11
Strain, Economic Status, and Crime
Robert Agnew

This chapter provides an overview of classic and general strain theory, the leading versions of strain theory. It then draws on these theories to discuss the relationship between economic status and crime. Economic status is a core variable in criminology: classic strain theory was developed to explain its presumed effect on crime, and general strain theory devotes much attention to it. Both classic and general strain theory argue that poorer individuals are more likely to experience certain strains or stressors. Classic strain theory focuses on the blockage of economic goals and relative deprivation; while general strain theory focuses on a range of strains, including family, school, peer, work, and neighborhood problems. These strains lead to negative emotions, such as frustration and anger, creating pressure for corrective action. Individuals sometimes cope through crime. They may engage in income-generating crime to achieve their economic goals, strike out at others to vent their frustration, and use illicit drugs to feel better. Poorer individuals are said to be more likely to cope in this manner because they are lower in social control and more often associate with criminal peers, among other things (Agnew, 2007; Baron, 2014; Merton, 1968).

Despite these arguments, studies of the relationship between economic status and crime have produced mixed results. In fact, most studies suggest that economic status is unrelated or weakly related to individual offending (Tittle & Meier, 1990). And certain prominent criminologists have challenged the validity of strain theory as a result (e.g., Hirschi, 1969; Kornhauser, 1978). Motivated by such challenges, this chapter reexamines the relationship between strain, economic status, and crime. The chapter begins by describing the research on economic status and crime. Overviews of classic and general strain theory are then provided. Next, the effects of economic status on strains and the likelihood of criminal coping are examined. Based on these examinations, it is argued that economic status generally has a modest relationship to strains and the likelihood of criminal coping over much of its range. But very poor individuals are substantially more likely to experience most strains and to engage in criminal coping. Also, rich individuals are more likely to experience certain strains conducive to corporate and state crimes. The relationship between economic status and strain, however, varies somewhat across groups and over time – with such variation a function of several factors that influence the perception of and reaction to economic status. These arguments allow strain theory to better explain the mixed data on economic status and crime.

Economic Status and Crime

Economic status refers to the individual’s net income from work; income from other sources (e.g., family, unemployment compensation, welfare); net wealth, including debts and the value of material possessions; and the monetary value of the goods and services produced for
personal use and received from others. These goods and services include food, housing, and medical care; and others include family, friends, charities, and government organizations. Very poor individuals can be defined in absolute and relative terms. In absolute terms, the very poor lack the economic resources to obtain those items and services commonly viewed as necessities in their societies (Brady, 2003). In relative terms, their economic resources are a small percentage of those possessed by others. There is currently no well justified cutoff point for “small,” but a somewhat arbitrary cutoff used by certain researchers is 50% of the median economic resources in a community or nation – although researchers have explored cutoffs as low as 5% (Brady, 2003). Those who are very poor in absolute or relative terms should be more likely to experience most of the strains listed below, although the absolute measure is more relevant to certain strains (e.g., the inability to obtain necessities) and the relative to others (e.g., relative deprivation).

Most individual-level studies find that economic status has a weak effect on self-reported crime (for overviews, see Agnew & Brezina, 2011; Braithwaite, 1981; Costelloe & Michalowski, 2009; Dunaway, Cullen, Burton, & Evans, 2000; Hagan, 1992; Tittle & Meier, 1990). Poorer individuals are more likely to be arrested and sanctioned, although this relationship is often viewed as suspect given evidence of bias against the poor (Braithwaite, 1981). Macro-level studies generally find that poorer areas have more crime, but there are prominent exceptions (Chiricos, 1987; Parker, 2008; Pratt & Cullen, 2005). This is the case with many poor communities occupied by first-generation immigrants, for example (e.g., Lee, Martinez, & Rosenfeld, 2001). Further, studies of crime trends sometimes find that poor economic conditions do not increase crime (for overviews, see Rosenfeld & Fornango, 2007; Rosenfeld, 2009; Yearwood & Koinis, 2011). For example, crime increased dramatically during the 1960s, despite the fact that all major sociodemographic groups experienced major improvements in their economic status (LaFree, 1998; Wilson, 1983). And crime decreased from 2008 to 2011, despite the massive economic recession that began in 2008.

