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## Material deprivation or minimal education? Social class and crime in an egalitarian welfare state



Jukka Savolainen<sup>a,\*</sup>, Reija Paananen<sup>b</sup>, Marko Merikukka<sup>b</sup>, Mikko Aaltonen<sup>c</sup>,  
Mika Gissler<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Criminology, University of Nebraska, USA

<sup>b</sup> National Institute for Health and Welfare, Finland

<sup>c</sup> National Research Institute of Legal Policy, Finland

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## ABSTRACT

Research on social class and crime is dominated by perspectives that assume socioeconomic disadvantage to exert causal influence on offending. As an alternative approach, the present study examined hypotheses derived from a *social selection* perspective which treats intergenerational continuity in antisocial propensity as the primary source of socioeconomic differences in criminal activity. Under this theory, individual characteristics of the parents influence their personal socioeconomic attainment as well as the behavioral traits they pass on to their children. Consistent with both of these perspectives, longitudinal data tracking Finnish males born in 1987 ( $n = 21,513$ ) showed strong negative associations between family socioeconomic status (SES) and offspring rates of criminal offending. In critical support for the selection perspective: (1) these association were linear rather than discrete, (2) parents' educational attainment accounted for most of the association between the occupational measure of family SES and crime, and (3) measures of offspring criminal propensity mediated a substantial share of these effects. Adolescent educational marginalization emerged as the key factor linking childhood socioeconomic status to the risk of criminal offending in emerging adulthood. We discuss the implications of this finding for social influence and social selection models of explanation.

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### 1. Introduction

The relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and criminal offending is an enduring and surprisingly contested topic of criminological research. Dominated by studies using self-report data from the United States, much of this literature has evolved as a series of attempts to refute and reclaim a meaningful association between social class and crime (Braithwaite, 1981; Clelland & Carter, 1980; Dunaway, Cullen, Burton, & David Evans, 2000; Savolainen, 2010; Tittle, Villemez, & Smith, 1978).

After decades of debate, the field has settled on the conclusion that a strong inverse association tends to materialize in studies that include valid measures of severe and persistent forms of socioeconomic disadvantage and offending (Elliott & Ageton, 1980; Ellis & McDonald, 2001; Farnworth, Thornberry, Krohn, & Lizotte, 1994). In other words, the literature suggests a *poverty effect* on serious crime.

The poverty explanation implies that standard measures of socioeconomic status that fail to single out individuals from truly disadvantaged families are not expected to be important correlates of criminal offending. Contrary to this expectation, research conducted in the Nordic countries finds consistent evidence of substantial differences in rates of offending across socioeconomic

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 402 472 3677.

E-mail address: [jsavolainen@unomaha.edu](mailto:jsavolainen@unomaha.edu) (J. Savolainen).

groups more generally. For example, having working class parents emerged as a significant predictor of both self-reported delinquency and officially recorded offending in Sweden (Ring & Svensson, 2007). In Norway, parental income is a strong negative predictor of the risk of criminal conviction (Galloway & Skardhamar, 2010). Research conducted with data from Denmark (Kyvsgaard, 2003; Van Dusen, Mednick, Gabrielli, & Hutchings, 1983) and Finland (Aaltonen, Kivivuori, & Martikainen, 2011) yields similar findings.

Given the comparatively low levels of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion observed in the Nordic countries (Esping-Andersen, 1990), these results appear to challenge the poverty explanation of the class effect. According to the Luxembourg Income Study only 1.3% of Swedes under the age of 18 live below the internationally standardized poverty line (Smeeding et al., 2001). Yet a measure of working class status covering 30% of the youth population is sufficient to generate substantial class effects in offending rates (Ring & Svensson, 2007). In this national context, it would be misleading to characterize a population aggregate of this size as truly disadvantaged. Overall, it is striking that generic measures of SES that fail to identify extreme ends of their distributions are capable of producing major differences in Nordic data sets. In light of the American literature, we should not expect to observe significant class effects with incremental measures of parental occupational status or income (Dunaway et al., 2000; Farnworth et al., 1994).

