Social Class, Youth Crime and Justice

2

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This chapter discusses the central place of social class in understanding the reasons for the marginalisation and criminalisation of substantial sections of the youth population in 'advanced' industrialised countries. Given the prevalence of neo-liberal ideologies, the huge changes taking place in basic class relationships due to globalisation, and the impoverishment of growing numbers of young people associated with these changes, it is important to understand the structural impacts of social inequality. A substantial part of this chapter, therefore, considers the making of a new layer of socially disadvantaged young people and the response of the state to the growth in what are seen as problematic populations. The youth justice system has a major role to play in these social processes.

Class, criminalisation and crime

Class has rarely been more relevant to social analysis and to any consideration of youth justice in particular. Class, as defined here, is basically a *social relation*. It is directly associated with economic, social and political power, and it is evident in how laws are framed, institutions are organised and societal resources are distributed (White and van der Velden, 1995). Class is also a lived experience. People act in the world in accordance with their relationships with other people around them and the communal resources available to them (see for examples, Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; McDonald, 1999; White and Wyn, 2004). Such resources are both material and cultural in nature. The class situation of young people is contingent, therefore, it very much depends upon family and community resources and it changes over time. Typically, young people's class situation is defined and distinguished on the basis of: the type and geographical

location of their housing; the capacity of their parent/s to provide material support; the nature of their education – state school or private school; the age at which their formal education terminates; the nature of qualifications (if any) they receive on completion of education; their age at entry into the labour market and the nature of their employment (if any); and the type of leisure activities that they pursue (Jamrozik, 2001). Community resources are distributed via the market, the state, and informal community and family networks. For young people, what happens in each of these spheres has a huge bearing on their class situation. The phenomenon of unemployment is the biggest single factor in the transformation of young people, their families and their communities. In a wage-based economy, subsistence is largely contingent upon securing paid employment. If this is not available, then a number of social problems are often invoked, including and especially crime.

The context within which concern about juvenile offending is occurring, and is perceived to be a growing problem, is defined by the reconfiguration of economic and political relations, one consequence of which is the increasing polarisation of rich and poor, both between countries and within countries. Wealth and power are increasingly concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. Simultaneously, there is the impoverishment of many communities, neighbourhoods and families around the globe, and the escalation of unemployment (and under-employment) worldwide. For young people in particular, the collapse of the full-time labour market has been devastating. The decline in manufacturing industries, the use of new labour-saving technology, the movement and flight of capital away from inner-cities and regional centres, changing workplace organisation based on casualised labour, massive retrenchments by private and public sector employing bodies, and competition from older (especially female) workers, have all served to severely diminish the employment opportunities and conditions of young people in Western countries (White and Wyn, 2004). This is the context within which youth crime routinely occurs.

Why is it that the social profiles of 'young offenders' tend to look basically the same throughout youth justice systems in 'advanced' industrial countries? Predominantly young men with an over-representation of youth drawn from minority ethnic communities, low income, low educational achievement, poorly paid and/or casualised employment (if any) and strained familial relations, are the standard defining characteristics of children and young people most frequently found in juvenile detention centres and custodial institutions, whether this be in Australia (Cunneen and White, 2002), England and Wales (Goldson, 2002; Muncie, 2004), Canada (Schissel, 2002) or the USA (Krisberg, 2005). The processes whereby identifiable groups of young people are criminalised tend to follow a distinctive social pattern. In effect, the youth justice system has a series of filters which screen young people on the basis of both offence categories (serious/non-serious; first time/repeat offending) and social characteristics (gender, ethnic status, cultural background, family circumstances, education, employment, income). It is the most disadvantaged and structurally vulnerable young people

who tend to receive the most attention from youth justice officials at all points of the system.