It is important to note that most of above research measures economic status in terms of income from work and, to a lesser extent, poverty status and unemployment during the past year. These measures are problematic, ignoring many of the components of economic status just listed. For example, the US poverty measure, developed in the early 1960s, does not take account of taxes, transfers, cash gifts, near-income, and in-kind services (e.g., housing assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid) (see Brady, 2003, for an overview). Further, these measures do not consider the duration of low economic status, even though poverty and unemployment are usually short-lived for a large percentage of people. As a consequence, these measures do not do a good job of identifying the very poor. Further, the above research often employs samples that underrepresent the very poor, such as school and telephone samples (Hagan, 1992; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997).

Studies which correct for these problems tend to find that the very poor are substantially more likely to engage in crimes involving interpersonal acts of violence and theft (Agnew & Brezina, 2011; Bjerk, 2007; Elliott & Ageton, 1980). For example, several studies find that persistent poverty and unemployment are strongly related to such crimes (Aaltonen, Kivivuori, & Martikainen, 2011; Farnworth, Thornberry, Krohn, & Lizotte, 1994; Jarjoura, Triplett, &
Brinker, 2002; Thornberry & Christenson, 1984). At the macro-level, there is evidence that very poor communities are especially likely to be high in these crimes (Krivo & Peterson, 1996). And studies tend to find a relationship between economic conditions and trends for these crimes when they examine such things as chronic unemployment and wages among the unskilled, which better index severe economic hardship (e.g., Bushway, 2011; Carlson & Michalowski, 1997; Colvin, 2000; Gould et al., 2002; Michalowski & Carlson, 1999; Rosenfeld & Messner, 2009; Yearwood & Koinis, 2011). At the same time, there is good reason to believe that richer individuals are substantially more likely to engage in corporate and state crimes (Agnew, Piquero, & Cullen 2009; Agnew et al., 2011). Corporate crimes refer to crimes committed by corporate officials at least in part for the benefit of their corporation; crimes committed by states include a range of human rights violations, such as genocide and the suppression of peaceful assembly.

In sum, it appears that the very poor are generally more likely to engage in street crime and the rich in corporate and state crime. But over much of its range, the relationship between economic status and crime is weak. There are, however, certain exceptions – such as the low crime rates of many very poor first-generation immigrants to the US. These are the facts about economic status and crime that strain theory must explain.

Overview of Classic Strain Theory

The classic strain theories of Merton (1938), Cohen (1955), and Cloward & Ohlin (1960) state that all individuals in the United States are encouraged to pursue the cultural goal of economic success (or the somewhat broader goal of middle-class status). While not the only goal in the US, it is said that special emphasis is placed on it – with success judged largely in terms of one’s economic status. As a consequence, a substantial percentage of people at all economic levels are said to place a high absolute and relative value on economic success. Classic strain theorists are somewhat unclear about the nature of economic success, but they most often convey the impression that success is a limited and achievable goal (see Agnew, 1997; Cullen & Messner, 2007).

While people at all economic levels are encouraged to pursue economic success, poorer individuals are said to have more trouble achieving it through legitimate channels – such as getting a good education and a well-paid job. Among other things, they are less well-prepared for school, attend inferior schools, cannot afford college, and lack the connections to secure good jobs. As a result, poorer individuals are more likely to experience goal-blockage and the negative emotions that result from it. Some may then cope through crime.

