bedroom). The results are again consistent with the main thesis of the book. It is important to point out that, as in Chapter 4, the results can only be used to justify the particular assumptions of their theoretical model and they do not constitute a test of the theory. Indeed, the results in Chapter 5 also indicate that the effect of economic and social stress on juvenile crime might be transmitted directly rather than through parenting factors, lending support for the ESIOM paradigm. The authors conjecture that this might be a result of their inability to obtain adequate measures of the relevant parenting factors at the aggregate level but certainly this deserves further investigation.

Chapter 6 contains a simple epidemic model of the offender population growth based on assumptions that are consistent with the observations from the previous chapters. This is the chapter that will attract most of my criticism. From reading all previous chapters one develops an understanding that the relationship between economic and social duress and crime is very complex, and getting a grip on the mechanism by which these two phenomena are related ought to be an important part of any model building exercise. The model however is simply a mechanical description of the interaction between the number of individuals who are susceptible to be involved in crime at a particular time, the number of delinquents at a particular time, and the various probabilities from moving from one state of the world to another.

I am afraid however that the complexity that governs the link between individual behaviour, social interactions and crime requires models that might

allow some of these relationships mentioned above to emerge endogenously as a function of the primitives such as social norms, level of economic and social duress, types of neighborhoods. Indeed, there exists a body of literature in economics that aims at modeling the relationship between individual behaviour and social interactions, such as Durlauf (2001), Brock and Durlauf (2000a, 2000b), Glaeser and Scheinkman (2000; 2001), and another body that intends to understand the relationship between social interactions and crime such as, Glaeser, Sacerdote, and Scheinkman (1996). A natural next step that suggests itself is to combine these different types of models to study the link between individual behavior, social interaction and crime. Such a model would provide a much richer framework to analyse the link between economic and social stress and crime.

It is important to note that in Chapter 7, where a number of alternative theories about the spatial distribution of crime are reviewed, the authors seem to agree with the general lines of the research agenda specified in the previous paragraph: ‘...the best way forward is to develop an adequate account of how aggregate crime rates are influenced by the supply of motivated offenders and then seek to integrate this account with a theory about how these offenders are affected by their supply of opportunities and incentives for crime. Our preoccupation has been with the former task.’

Finally, Chapter 8 explores the obvious corollary that better parenting would imply in a reduction in crime in the long-term. More specifically, the authors argue that macroeconomic policy is an important instrument given the relationship between child neglect and abuse and poverty. They argue further that macroeconomic policy should aim at more than sustained economic growth. It should combine policies that increase the rates of employment among families under social and economic distress with an effective child maintenance scheme and high-quality (subsidized) childcare services. They also put forward the necessity to develop measures to reduce the spatial concentration of poverty and social disadvantage, perhaps even ‘...measures which seek to create improved employment opportunities within impoverished neighborhoods.’

There are two caveats on these policy recommendations. Firstly, the insights from the economics of information, developed over the last thirty years by economists such as 2001 Nobel laureates George Akerlof, Michael Spence and Joseph Stiglitz, suggest that less intrusive forms of regulation might be more efficient than direct interventions. Programs such as those designed to provide parental support and advice in the first few years of a child’s life or to provide access to training for the unemployed or low-paid workers might be preferable to direct payments. The second caveat is related to the role played by schools and universities. The existing evidence indicates that providing good education at all levels might be a very effective way to promote social mobility and to reduce crime.

In summary, it is an interesting thought-provoking book that deserves the attention of academics and policy makers alike. Its main contribution is to point out that the link between economic stress and crime is likely to be indirect and to pose a positive theory suggesting that such a link is provided by a combination of

bad parenting and peer-group pressures. There are some real challenges in terms of further research. First, such theory will have to be reconciled with the recent experience in the US where there has been a decline in crime. Although such decline is in the context of a booming economy, there is a perception that the income inequality if anything became wider over the last decade or so. The second challenge is to build a testable model that integrates individual incentives, social interactions and crime.

## References

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