The propensity for some young people to engage in criminal activity is mirrored in, and an outcome of, the prevalent divisions and social inequalities characteristic of wider social and economic structural forms. It is also very much influenced by the processes of criminalisation in themselves. Entrenched economic adversity has been accompanied by state attempts to intervene in the lives of marginalised groups, usually by coercive measures, which is itself a reflection of a broader shift in the role of the state, from concerns with 'social welfare' to renewed emphasis on the 'repressive' (Goldson, 2005; White, 1996). The intrusiveness of the state is, in turn, biased toward some groups of young people more than others. This is indicated in the extreme over-representation of indigenous young people in the criminal justice system in Australia (Cunneen, 2001), New Zealand (Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Social Development, 2002) and Canada (Department of Justice, 2004). It is demonstrated in the massive over-representation of African Americans in gaol, prison, or on probation or parole in the United States (Krisberg, 2005), and the ways in which black young people are disproportionately negatively treated in England and Wales (Goldson and Chigwada-Bailey, 1999). The history and dynamics of state intervention in particular communities vary considerably. There can be no doubt, however, that institutionalised racism, including that which is evident in the ways in which societal resources are allocated to different communities, has been, and will continue to be, extremely damaging to these groups.

The labelling of some communities and identifiable groups of young people as 'no hopers', an 'underclass', 'dangerous' and/or 'criminal', feeds back into the very problems of marginalisation and unemployment which lie at the heart of much youthful criminality (see Inniss and Feagin, 1989; Schissel, 2002). That is, the structural transformations in global political economy are refracted socially in ways that reinforce negative images of, and the repressive law enforcement practices directed at, the most vulnerable sections of the community. These processes serve to entrench further the unemployability, alienation and social outsider status of members of these communities. The core picture of neo-liberal ideology and practice includes permanent structural unemployment and underemployment, privatisation of state services and withdrawal of income support, a shrinking of capital's contribution to the tax base as well as reducing overall state revenue as a proportion of gross domestic product, and the internationalisation of the economy. The social impact of capitalist restructuring is manifest in the immiseration of large numbers of people and the polarisation of income. One aspect of this is the expansion of the truly disadvantaged, invariably youthful in appearance and social construction.

Many young people in 'modern' and 'advanced' industrialised societies are not simply marginal to the labour market, they are literally excluded from it – by virtue of family history, structural restrictions on education and job choices, geographical location, racial and ethnic segregation, stigmatised individual and

community reputation, and so on. Put simply, economic restructuring on a global plane has sharpened the disjuncture between viable reserve labour and non-viable reserve labour, and it is the long-term unemployed who are slipping into the most marginalised situation as skills and knowledge become redundant. In addition to absolute unemployment, marginality is also constituted through permanent part-time work; through seasonal or irregular employment combined with unemployment; through minimum or sub-standard conditions at, near or even below the poverty line; through short-term contract employment; and through accelerated reductions in the social wage (for example, education and health) through the privatisation of services and the introduction of 'user-pays' services. This comprises a condition of existence for a substantial proportion of working-class young people. The class situation of young people is ultimately defined by the contours of unemployment and the general status of wage-labour in the economy (see for example, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2004).

The social ecology of poverty and unemployment

Analyses of the social ecology of poverty and unemployment are crucial to understanding the precise nature and extent of juvenile offending in any particular locale. While in many respects school exclusion and/or youth unemployment is the principal foundation underpinning offending (witness the social background of most juveniles in detention), it is within conditions of multiple and intersecting modes of social adversity that it has its most profound impact. In other words, examining the extent of inequality in specific community resources, of which unemployment is but one indicator, is essential in order to begin to account for youthful offending.

More particularly, to understand existing patterns of juvenile offending, we must appreciate the prime influence of local community conditions on youth behaviour and life experiences. The concentration of large numbers of unemployed young people in particular geographical locations increases the difficulties of gaining paid work for specific individuals (Hunter, 1998; Wilson, 1996). Such demographic concentration simultaneously fosters the shared identification and physical congregation of unemployed young people with each other. It thus can act both to preclude young people from attaining jobs and to make them more visible in the public domain as an 'outsider' group. In essence, the young poor are being locked into areas characterised by concentrations of poverty, scarce employment prospects and overall declining economic fortunes. Poverty is being entrenched at a spatial level and this has major ramifications in terms of local community infrastructure. Poor people often live in areas with deteriorating housing, they suffer more profoundly any cutbacks in public amenities, and they are more likely to experience declining quality in their health, educational and welfare services. In addition, the neighbourhoods

become heavily stigmatised as 'crime prone', giving rise to a policy of containment and attracting the more repressive interventions from state agencies.