More recently, researchers in the classic strain tradition have argued that individuals evaluate their economic circumstances not only in terms of some cultural goal or standard, but also by comparing themselves to others in their reference group (e.g., Agnew, 1997; Baron, 2014; Bernburg, Thorlindsson, & Sigfusdottir, 2009; Blau & Blau, 1982; Burton & Dunaway, 1994; Cohen, 1965; LaFree & Drass, 1996; Merton, 1968; Messner, Raffalovich, & McMillan, 2001; Parker, 2008; Passas, 1997; Stiles Liu, & Kaplan, 2000). There is some disagreement over
whom individuals select as reference others, but it is often assumed that people compare themselves to proximate others, such as friends, neighbors, and classmates; and/or to similar others, such as those in the same racial group. Relative deprivation is said to exist if individuals believe that they have fewer economic resources than these others and they both want and feel entitled to these resources. This sense of entitlement partly derives from the fact that others like themselves possess these resources. Like goal blockage, relative deprivation results in negative emotions such as frustration and anger. And we would expect poorer individuals to be higher in relative deprivation, so long as individuals select reference others as just described.

Classic strain theorists emphasize that not all strained individuals cope through crime. Criminal coping is said to be more likely when strained individuals (a) have a weak commitment to legitimate norms; (b) blame their strain on others; (c) associate with criminal peers – especially gang members; and (d) have the skills and opportunities to engage in crime (see Agnew, 1997; Baron, 2014). Poorer individuals are said to be more likely to possess these characteristics, partly because the strain they experience contributes to them. For example, their inability to achieve economic success by following legitimate norms weakens their commitment to such norms (Merton, 1968). And strained individuals who regularly interact with one another sometimes form gangs as a method of coping with their strain (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955). A major exception, however, is that poorer individuals lack the skills and opportunities to engage in most corporate and state crimes.

In sum, classic strain theory states that poorer individuals are more likely to experience the strains of goal blockage and relative deprivation and to cope with these strains through crime. The mixed data on the relationship between economic status and crime therefore pose a challenge to the theory.

Overview of General Strain Theory

General strain theory (GST) incorporates and extends classic strain theory (Agnew, 1992 , 2007). Most notably, GST focuses on a much broader array of strains, with strains being defined as events or conditions that are disliked. Strains fall into three groups. Individuals may be unable to achieve their goals, including economic, status, autonomy, and other goals. They may lose things they value, including material possessions, friends, and family members. And they may be treated in a negative or aversive manner by others; for example, they may be verbally and physically abused by family members, peers, and employers.

GST makes a distinction between “objective” and “subjective” strains. Objective strains refer to events and conditions disliked by most people in a given group. Subjective strains refer to events and conditions disliked by the people who are experiencing them. This distinction is important because people often differ in their subjective reaction to the same objective strain. In fact, this is one of the key points made below. Low economic status is an objective strain in the United States, but a range of factors influence the extent to which people subjectively dislike their low status. For example, people are more likely to dislike their low economic
status when they place great emphasis on economic goals and compare themselves to more privileged others.

Strains, especially subjective strains, lead to negative emotions, such as anger and frustration. These emotions create pressure for corrective action, and crime is one possible response. Not surprisingly, research suggests that economic strains – which involve not having enough money – are most strongly related to income-generating crimes (e.g., Felson et al., 2012; Rosenfeld, 2009). Individuals who cannot get money through legal channels may attempt to get it through crimes such as theft, drug selling, and prostitution. But economic strains may also result in violent crime and drug use, as people vent their negative emotions or seek relief from them.

GST states that some strains are more likely to lead to crime than others, largely because they generate strong negative emotions, overwhelm legal coping resources, and are conducive to criminal coping. Among other things, such strains are high in magnitude. That is, they are high in degree (e.g., a large versus small monetary loss), are of long duration, and are expected to continue into the future. Also, they involve the core goals, values, needs, identities, and/or activities of individuals. Criminogenic strains are also seen as unjust, which helps generate strong anger. And they are easily resolved through crime. This is the case with economic strains, which are readily resolved through income-generating crimes, but is not the case with a strain such as the death of a family member.

