

YOUNG PEOPLE, ECONOMIC CRISIS, SOCIAL CONTROL AND CRIME*

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WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNEMPLOYMENT AND CRIME?

In reviewing the characteristics of juvenile and adult offenders in Australia, Braithwaite¹ noted that after race (in particular the rate of Aboriginal imprisonment), the second most striking characteristic of offending is unemployment. Roughly 20 per cent of those incarcerated in Australian prisons are employed at the time they are arrested and charged.²

Similarly, at the ecological level of analysis there is consistent evidence that urban areas that have high levels of unemployment or concentrations of people with lower socio-economic status experience higher crime rates than do more affluent suburbs.³ Also, in a recent survey of crime in New South Wales, strong correlations between offender rates and characteristics of social regions — especially unemployment, proportion of single-parent families and the general level of poverty — were found.⁴

Yet, time-series analysis and macro statistical studies do not uniformly confirm the unemployment-crime link. There is still considerable uncertainty from such analyses as to whether there is a link between historical periods of high unemployment and increased crime trends.⁵

Unravelling these statistical data is difficult. One theme that emerges is that during a depression (where all economic indicators are poor), crime rates may remain low but in a recession (where only some economic indicators are depressed), they will increase. A possible explanation here is that of relative deprivation — if most people are badly off then an individual unemployed person does not feel as alienated and aggressive, while during a

* Paper presented at a seminar entitled "Crime and the Recession" held by the Institute of Criminology at the State Library of New South Wales on 15 April 1992.

1 Braithwaite, J, "Crime". In Najman, J M and Western, J S (eds), *A Sociology of Australian Society* (1990) at 377-402.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Devery, C, "Disadvantage and Crime in New South Wales" (1991), New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

5 Mukherjee, S K, *Crime Trends in Twentieth-Century Australia* (1981); Belknap, J E, "The Economics-Crime Link" (1989), 21/1, *Criminal Justice Abstracts*, 140-57; Crow, I, et al, *Unemployment, Crime and Offenders* (1989).

recession, criminogenic forces come into play more strongly as an unemployed person considers his or her lot in comparison with the majority of people who still have jobs.

What is most clear from the research evidence is that single-factor explanations for crime are inadequate, or at the very least suffer from limitations. Also, it is probably essential to disaggregate offence categories before a unidimensional factor, such as unemployment, can explain much of the statistical variance. And, in modern complex economies, linear relationships between crime and elements such as unemployment, poverty, inflation and say homelessness, are no longer clear.

Nevertheless, we have no doubt that unemployment plays a significant role in generating crime. Unemployment and poverty clearly influence homicide rates in North America;⁶ they have done so with murder rates generally in Australia⁷ and with rates of serious assault and murder in Aboriginal communities.⁸

This influence is most clearly seen when examining youthful offending. The Youth Justice Coalition in New South Wales in their report, *Kids in Justice*,⁹ looked carefully at the social indicators correlating with high juvenile offending. Of all the social indicators studied the most significant were those indicators relating to the activities and future prospects of young people. For example, a high correlation was found to exist between juvenile offending, youth unemployment and non-participation in education.

The Coalition noted the pernicious effect of the combination of lack of education and lack of employment opportunities. Young people in Bourke, for example, had far fewer options than in Willoughby, where large numbers of youth are both employed and attend educational institutions.

As a generalisation then, we would agree with the majority of researchers who provide evidence suggesting that there is a relationship between unemployment and crime generally and unemployment and crime specifically. But a great deal more conceptual clarification is needed before we can move much beyond this gross relationship. For example, in the United States some studies in urban centres suggest that juvenile drug dealers do not earn any more than those employed in fast-food industries.¹⁰ Yet, despite a surplus of jobs in fast-food outlets, thousands of juveniles turn deliberately to crime.

It is also evident that the unemployment-crime link is predicated on social and cultural assumptions that arise from research that focuses almost exclusively on young males. When Naffine and Gale examined the Australian data they found that high unemployment among females was at no stage mirrored in the female crime figures.¹¹ Clearly it is from male

6 Belknap, above n5.

7 Najman, J M, "Victims of Homicide: An Epidemiological Approach to Social Policy" (1980), 13 *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 272-80.