The most structurally vulnerable, the most dispossessed, the poorest and the most deprived people are funnelled into ghettoised neighbourhoods. As indicated in British research, unemployment, disability and sole parenthood are particularly prevalent in certain geographically defined residential locations. The composition of these areas and housing estates (for example, disproportionately high numbers of those suffering from mental illness) is such that 'nuisance neighbours' are more numerous than might otherwise be the case in more socially heterogeneous neighbourhoods (Burney, 2000). The recent history of public housing has, in essence, been witness to consolidating forms of residualisation. As demonstrated in British research, it is the most vulnerable of the vulnerable who are located within the least attractive accommodation (Goodchild and Cole, 2001). These kinds of trends have obvious implications for the employment and educational opportunities of young people, and how they perceive themselves and their future prospects.

The social status and crime rate of specific neighbourhoods impact upon the likelihood of young people becoming involved in offending behaviour independent of their specific socio-economic status (Reiss, 1986). For example, a young person from a low income background living in a high crime rate area is far more likely to engage in offending behaviour than the same person living in a low crime neighbourhood. Community context is, therefore, an integral part of why some unemployed young people have a greater propensity to commit crime, and to be criminalised, than other young people in a similar social position (see also Weatherburn and Lind, 2001). The level and extent of welfare provision and services at a local level also have a big impact on youth lifestyle and life chances, as indicated in Canadian research into 'street-present' young people (Hagan and McCarthy, 1997).

Blaming the victims: Individualisation, responsibilisation and coercion

Where large numbers of young working-class people congregate in particular areas, they constitute visible evidence of failing social and economic conditions within which poverty and inequality are rife, and the threats to social order posed by such structural failure. Such analyses are increasingly peripheralised within dominant discourses that tend to privilege individual agency, underpinned by notions of marginalised young people constituting a particular type of *moral category*. In this way, members of the so-called 'underclass' are perceived and portrayed as morally corrupt and as needing to be disciplined and reformed (see especially Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Murray, 1990). The dominant political offensive in periods of high unemployment and low levels of collective labour mobilisation is to place even greater pressure on 'losers' to

either 'cope' with their situation, or to face the coercive penalties of state intervention. One way in which the social cost of inequality and disadvantage is neutralised within state ideology, is through 'official' constructions that serve to reinforce the individualised nature of complex social problems. A related response is through coercive action, generally involving some form of criminal-isation of the poor, and containment of social and economic difference via geographical segregation.

In effect, welfare and law enforcement policies serve to reinforce the distinc-tion between 'the virtuous poor' (who are thought to exhibit positive attitudes toward self-improvement, healthy lifestyle and ready submission to state criteria for welfare assistance) and the 'vicious poor' (who are conceptualised as lacking industry and the work ethic, and who are seen as idle, wanderers and generally unrespectable). It is the 'deserving' poor who are the object of state welfare, while the 'undeserving' poor are subject to unrelenting intervention by the more repres-sive and coercive arms of the state, including criminal/youth justice systems. The new 'dangerous classes' are framed within discourses of contempt and fear – a social attitude that pervades the popular media and political elites.

The ideological representation of the young poor and deprived as an irre-sponsible, feral 'underclass' is built into the policy apparatus of the state in rela-tion to both welfare and criminal justice. Unemployment is reduced to 'bad attitudes' and 'bad families'. The response, therefore, is to impose varying forms of mutual obligation on the poor – below poverty line benefits and inadequate services in return for work search obligations and imposition of training and employment programmes. For those who do not 'play the game', there is with-drawal of state support. For those who 'ignore the game' and make a living through alternative means, there is state coercion in the form of increased polic-ing, harsher sentencing and greater use of imprisonment.