Finally, GST states that some people are more likely to cope with strains through crime than others. Criminal coping is more likely among those with poor coping skills and resources (e.g., poor social skills and inadequate problem-solving skills). It is more likely among those with few conventional social supports; that is, family, friends, and others who can provide assistance. It is more likely among those who are low in social control or have little to lose by engaging in crime (e.g., are unemployed, doing poorly in school, do not get along with parents). It is more likely among those who are disposed to criminal coping, including those who associate with other criminals, hold beliefs favorable to crime, and possess traits such as low constraint and negative emotionality (are easily upset, tend to act without thinking). Finally, it is more likely when individuals are in situations where the costs of crime are seen as low and the benefits as high.

Unlike classic strain theory, GST was not developed to explain the presumed link between low economic status and crime. But GST states that low economic status is associated with, or increases exposure to, many strains conducive to crime, including the inability to achieve economic goals; family problems, such as parental rejection, child abuse, and the use of harsh and erratic discipline; school problems, such as low grades and poor relations with teachers; work at “bad” jobs, such as those with unpleasant working conditions and few benefits; marital problems; criminal victimization; and residence in deprived communities plagued by a host of problems. Further, GST states that low economic status increases the likelihood of criminal coping. For example, poorer individuals are less likely to possess the skills and resources that facilitate legal coping, including money, a good education, social skills and problem-solving skills, and connections to influential others. So, like classic strain theory, GST predicts that the poor should be more likely to engage in crime and it, too, is challenged by the mixed data on
economic status and crime.

The Impact of Economic Status on Strains

Research from several areas suggests that the arguments of classic and general strain theory regarding economic status and strain are in need of revision. It is not simply the case that the poor experience more strains. Economic status tends to have a modest effect on most strains across much of its range, although the very poor and the rich are substantially more likely to experience certain strains. Further, the relationship between economic status and strains is influenced by several factors. Several major strains are considered below, with a focus on those economic strains that involve not having enough money.

Goal blockage and relative deprivation

Recent research has examined those strains that are the focus of classic strain theory: the blockage of economic goals and relative deprivation. Goal blockage is typically measured by asking respondents about their chances for achieving goals such as “a good paying job” (see Burton & Cullen, 1992, for an overview). Relative deprivation is usually measured by asking respondents whether they have as much money as others, such as friends, neighbors, classmates, and, occasionally, people in the country as a whole (e.g., Agnew et al., 1996; Baron, 2007, 2014; Bernburg et al., 2009; Burton & Cullen, 1992; Burton, Cullen, Evans, & Dunaway, 1994; Burton & Dunaway, 1994; Stiles et al., 2000). Such studies usually find that goal blockage and relative deprivation have a moderately strong effect on crime compared to other causes. A few studies have also examined dissatisfaction with one’s economic status, which tends to have a relatively strong effect on crime and to at least partly mediate the effects of goal blockage and relative deprivation on crime (Agnew et al., 1996; Baron, 2007, 2008, 2014; Cernkovich, Giordano, & Rudolph, 2000; Felson et al., 2012; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Wright et al., 1999). These findings have their parallel at the macro-level, with research finding that consumer perceptions of their economic situation and opportunities influence trends in the rate of certain crimes (Rosenfeld, 2009; Rosenfeld & Fornango, 2007). It should be noted, however, that studies rarely measure the magnitude and perceived injustice of goal blockage and relative deprivation, nor do they take account of the conditioning variables described by classic and general strain theory. When these issues are corrected, researchers may find that these types of strain have even larger effects on crime (see Agnew et al., 1996, Baron, 2007, 2008; Rebellon, Piquero, Piquero, & Thaxton, 2009).

