



Socioeconomic background and crime

A summary of the research

**The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) -
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English summary of Brå report 2023:3

Summary

The significance of socioeconomic background factors for whether or not individuals become involved in crime has been widely discussed in the field of criminology, and the research literature in this field is extensive. The aim of this report is to provide an easily accessible overview of the knowledge that has been produced by this research.

The report's findings are based on a literature review that includes narrative reviews, systematic reviews and meta-analyses, as well as individual studies that have examined individual-level differences in offending in relation to socioeconomic background factors. The review is based primarily on studies published by researchers in the United States, the Nordic countries and the rest of Europe, but also includes a number of studies from other parts of the world.

Different studies have used different indicators of socioeconomic background, such as parents' socioeconomic status or levels of education or income, or the family's financial resources in some other sense. The review proceeds on the basis of these studies' own definitions and measures of socioeconomic background or related concepts, such as social class. The review presents findings from research based on both registered and self-reported crime.

Research questions

The presentation of results is based on the following central question: According to the published research, what is the significance of socioeconomic family background during childhood for explaining individual differences in offending?

Sub-questions include: What do studies from Sweden and other countries say about the correlation between socioeconomic background during childhood and involvement in crime? Are there differences between men and women? How strong is this correlation, and how does this compare with the strength of the correlations found for various factors described in the research as established risk factors for offending? How do researchers explain the links between socioeconomic background factors and participation in crime?

Clear correlation between socioeconomic background and registered crime

The literature review shows that there has long been agreement in the research that people from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background are clearly over-represented among those registered as crime suspects or

prosecuted for crime, and among those sentenced to prison. Swedish studies have consistently found that the proportion of people who are registered for involvement in crime is higher among those who grew up in low-income families or whose parents had low levels of education than among those who grew up in more affluent homes. This applies both to those registered as offenders in their youth and those registered as offenders as adults. It also applies to both men and women. Large-scale studies from other countries focused on registered crime have produced similar results.

A more ambiguous picture in self-report studies

The advent of the use of the self-report methodology from the 1950s onwards meant that researchers began to study crime by means of surveys, in which young people in particular were asked to report their involvement in criminal offending. These studies showed that involvement in crime was much more common than had previously been thought, and that offending was relatively common even among young people from more affluent homes.

As regards the link between parents' socioeconomic conditions and self-reported offending, the picture presented by this research tradition is much more mixed than that produced by the research focused on registered crime. Irrespective of which part of the world one looks at, there are self-report studies that have found a correlation between socioeconomic background and involvement in offending, and studies that have found no such correlation. Overall, the results from self-report studies appear to be similar for both genders.

Some researchers have questioned the ability of self-report studies focused on young people to adequately capture the relationship between socioeconomic factors and involvement in crime, in part because these studies primarily focus on less serious offences that are relatively common during the teenage years. Others have argued that even these studies most often report a correlation when the focus is directed at repeated involvement in offending or at more serious types of crime, and when studies use measures of parental socioeconomic status that distinguish the group with the most disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions, .e.g., by means of measures focused on persistent unemployment or poverty.

Despite the somewhat ambiguous findings produced by self-report studies, a general conclusion based on the research as a whole is that there is a correlation between socioeconomic background and involvement in offending for both men and women, although the relationship emerges more clearly in some studies than in others.

Correlation between socioeconomic background and crime is weak

Both meta-analyses and individual studies show that the correlation between socioeconomic background and involvement in crime is weak, although the strength of the correlation varies somewhat depending on the types of crime examined and on how researchers choose to measure socioeconomic background.

The weakness of the correlation reflects the fact that relatively many people, regardless of their socioeconomic background, commit at least occasional offences at some time in their lives, particularly during adolescence. At the same time, the majority of people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds become no more involved in offending than people from more affluent homes.

When compared with a range of established risk factors for crime, such as parents' parenting skills, the presence of conflicts in the family, school problems or associating with delinquent peers, research shows that these factors are more strongly correlated with criminal behaviour than socioeconomic background factors. The same is true for risk factors linked to individuals themselves, such as levels of impulsiveness or permissive attitudes toward offending behaviour.

The weakness of the correlation between socioeconomic background factors and crime means that it is not possible to predict whether or not a person will become an offender based on knowledge of that person's socioeconomic background. However, even given a weak correlation, the proportion who become involved in crime can vary substantially between groups at the lower and upper extremes of the socioeconomic scale. This is evident from Swedish studies, which have shown that the risk of being convicted of crime is substantially higher among women and men from the most socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds compared to women and men from the highest income families.

No consensus on explanations for the relationship between socioeconomic background and crime

There is currently a lack of consensus in the research on how the relationship between socioeconomic background and crime can best be understood and explained theoretically. The literature review shows that there is a wide range of explanatory models that highlight the importance of different factors.

Some explanations focus on the fact that socioeconomic background is associated with differential opportunities to achieve economic prosperity and status, and that crime is a result of a dissonance between the desire to

succeed in these goals and the perception that such success cannot be achieved via legal means. Others focus on the fact that socioeconomic background is associated with differences in the likelihood of developing strong bonds to key institutions, such as school and work, which serve to constrain certain types of behaviour and make involvement in crime less likely. Still other explanations highlight the importance of differences between socioeconomic groups in terms of their exposure to criminogenic environments, norms and patterns of behaviour.

Some explanatory models focus on how the risk for involvement in crime evolves over time in a complex interaction between a variety of risk and protective factors related to both the individual and his or her environment. From this perspective, socioeconomic background can be understood as one factor among others that influence the environments in which individuals spend time (family, school, social circle, local community), and that thus affects the composition of the risk and protective factors that different individuals have to relate to. Several researchers have argued that the effects of different risk factors are amplified when socioeconomically disadvantaged families become concentrated in the same neighbourhood.

The literature review shows that different studies have found support for several of these explanatory models, and that there is currently no consensus in the research as to which model best explains the link between socioeconomic background and crime. However, a shared feature of all these explanatory models is that socioeconomic background is not in itself viewed as having a direct causal effect on the risk for criminal behaviour, but that this risk is rather affected by a chain of other factors, whose strength varies more or less systematically between individuals located at different positions along the socioeconomic scale.

Conclusion

The assembled research shows that there is a link between socioeconomic background and involvement in crime. Individuals from the more disadvantaged socioeconomic strata are at a higher risk of offending than those who come from a more affluent background. The correlation between socioeconomic background and crime is weak, however, and it is not possible to predict who will offend on the basis of knowledge about someone's socioeconomic background. At the same time, Swedish and other register studies show that there is a clear excess risk for prosecution and conviction among individuals from the most disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds in particular.

Although there is no consensus on the specific factors that interact to increase the risk for offending among people from less favourable socioeconomic backgrounds, several researchers argue that indicators of a lack of

socioeconomic resources in the family during childhood, together with various risk factors for crime, should be taken into account when designing preventive strategies. For individuals who repeatedly engage in offending, the results suggest that it is important to take their family situation into consideration, including levels of resources within the family, in combination with risk and protective factors linked to other environments and to the individuals themselves, when designing interventions. At the societal level, it may also be important to prevent the development of concentrations of households with low levels of socioeconomic resources in certain types of neighbourhoods.