

Luigi Leone

Forensic Sciences Section
University of Messina
Messina, Italy
E-Mail: luigi.leone@unime.it

Criminological reflections on poverty

«They say, moreover, that grinding poverty renders men worthless, cunning, sulky, thievish, insidious, vagabonds, liars, false witnesses; and that wealth makes them insolent, proud, ignorant, traitors, assumers of what they know not, deceivers, boasters, wanting in affection, slanderers...».

Tommaso Campanella, *The City of the Sun*

The problem of poverty, defining it as a complex phenomenon in terms not only of material deprivation and inadequate consumption (Ruggles 1990) but also of non-material resources deprivation and its social perception (Eckmann 1997), is strictly linked with the concept of social exclusion. David M. Smith claims that social exclusion is principally perceived as the exclusion from the labour market, followed by other forms of exclusion (from consumption, saving, social activities, etc.): social exclusion is a “lack of agency”.

The socio-economic transformations have produced new dynamics of occupational structure (e.g. labour market deregulation and flexibilisation, casual/irregular labour and odd jobs, unemployability, risk to lose one’s job), sense of insecurity, inequality, loss of power and independence.

Thus, the inadequate material and social resources (in terms of health, job, education, lodgings, social net, rights) can seriously lead to marginalization and to adopt a “culture of poverty”, whereas people reproduce and transmit not affecting value and norm systems behaviour, being forced to cope with life’s problems resorting to alternative strategies.

Poverty, as multidimensional disadvantage, is an irregularity income and social condition that during childhood causes chronic cycle of transmission from one generation to another (i.e. intergenerational persistence), with serious reflection in later life (Warzywoda-Kruszynska 2007): poverty gives rise to harsh impairment of neural (language, memory) and abilities development (Krugman 2008).

Children living in poverty, furthermore, are at a higher risk for engaging in delinquent behavior (Peterson and Krivo 2005; Pratt and Cullen 2005).

Poverty increases family stress as well (Larzelere and Patterson 1990), that is obviously the context where is played an important role in child outcomes.

The UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) saw crime as both the cause and consequence of poverty, insecurity and underdevelopment.

But how is it to be correlated crime with poverty?

Even if 2000 years ago emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius Antoninus claimed that “*Poverty is the mother of crime*”, things are partially different.

Generality thinks that who has less will want to take from who has more, that crime increases when the gap expands between the haves and the have-nots and that poverty drives people to crime. Indeed, it's plainly unfair to people in poverty to suggest that they are more disposed to crime than other people, as all these suggestions arise out of over-simplification of relationships between facts: we've got to begin from what definition of crime is being used and what type of crime and criminal behavior is being parsed.

It's possible to correlate poverty and criminality in these two following ways:

- 1) **DIRECT RELATION**: the so called “predatory activities” (i.e. theft, robbery, shop-lifting, pickpocketing, bag-snatching, dealing in stolen goods) from the last 30-40 years has grown in European Countries: it means that economic growth and better life's level (i.e. income's growth) have a positive correlation with lucrative crimes (Barbagli 1995);
- 2) **INVERSE RELATION**: violent crimes (e.g. murders) have reduced in those Countries where gross national product has grown (except USA), compared with poor Countries where indeed murders are more. In other words, the number of homicides has an inverse relation with economic conditions, therefore with education/acclimation population's level.

Poverty and crime can sometimes be symptoms of some form of lack of social integration.

Policy's interventions play an essential role whereas remedying poverty might help the process of nurturing the young and might reduce some stresses which exacerbate social disorder and delinquency processes, even if the benefits in crime control are often speculative.

However, a civil society engagement should deal with poverty regardless of what effect there is on the crime rate.

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