Contrary to strain theory, the effect of economic status on goal blockage, relative deprivation, and monetary dissatisfaction is generally modest in size (e.g., Agnew et al., 1996; Stiles et al., 2000; Wright et al., 1999). For example, Agnew et al. (1996) found that family income explains less than 2% of the variation in these factors. This modest effect helps explain the generally weak relationship between economic status and crime. There are several possible reasons for the modest effect of economic status:

Richer individuals may pursue economic goals beyond their reach
Richer individuals tend to pursue higher economic goals than poorer individuals (see especially Agnew, 1980, 1983; Della Fave & Klobus, 1976; Easterlin, 2003). Also, there is some evidence that economic goals are ever-escalating, such that individuals who achieve a particular economic goal then turn to the pursuit of a higher goal (Easterlin, 2003; Wolbring, Keuschnigg, & Negele, 2013). These arguments were advanced by Merton (1968:190) at one point, when he stated that “in the American Dream there is no final stopping point… at each income level Americans want about twenty-five percent more (but of course this ‘just a bit more’ continues to operate once it is obtained).” Similarly, Messner & Rosenfeld (2001:63–64) state that “the American Dream offers ‘no final stopping point’… [and] requires ‘never-ending achievement’” (also see Agnew, 1997). So, richer as well as poorer individuals are often unable to achieve their economic goals, although goal blockage is still somewhat more common among the poor (e.g., Agnew, 1986; Della Fave & Klobus, 1976).

**Richer individuals may compare themselves to more advantaged others**

While some criminologists assume that individuals compare themselves to similar or proximate others, others assume that they compare themselves to more advantaged others – with rich individuals comparing themselves to still richer individuals. This being the case, relative deprivation should also be common among rich individuals. This focus on upward comparisons is said to be a function of an egalitarian ideology that encourages everyone to aim high; to historically high rates of mobility, which also encourage everyone to aim high; and to the mass media – which regularly features and encourages comparisons with more privileged others (see Passas, 1997). While there is some anecdotal evidence for this argument, the larger literature on social comparison suggests that there is no simple answer to the question of who people select as comparison others (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002; Suls & Wheeler, 2000). Individuals tend to compare themselves to proximate and similar others, but sometimes compare themselves to dissimilar others – including more or less advantaged others.

**Poorer individuals may lower their economic goals, compare themselves to less advantaged or similar others, or avoid social comparison**

Poorer individuals sometimes adapt to their deprived situation by lowering their economic goals or by “stretching” their goals, making a distinction between “preferred” and “minimally acceptable” goals (Agnew, 1983, 2000). There is no good data on the extent to which poorer individuals make downward or lateral social comparisons. That said, the social comparison literature indicates that individuals have a strong need to maintain or enhance their self-evaluation and, when threatened, they sometimes respond by comparing themselves to those who are worse off or at least similar to themselves – including real, imagined, and prototypical others (Suls et al., 2002; Suls & Wheeler, 2000). They may also avoid social comparison and instead make internal comparisons, perhaps focusing on the fact that their current economic circumstances are an improvement over the past. More research is needed on the relationship between economic status and the types of social comparisons that are made.

**Individuals often exaggerate their current and expected economic situation**
Individuals may not only avoid economic strain by lowering their goals or making downward/lateral comparisons, but also by exaggerating their current and expected economic status. There is much evidence that people tend to overestimate their positive attributes and underestimate their negative ones, both in absolute terms and relative to others. Among other things, people often overestimate their academic and job performance, popularity, and economic success (Agnew, 1986; Gouveia & Clarke, 2001). With respect to economic success, many objectively poor individuals view themselves as “middle class” (Jackman & Jackman, 1973). People also tend to underestimate their chances of experiencing many negative events and overestimate their chances of experiencing many positive ones – including economic success (Agnew & Jones, 1988; Gouveia & Clarke, 2001). It is not clear whether poorer individuals are more likely than richer to exaggerate their economic success, but one can argue that there is more room and motivation for exaggeration among the poor.