8 Wilson, P R, *Black Death White Hands* (1987).

9 Youth Justice Coalition, "Kids in Justice: A Blueprint for the 90s" (1990), Law Foundation of New South Wales, Sydney.

10 Wilson, P R, "Law and Order in the USA" (1990), mimeographed paper presented to Summer School, University of Western Australia, Perth.

11 Naffine, N and Gale, F, "Testing the Nexus: Crime, Gender, and Unemployment" (1989), 29(2) *British Journal of Criminology*, 144-56.

offending studies that criminologists have developed their theories about the anti-social inclinations of juveniles and adults excluded from the workforce.

WHY SHOULD UNEMPLOYMENT AFFECT CRIME?

Why should young people become more criminogenic as a result of unemployment? Even if we are only talking about young males, the statistical reality is that young males account for somewhere between 80 and 90 per cent of all juvenile offending. Braithwaite has provided a compelling argument in a number of publications. Briefly, he proposes that crime in the suites arises because certain people have great wealth and power; crime in the streets, on the other hand, arises when certain other people have very little wealth or power.¹²

Let us consider the last part of this equation in regard to juveniles in Australia. If unemployment peaks at over 11 per cent during this year then youth unemployment will nudge the 30 per cent figure — a level which is higher than for any other period since the 1930s. At the same time, of course, we have seen during the terms of the current government an increasingly obvious redistribution of the wealth of the nation to the rich and powerful.

Now, to use Braithwaite's thesis again, anyone who believes that young unemployed males will passively sit back and accept their position in Australian society will be sadly disappointed. Lacking both political and economic power, unemployed young people will increasingly become involved in a whole range of what sociologists often refer to as 'marginal activities' — heavy alcohol and drug consumption, prostitution, petty offending and, we believe, more serious crimes of violence.

The criminogenic forces driving them towards these activities will be hastened by the very same regulatory or control mechanisms that society implements in order to attempt to contain their deviancy.

To begin with, consider how the regulatory youth labour market mechanisms have changed since the Whitlam years. Under Whitlam we had the National Employment and Training Scheme (NEAT). Then we had the Regional Employment and Development Scheme (RED). Finally we saw the abolition of the under 18-year-olds unemployment benefit by the Hawke Government and of course, 'Priority One'. As Rob White demonstrates in his recent book,¹³ ideas under Whitlam of equality and redistribution of wealth have been replaced by the negative philosophical concept of the 'deserving poor'.

What this has meant for young people is abundantly clear from the available statistics. The amount of spending on job training for unemployed young people has plunged by more

12 Braithwaite, J, *Inequality, Crime and Public Policy* (1979); Braithwaite, J, "Poverty, Power, White-Collar Crime and the Paradoxes of Criminological Theory" (1991), 24, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 40-58.

13 White, R, *No Space of Their Own: Young People and Social Control in Australia* (1991).

than two-thirds over the last six years.¹⁴ Young unemployed people now wait twice as long for income support which, according to ACOSS, has fallen by up to 60 per cent for some.¹⁵ Also, there has been a significant decline in the number of unemployed young people who are receiving income support.¹⁶ Do we really believe that, given these economic circumstances, some young people will not rob and bash and even kill in order to survive?

Education is another control mechanism for young people that could generate criminogenic influences. Again, White¹⁷ has cogently argued that education has increasingly been redefined away from a notion of social right to an investment in human capital or an endowment in future earning power. A senior criminologist from the Australian Institute of Criminology has recently taken the control argument to its logical extension — by suggesting that we keep young people in school for longer periods in order to curb crime.¹⁸

Keeping young people in school for longer periods of time will only displace crime in the streets to crime in the schools, and directing education towards future earning power — without providing jobs from which young people could earn a wage — will increase the level of frustration and alienation from society generally. We would predict that current educational policies will exacerbate the youth unemployment–crime link rather than diminish it.

There are other structural factors at work which will increase the link between youth crime and unemployment. In the United States, William Julius Wilson has forcefully argued that the number of poverty areas increased sharply during the 1970s with the proportion of poor within them rising also.¹⁹ Wilson links these changes to the structural transformation of central cities from manufacturing to service centres and from the demographic transformation of cities from majority to minority populations. The growing concentration of the poor in inner city areas created a social environment lacking the institutions, roles and values conducive to success in the larger society. Crime, drug-taking and a culture of violence was the result of these demographic and social moves. In turn, this further ‘criminogenised’ those areas with a concentration of the urban ‘underclass’.