The dilemma facing the most marginalised has been expressed as follows:

> … the hypercasualization of the labour market, and fall in opportunities and incentives for formal employment of less skilled workers, [have] led to an increase in informal activities of many kinds, including crime. It has also generated informal clubs of various sorts, based on the acquisition, consumption and exchange of semi-legal or illegally acquired goods, the sharing of information about informal activities, and the pooling of risks associated with illegality. In this way, poor and excluded people have sought to compensate themselves for the inequities of market-based outcomes, to 'tax' the better-off of the unjusti-fied gains they have made, and to gain revenge on the various authorities that oppress them, as well as on the mainstream population who despise and exclude them. (Jordan, 1996: 218)

The response in many places to this phenomenon has been to introduce expanded law enforcement measures (including a wide range of legislation intended to deal with 'anti-social behaviour', including youth curfews) and more intensive and extensive regulation of welfare provision (including 'workfare'-type

schemes and systematic penalisation of any breaches in welfare provision rules). The crux of state intervention is how best to manage the problem of disadvantaged groups (their presence and activities), rather than to eradicate disadvantage, poverty, inequality and consolidating modes of social and economic polarisation.

Social exclusion, public space and social identity

The systematic marginalisation of young people (and their communities) is marked by the disintegration of connections with mainstream social institutions (such as school and work), and a tenuous search for meaning in an uncaring and unforgiving world. The quality and quantity of youth crime are heavily overlaid by geographical location in that local economic resources, social networks and the spatial organisation of (un)employment shape the options and opportunities available to young people. Making ends meet, therefore, is contingent upon local contacts and local alternative economic structures.

For those without adequate economic resources to buy consumer goods, there are strong pressures to engage in alternative consumptive activity, and to compensate for the lack of consumer purchasing power by taking the possessions of others (Adamson, 1998; Miles, Cliff and Burr, 1998). Exclusion from the legitimate spheres of production (paid employment), and thus exclusion from other forms of legitimate identity formation (as workers), also force attention to alternative sites where social identity can be forged. In particular, if social identity and social belonging are made problematic due to institutional exclusion from paid work and commodity consumption, then the appeal of 'street culture' and the 'street scene' becomes more appealing.

The phenomenon of groups of young people 'hanging out' in the public domains of the streets, shopping centres and malls is one manifestation of the search for social connection. The precise character and composition of these groups vary enormously depending upon national and local context (see Duffy and Gillig, 2004). There is a diversity of youth subcultural forms, as well as youth gangs, although youth formations of these types have long been a source of consternation among sections of the adult population (Cohen, 1973; Pearson, 1983). The social status of young people in groups today has also been influenced by broader changes in the nature of public space itself. This is evident in research that has examined the rise of consumerism, the mass privatisation of public space and intensified regulation of this space (Davis, 1990). The use of public space by low income, marginal groups of young people has been accompanied by concerted efforts to make them invisible in the urban landscape. The response of state police and private security companies to their presence in the 'commercial' spaces of shopping centres, for example, has been to move them on, to exclude them from community life and participation (see White and Alder, 1994). Thus the very use of space itself is increasingly constructed around

the notion of space as a commodity – those with the resources have access; those without are denied. This process of imposed social exclusion, and criminalisation, is not class neutral. It is primarily directed at the most marginalised sections of the youth population. Ultimately, what is at issue is the containment of the most dispossessed and structurally vulnerable sections of the working class (often compounded by processes of racialisation) living in the more disadvantaged areas of towns and cities (Collins et al., 2000).