Perhaps these findings show that *relative deprivation* is more important than absolute poverty (Bernburg, Thorlindsson, & Sigfusdottir, 2009). This hypothesis struggles to explain why relative deprivation should matter in countries like Sweden, Iceland, and Finland when it apparently does not apply in the United States. Sociological and psychological literatures suggest that outcomes perceived as discriminatory or illegitimate are more likely to motivate acts of aggression and other norm-violations than negative outcomes resulting from fair and equitable treatment (Berko-witz, 1993; Blau & Blau, 1982; Tyler, 2006). From this perspective, class differences in offending behavior should be, if anything, less pronounced in social systems that are egalitarian, meritocratic, and characterized by high levels of trust in social institutions, such as the Nordic countries.

Further, it is informative that Nordic research tends to find strong *linearity* in the association between socioeconomic background and criminal offending. In these countries, the criminogenic effect of SES does not appear to be limited to the members of the lowest stratum but seems to apply across the entire distribution of socioeconomic attainment (Galloway & Skardhamar, 2010; Van Dusen et al., 1983). In order to explain these findings in terms of relative deprivation, one would have to assume that Norwegians from affluent families exhibit incrementally higher offending rates than their peers from *even more* affluent families because they feel economically deprived or socially excluded. Although this assumption is not illogical, we find it far from persuasive.

Emerging evidence suggests that it is not poverty but *educational attainment* that explains much of the association between family SES and criminal offending in the

Nordic countries (Galloway & Skardhamar, 2010; Ring & Svensson, 2007). In our view, a *social selection* mechanism presents a promising alternative for making sense of these observations. The selection perspective suggests that individual traits and abilities related to criminal propensity are also predictive of low socioeconomic attainment. Under this framework, the association between family SES and offspring criminality is explained by *intergenerational transmission of antisocial behavior* (Blazei, Iacono, & Krueger, 2006). In what follows we articulate this theoretical model in further detail and contrast it against the poverty/social disadvantage hypothesis. We then derive five critical test-implications from the social selection perspective and examine the empirical validity of these hypotheses using longitudinal data from Finland. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical implications of our findings and suggest directions for future research.

## 2. A social selection perspective

Intergenerational continuity of criminal behaviour is a consistent finding of criminological inquiry (Besemer, 2012; Farrington, 2011). According to Farrington (2011), having a parent with a criminal record is among the strongest individual-level predictors of criminal behaviour. Although a number of factors are likely to contribute to this effect, intergenerational transmission of antisocial propensity is considered as one of the principle mechanisms (Besemer, 2012; Van de Rakt, Ruiter, De Graaf, & Nieuwbeerta, 2010). Prominent theories of crime and delinquent offending treat early emerging individual risk characteristics (e.g., cognitive deficits, low self-control, and negative emotionality) as key elements of criminal propensity (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004; Moffitt, 1993; Wikström & Svensson, 2010). As similar characteristics have also been found to impede socioeconomic success (Farkas, 2003; Gottfredson, 2004; Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006; Mayer, 1997; and McLeod & Kaiser, 2004), it is possible that a substantial amount of the association between low SES and criminal offending is confounded by individual differences in criminal propensity. For example, low self-control, the key determinant of criminal propensity according to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) makes it difficult for people to attain educational or occupational success (Caspi, Wright, Moffitt, & Silva, 1998; Maguin & Loeber, 1996; Moffitt et al., 2011).

Sociological literature on stratification processes suggests that social selection mechanisms of this kind may be particularly prominent in the Nordic welfare states: “Research in comparative sociology has long supported the notion that macro societal characteristics [...] can moderate the influence of personal traits such as health and cognitive ability in status attainment” (Adkins & Guo, 2004: 236). Specifically, Adkins and Guo (2004) argue that the utility of individual traits and abilities “intrinsicly useful in status attainment” will be diminished in social systems characterized by high levels of social closure and inequality. By contrast, in societies, “such as contemporary Denmark”, where ascribed characteristics have less impact

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