American studies more or less confirm an increase in the distribution and population of ‘underclass areas’.²⁰ Though no similar studies have been conducted in this country, the work of Polk and Alder²¹ suggests that there has been a growth in a marginal underclass in Australia. Certainly we have seen similar structural changes to those in the United States,

14 Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), “Unemployed Young People: Tough Times, Less Help” (1991), research paper, Sydney.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Above n13.

18 John Walker, *Courier Mail*, 10 March 1992.

19 Wilson, W J, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy* (1987).

20 Massey, D S and Eggers, M L, “The Ecology of Inequality: Minorities and the Concentration of Poverty, 1970–1980” (1990), 95(5), *American Journal of Sociology*, 1153–88.

21 Polk, K, and Alder, C, “Criminal Justice Reform in Australia”. In Chappell, D and Wilson, P (eds), *The Australian Criminal Justice System: The Mid 1980s* (1986).

such as the relocation of industries to outlying industrial estates and the largest single decline in the youth labour market in the last 25 years.²²

In addition, a massive recession in rural areas is daily adding more Aborigines to an 'underclass' already heavily populated by Aboriginal youth. Conservative estimates place the Aboriginal youth unemployment figure at over half of the Aboriginal labour force.²³ And despite limitations on the reliability of Census data regarding Aboriginal work status and the seasonal nature of rural employment, this position reflects a decline in employment for Aboriginal youth in the intercensal period 1981–86 of almost 15 per cent.²⁴ Heavy drinking, gambling, assault and drug-taking marked this underclass in the past.²⁵ It is not unreasonable to suggest that as this underclass grows, so will these activities.

The relationship between youth crime and unemployment noted by the Youth Justice Coalition is certainly confirmed by anecdotal evidence. Of 36 young Aborigines interviewed in a recent evaluation of prison employment and other programs, only one had a job.²⁶ Some drug researchers have recently noted an increase in illegal drug-taking by young out-of-work males.²⁷ At least some states report an increase in juvenile break and entering statistics,²⁸ and both victims of crime organisations and the police report an increase in the number of assaults on elderly persons and in attacks on people in their homes.²⁹

In addition, there is considerable evidence to suggest that homeless and unemployed youth are increasingly likely to be victims of violence.³⁰ This confirms earlier research demonstrating that the unemployed experience a level of victimisation far in excess of that experienced by other groups.³¹

WHAT ARE THE CURRENT STRATEGIES?

The last few years have been marked by economic strategies targetting inflation as the prime economic focus and accepting that unemployment will remain at a minimum of 10 per cent for the next few years. Even with Paul Keating's 'One Nation' package, it is highly unlikely that there will be an increase in full-time employment for 15 to 19 year olds that compensates the magnitude of their recent job losses.³²

22 Sweet, R, "The Youth Labour Market: The Current Recession in the Context of Longer Term Trends and Future Options" (1991) *Youth Affairs* (Winter) at 16–23.

23 Miller, P W, "Aboriginal Youth Unemployment". In Altman, J C (ed), *Aboriginal Employment Equity By the Year 2000* (1991), 79–90.

24 Ibid.

25 Above n19.

26 Burns, D, Thomas, K and Wilson, P, "Interim Report to Queensland Corrective Services Commission on Aboriginal Programs" (April 1992), Community Development and Crime Prevention Unit, Queensland University of Technology.

27 Melissa Bull, personal communication, 1992.

28 Criminal Justice Commission, "Crime and Justice in Queensland" (1991).

29 *The Age*, 5 May 1991.

30 National Committee on Violence, "Violence: Directions for Australia" (1990).

31 Braithwaite, J and Biles, D, "On Being Unemployed and Being a Victim of Crime" (1979), 14/3 *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 192–200.

32 Above n22.

What this means is not only a quite extraordinary waste of young people's lives but also more and more attempts to control working class young people through organised interventions into their lives and communities³³. Unemployed young people will, we suspect, become more and more visible on the streets (which youth see as an area of relative freedom) and this, in turn, will lead to increased police and welfare agency crack-downs.

Some states — especially South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia and soon Queensland — have embarked on community crime prevention schemes in order to reduce the youth crime link. Modelled on the French Bon Maison Scheme, these crime prevention programs are grounded in rhetoric which emphasises youth alienation, unemployment and lack of purpose. Admirable as the intent of these schemes are, they have hitherto been marked by poor coordination and a lack of adequate evaluation. In addition, the schemes have often been badly funded and there is little or no evidence to suggest that they have added, or will add, even in a token sense, to the pool of jobs available for young people.