Hollowed-out communities and social control

The concentration of poor people in poor areas carries with it a range of implications for social policy and state intervention. In the Australian context, for instance, the reality for many such neighbourhoods is that even when economic growth and employment fortunes are generally on the rise, these areas tend not to benefit. Poverty is thus spatially entrenched, and this entrenchment persists over time. In describing these kinds of social processes in the United States, Wilson makes the point that:

> The consequences of high neighborhood joblessness are more devastating than those of high neighborhood poverty. A neighborhood in which people are poor but employed is different from a neighborhood in which people are poor and jobless. Many of today's problems in the inner-city ghetto neighbourhoods – crime, family dissolution, welfare, low levels of social organization, and so on – are fundamentally a consequence of the disappearance of work. (1996: xiii)

As economic formations 'modernise' and global economic restructuring leads to diminishing employment opportunities (particularly in manufacturing industries) in many Western countries, whole communities are negatively affected. Significantly, however, when these jobs are lost, it is particular ethnic minority migrant groups who are most affected (Moss, 1993; see also Wilson, 1996). As the number of jobs in specific geographical areas decline, so too do amenities within the neighbourhood. In other words, economic transformations (involving the demise of manufacturing) and economic recession (characterised by high levels of unemployment) compound the physical deterioration of particular locales and hasten the social and economic homogenisation – characterised by impoverishment – of specific neighbourhoods. The flight of capital, including small businesses, from these areas, combined with the inability of residents to afford to either travel or live outside the area, cements such processes. The net result is ghettoisation, as middle-class people retreat to different suburbs, governments disinvest in public infrastructure (such as schools and hospitals) and neighbourhoods become marked with negative reputations and known as 'no go' zones.

For young people in these circumstances life is hard and legitimate opportunities for social advancement are seriously circumscribed. Doing it 'tough' can translate into the creation of alternative social and economic structures at the

local level. For example, if no paid work is available in the formal waged sectors of the economy, the alternative economy may comprise the only viable option. Here we may see the emergence of what could be called 'lumpen capitalists' and 'outlaw proletarians': people who subsist through illegal market activity. Davis (1990) illustrated this in discussing how cocaine, once the preserve of the rich, was transformed into a 'fast food' drug known as 'crack cocaine', thereby opening up both extensive new markets, and entrepreneurial activity at street level. The emergence of 'gangs' is likewise linked to both economic necessity (if activity is centred around illegal means of accessing money and goods) and social imperative (methods of acquiring a sense of meaning, purpose and belonging).

New social structures at the local neighbourhood level, based upon networks of friends, families and peers, can serve to collectively reconstitute the 'social' at a time when the welfare state is in retreat. The 'Family' or the 'Gang' may represent a turn to subterranean sources of income, emotional support, and sharing and distribution of goods and services when formal market mechanisms and state supports are of negligible assistance. Furthermore, communal networks of this kind can consolidate around shared social markers, such as geography, ethnicity and local history. Coming from a certain area may thus be transposed as a badge of communal membership and internal territorial identity, to counter the external stigma pertaining to the area due to its low economic status and negative reputation. In other cases, identity can be constructed within the crucible of conflict. For instance, there may over time be continuous cultural and physical resistance to aggressive (racist) policing, and this may be manifest in the language of the streets, in its music and dance, in police–citizen confrontations including, at the extremes, uprisings and urban riots.

The response of the state to social disadvantage and alternative cultural formations can take several different forms typically comprising the criminalisation of specific 'types' of young people and activities via anti-social behaviour legislation, imposition of curfews, electronic monitoring and surveillance technologies, aggressive prosecution of family members and the application of sanctions on parents. Alternatively, the petty bourgeois layers of particular populations may be called upon to play a mollifying and pacifying role (see Davis, 1990; Headley, 1989). More specifically, there is an instrumental role for 'community leaders' (often with regard to ethnic minorities) in assisting with the implementation of containment strategies *vis-à-vis* the most marginalised sections of the young working class. In return for public kudos within the symbolic politics of 'community', and the possibility of investment and financial gain, 'community leaders' pledge to 'clean up the streets' as vociferously as the most repressive state agencies.