**Individuals pursue several goals, ranking those they are better able to achieve as more important**

Classic strain theorists argue that most people in the US place a high absolute and relative emphasis on the goal of economic success, so that the failure to achieve this goal produces much frustration. Data, however, suggest that most people play greater absolute and relative emphasis on other goals, including those involving family, friends, religion, health, and self actualization (Agnew, 1983, 1986). And even among job-related goals, things such as a steady income and important work are ranked as higher in absolute and relative importance than a high income (lower-income respondents focus more on a steady income, higher-income on important work) (Agnew, 1983). Relatiedly, data suggest that individuals tend to place more emphasis on those goals they are better able to achieve (Agnew, 1983, 1986; Kohn, 1977). Further, the overwhelming majority of individuals are able to at least partly achieve some of their important goals, thereby alleviating their strain (Agnew, 1986). So, poorer individuals may also avoid strain by assigning less relative and absolute importance to economic success. The happiness literature provides limited support for this argument: income only has a modest effect on happiness and one’s level of happiness is more strongly influenced by things such as having a spouse or partner, good health, and the quality of one’s job (Ball & Chernova, 2008; Easterlin, 2003).

In sum, there are several reasons why economic status has only a modest effect on goal blockage and relative deprivation over most of its range. Richer individuals may pursue higher or ever-escalating economic goals and/or compare themselves to more advantaged others. Poorer individuals may pursue lower goals, make downward or lateral comparisons, avoid social comparison, exaggerate their current and expected economic status, and/or place less emphasis on the goal of economic success. There is some evidence that each of these processes is operative, although we do not yet have a good idea of how common they are and to what extent they help account for the modest relationship between economic status and crime.

At the same time, there is reason to believe that these processes may be less common among the very poor. Again, the “very poor” are unable to obtain those goods and services viewed as...
necessities and/or their economic status is much lower than most others. Consequently, they may have trouble lowering their economic goals to a point where they are achievable, comparing themselves to less advantaged others, exaggerating their current level of economic success, and de-emphasizing the importance of money. We lack good data in this area, however, since studies usually fail to distinguish the very poor from others and/or employ samples that underrepresent the very poor.

It is also important to note that these processes likely vary over time and across groups. For example, a central theme in the anomie literature is that individuals are more likely to pursue higher goals and make upward comparisons during times of economic prosperity – when those around them are doing well (Agnew, 1997; Passas, 1997). It has also been argued that certain groups place much more emphasis on material success than others. This is said to be true of certain inner-city youth, where displays of material possessions are a key source of status (Anderson, 1999; Currie, 1997).

The experience of economic problems

Economic problems are the direct result of not having enough money and involve (a) the inability to obtain valued objects, services, or activities; (b) the loss or threatened loss of these things; and (c) the need to engage in undesired activities. Examples include not having enough money to pay bills or buy the things you want; having to sell possessions or cut back on certain activities, such as eating out; moving to cheaper living quarters; and working a second job. Individuals experiencing such problems usually want more money and what others have, so this strain overlaps with both goal blockage and relative deprivation. But this strain is distinct in that it manifests itself in a range of concrete problems, certain of which may create much pressure for corrective action in the near term. For example, individuals may be regularly harassed by bill collectors or exhausted from working multiple jobs. We might therefore expect this strain to have a stronger relationship to crime.

The limited research in this area finds that economic problems have a relatively strong relationship with crime (for reviews see Agnew et al., 2008; Bernburg et al., 2009). Certain research suggests that the relationship is nonlinear, with crime increasing only after a few economic problems are experienced (Agnew et al., 2008). The relationship between economic status and economic problems is only modest in size, however. In particular, a substantial percentage of poorer people report no or only a few economic problems, while many richer people report several problems. Agnew et al. (2008) report that family income explains only about 1% of the variation in economic problems. They find that 60% of individuals with 2002 family incomes of less than $10,000 report zero or one of 16 economic problems, while 18% of individuals with family incomes above $70,000 report three or more economic problems (versus 27% of those with incomes less than $10,000). This modest relationship likely reflects the fact that many poor individuals have learned to live within their means; while many richer individuals spend beyond their means. There is much encouragement to do so in market societies such as the US, which place great emphasis on consumerism.