CONSEQUENCES OF IGNORING YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Youth unemployment as a criminogenic influence has to be considered in relation to other social factors. One possible consequence of high youth unemployment is a further deepening of the degree of social inequality in Australian society. If the rich get richer and the poor become poorer then we would expect more white-collar crime. To use Braithwaite's³⁴ model, if the wealthy accrue more power then expect more crimes by the powerful.

More directly though, we would expect increased young male unemployment to influence serious assault, rape and domestic violence rates. Humiliation and anger are two clear results of unemployment in patriarchal societies and women could well become the victims of the humiliation felt by young males as a result of their unemployment.³⁵ Data from Naffine and Gale³⁶ also suggest that male break and entering offences will increase with increasing youth unemployment.

Young unemployed females, as we have seen, do not appear to channel their marginal status into crime. Christine Alder's inquiry into the experience of female employment in Australia demonstrated that 'fatalistic expressions were a striking feature of the interviews with unemployed young women'.³⁷ Empirically, Naffine and Gale's study showed a low involvement in crime during periods of high unemployment for females.³⁸

The effects of high unemployment rates on young females are complex and, as yet, little understood. Box and Hale³⁹ argue that unemployed women may 'slip back and take up the wife/mother social role'. This has been supported by a recent study in New South Wales

33 Above n13.

34 Above n12.

35 See Braithwaite, above n12 at 50.

36 Above n11.

37 Alder, C, "Unemployed Women Have Got It Heaps Worse" (1986), *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 19/4, 210-19 at 217.

38 Above n11.

39 Box, S and Hale, C, "Unemployment, Imprisonment and Prison Overcrowding" (1985), 9 *Contemporary Crises* 209-20 at 215.

where low job expectations and long-standing unemployment were linked to high teenage pregnancy rates.⁴⁰ Whether this role leads to an increase in petty social security frauds — as a result of the increasing economic marginalisation of women, or simply a higher level of targetting by public servants of this offence — remains to be seen.⁴¹ It is also very possible that rates of alcohol and drug-taking, mental illness and suicide by young women could increase.

Undoubtedly, both unemployed young males and females will increasingly become victims of crime⁴² Spending, as they do, more and more time in public rather than in private space, young people will become targets for sexual violence, abduction and assault, as well as, unfortunately, harassment perpetrated by police officers.⁴³

There are no easy solutions. Community crime prevention programs are a stop-gap measure that may slow the growth of youth crime but only if they are adequately financed, carefully implemented and thoroughly evaluated. Instead, more radical economic solutions are required. A strong partnership is needed between schools, the work place and training providers, such as TAFE, to open up youth employment opportunities.

Sweden adopted such a plan in the 1960s and 1970s when youth employment collapsed in that country. After nine years of compulsory schooling, 50 per cent of students enter an upper secondary school vocational stream and 50 per cent an academic stream. Both streams are required to concern themselves with vocational preparation and further study. Industry is strongly involved in providing work placements, paying students, giving input into curricula and overseeing quality control.⁴⁴

Australian education is almost devoid of sustained and directed involvement with industry and the work place. Both education and industry are to blame for this state of affairs. The situation, however, must change. Work placements and guaranteed wages should be built into secondary education and such placements should be given credit for later entry into tertiary education. School-based apprenticeships are an avenue Australian politicians must seriously explore. The consequences of not doing so are considerable. We are facing, in the 1990s, the spectre of a lost generation of Australian youth who feel disenfranchised from the work place, alienated from mainstream Australian society and angry about the future carved out for them by past generations of policy-makers and politicians. If the lost generation eventuates it would be quite remarkable if substantial increases in alcohol and drug-taking, petty crime and sexual and general violence did not occur.

40 Wiseman, H, "Teen Pregnancies Linked with Jobs" (1992) *Australian Doctor Weekly*, 3 April, at 22.

41 Easteal, P, "A Study of Social Security Fraud Committed by People on Single-Parent Benefits" (1989), report to the National Women's Consultative Committee, Australian Institute of Criminology.

42 Above n31.

43 Alder quoted in report by National Committee on Violence (1990), above n30.

44 Above n22.