The intersection of class and 'race' is illuminated by Wilson's analysis of the over-representation of African Americans within the unemployed in the United States. A crucial factor is the location of many black Americans in segregated ghettos, a process exacerbated by specific government policies and programmes

(Wilson, 1996). Similar concentrations of ethnic minority groups in heavily disadvantaged areas is apparent in Sydney, Australia (Collins et al., 2000). So too, in Germany, segregation based upon class and 'race' is a major problem:

> Not surprisingly, when the traditional forms of social recognition through work and mainstream social institutions become increasingly inaccessible, new forms of recognition are sought. Ethnic encapsulation provides a problematic solution to social recognition because it frequently involves cultures of violence. (Heitmeyer, 2002: 106)

Resurgent interest in street gangs, youth and violence in North America (Gordon, 2000), Europe (Klein et al., 2001) and Australia (White, 2002) provides increasingly important insights into the consequences of such complex social phenomena.

From a class perspective, mention also has to be made of the particular and peculiar role of local elites and civic/community 'leaders' in the regulation of specific populations. As described earlier, such people may be recruited or implicated in 'community' attempts to 'clamp down' on undesirable behaviour. This specific political role of local elites, however, is bolstered by the general vulnerabilities experienced by local small businesses that lend support particularly on matters of law and order:

> … their deep and pervasive perception – supported somewhat by practical experience – is that their businesses, personal property, and physical integrity are front-line targets for street crime (e.g., armed robbery, breaking and entering, shoplifting, mugging, etc.). For them, the visibility of working-class street culture, particularly that of various 'underclass' strata, is a source of anxiety for their own persons, their property, their customers, and trade. (White and van der Velden, 1995: 69)

This anxiety translates into perpetual 'moral panics' over 'street-present' working-class young people in particular. Congregations of young people, especially if they are not spending money as consumers, may constitute both symbolic and material barriers to commerce; conceptualised as representing disorder and decline. Young people often congregate and 'hang out' in and around *commercial spaces* and their very visibility, perceived lack of financial power, and behaviour (hanging around in groups, making noise) can render them an unwelcome presence – regardless of whether or not they actually transgress the law or actively engage in offensive activity (White and Alder, 1994).

Conclusion

The principal aim of this chapter has been to briefly survey changes in the class situation of young people (especially in relation to the most marginalised sections

of the working class), and the responses of the state to the existence and activities of the disadvantaged (primarily through mobilisation of the forces of law and order). Fundamentally, the dearth of paid employment in 'advanced' industrial economies is the key reason for heightened social dislocation and disorganisation. When accompanied by neo-liberal policies that place great emphasis on moral agency and individual responsibility within a material context defined by the retreat of state welfare support, this becomes a recipe for compounded structural disadvantage.

The consequence of class inequality and transformations in the class structure that deepen this inequality, is a sharpening of social tension and antagonism. A big issue for young people is that they are increasingly made to feel as if they are 'outsiders'. This is confirmed daily in the form of exclusionary policies, and coercive security and policing measures which are designed precisely to remove them from the public domain. For young people, this is often seen as unfair and unwarranted. It can certainly breed resentment and various forms of social resistance (see for example, Hayward, 2002; White and Wyn, 2004).

In responding to youth crime and the images of youth deviance, many countries employ a combination of coercive measures (such as youth curfews, aggressive street policing, anti-gang interventions) and developmental measures (such as sports programmes, parent classes, educational retention programmes). While the specific approach to youth justice varies considerably from jurisdiction to jurisdiction (see Muncie, 2002; Muncie and Goldson, 2006), a common element is the essential construction of the problem and those young people who are held to be responsible. Most justice systems deal predominantly with offenders from working-class backgrounds (including indigenous and ethnic minority people), and thereby reflect the class biases in definitions of social harm and crime, as well as basing responses on these biases. In so doing, they reinforce the ideological role of law and order discourse in forging a conservative cross-class consensus about the nature of social problems. The reinforcement of this discourse also unwittingly enhances the legitimacy of coercive state intervention in the lives of working-class young people, even if under the rationale of 'repairing harm' as in the case of restorative justice. At a social-structural level, such processes confirm the role of 'crime' as the central problem (rather than poverty, unemployment, racism), neglecting or avoiding entirely the roles of class division and social inequality.

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