Again, however, we might expect that those who are very poor to be substantially more likely
to report economic problems. Testing this proposition requires that we better measure economic status; for example, we measure the duration of poverty and give more consideration to the varied components of economic status listed above. Research should also measure the perceived injustice and magnitude of these problems (e.g., their perceived severity, duration).

**Inability to obtain necessities through legal means**

An especially important subcategory of economic problems involves the inability to obtain necessities through legal means. Necessities include those things needed for physical survival and wellbeing, particularly food, shelter, adequate clothing, security, and necessary medical care. They also include those things perceived as necessities, with such perceptions varying across groups and over time (Brady, 2003). Many in the US, for example, view automobiles, air conditioning, and cell phones as necessities. This type of strain should have a strong effect on crime, given that it is high in magnitude. But it has not received much attention from criminologists, despite the fact that substantial numbers of people in the US experience homelessness, hunger, inadequate medical care, and ongoing threats to their physical security (e.g., Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012; World Hunger Education Services, 2012).

Nevertheless, a few studies indicate that crime is more likely among those living on the street, those who report they are hungry and lack adequate clothing, and – in one study – those who report they lack adequate food, furniture, and medical care (Baron, 2007; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Stiles et al., 2000). Beyond that, much data indicate that crime is substantially higher among those whose physical security has been threatened, including those who have been victimized, have had close others victimized, and have witnessed violence in their homes and communities (e.g., Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Harrell, 2010).

Very low economic status is strongly related to this type of strain, by definition. And data indicate that that hunger and homelessness are much more common in poor households, but become quite uncommon once a certain minimal income level is reached (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012; World Hunger Education Services, 2012).

**Inability to satisfy addictions, including for drugs, gambling, and shopping, through legal means**

Some individuals are addicted to behaviors such as drug use, gambling, and shopping. That is, they are preoccupied with the behaviors and have much difficulty restraining themselves from engaging in them, even when doing so might cause harm. Some have a genetic predisposition for these addictions, although social factors also contribute to them. In fact, strain or stress is said to be a contributing factor (Bahr, 2011). Once developed, there appears to be some biological basis for the addictions, with individuals experiencing a change in the “reward circuitry” of their brains (Bahr, 2011). There is good reason to believe that the inability to satisfy certain addictions through legal channels has a strong effect on crime, particularly addictions to drugs, gambling, and – to a lesser extent – shopping.

The inability to satisfy these addictions constitutes a strain of great magnitude, given the
overwhelming compulsion to engage in the addictive behaviors. Also, addictions to drugs and gambling put individuals in contact with criminals, which may increase their disposition for criminal coping. There has been some research here, most focusing on drugs. Data suggest that individuals more often engage in crime when using drugs, partly because of the need to secure money (Bahr, 2011; Slocum, Simpson, & Smith, 2005). Further, qualitative research suggests that many hardcore criminals engage in crime partly because of their very strong desire to maintain the “party lifestyle,” which involves frequent drug and alcohol use, gambling, and lavish expenditures on certain consumer products (e.g., Shover, 1996).

We would expect this strain to be much more common among the very poor, since by definition they lack the money to finance their addictions through legal channels. Those with somewhat more money may also turn to crime in order to finance their addictions, but it is likely that they will soon fall into the ranks of the very poor as they exhaust their financial resources.

The effect of economic status on other strains

The above strains involve not having enough money to meet economic goals, prevent relative deprivation, avoid economic problems, obtain necessities, and feed addictions. But economic status may affect other strains as well. There is a large literature suggesting the low economic status contributes to most of the criminogenic strains identified in GST, including parental rejection, child abuse, harsh and erratic disciple, negative school experiences, work at “bad” job, marital problems, victimization, and residence in deprived communities plagued by a host of problems (e.g., Agnew, 2007; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Currie, 1997).

The effect of economic status on these strains is largely indirect. For example, poor parents experience certain of the economic strains listed above, such as economic problems; these strains contribute to depression and anger; these negative emotions contribute to poor parenting practices, such as parental rejection and harsh and erratic disciplinary techniques; and these practices in turn function as criminogenic strains for the children in such families (Agnew, 2007). To give another example, poor parents provide less cognitive stimulation to their children (e.g., have fewer books in the home, less often read to their children), this limits the children’s intellectual development, and this limited development increases the likelihood that the children will later experience school- and work-related strains (Guo & Harris, 2000).

The fact that economic status is the first link in an often long causal chain helps explain its modest association with the final link in the chain, crime. Also, while low economic status increases exposure to the above strains, the effect is strongest for those of very low economic status – such as those who have been poor for several years (see Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). This, too, helps explains the weak effect of economic status on crime in most studies, since these studies fail to identify the very poor and/or undersample them.

Strains that more often impact richer individuals

Most of the strains listed above are more common among poorer individuals, with some largely limited to the poor. But there are certain strains that are more often experienced by
richer individuals, including:

- Personal economic problems that presuppose some level of financial wellbeing, such as losses in the stock market and the various financial problems encountered by business owners (see Agnew et al., 2009).

- Strains associated with the corporate and political roles more often occupied by richer individuals. Corporate executives, for example, have some responsibility for the performance of their companies and may experience much strain when that performance is threatened, with such threats including low and declining profits, government regulations, and increased competition (see Agnew et al., 2009).

- Threats to the privileged position of richer individuals, a strain emphasized by conflict theorists. These threats may stem from the government (e.g., higher taxes, burdensome regulations), the larger community (e.g., higher crime, riots), and other rich individuals (Agnew, 2011).

These strains are most relevant to the explanation of corporate and states’ crimes, since these crimes are designed to alleviate the strains (e.g., increase corporate profits, evade government regulations, exercise greater control over disruptive groups) of richer individuals.

**Economic status and criminal coping**

As noted, classic and general strain theory state that poorer individuals are not only more likely to experience most strains, but are also more likely to cope with them in a criminal manner. Recent research, however, suggests a more complex relationship between economic status and criminal coping. As Wright et al. (1999) point out, while poorer individuals possess certain characteristics conducive to crime (and criminal coping), richer individuals possess others. In particular, richer individuals are more often socialized to have a desire for risk-taking and they possess more social power – which enables them to better resist sanctions (also see Kohn, 1977). Chambliss (1973) makes a similar point in his discussion of the “Saints” and the “Roughnecks,” describing how the richer Saints use their positive reputations, social skills, and access to cars and money to hide their delinquent acts and to escape sanction if detected. Brezina & Aragones (2004) elaborate on this point in their discussion of how “positive labeling” facilitates crime. Individuals who are labeled in a positive manner, for example, may be subject to less supervision – making it easier to commit criminal acts without sanction. Further, certain research describes how the resources more often possessed by richer individuals, including money, creativity, power, and autonomy, can facilitate criminal coping (Agnew, 1990; Cullen, Larson, & Mathers, 1985; Wright et al., 2001; also see Hagan, 1992; Tittle, 1995). Among other things, such resources undermine efforts at social control and increase opportunities for crime (e.g., it is easier to cope through illicit drug use if you have the money to buy drugs).

Recent research in psychology has extended these arguments, suggesting that richer individuals are more likely to be self-interested, greedy, and low in compassion (e.g., Piff et al., 2012; Stellar et al., 2012). Among other things, this is said to stem from the fact that their self-
interest and greed are more often reinforced. Also, their less stressful environments are said to reduce compassion for others. As a consequence, richer individuals are more likely to engage in selfish/unethical behavior in certain laboratory and naturalistic experiments. It should be noted that these findings are compatible with the arguments of many conflict theorists, who state that richer individuals are interested in protecting their privileged position, care little about the plight of the poor, and will harm others if threatened (Agnew, 2011). Further, recent research suggests that while poorer individuals may lack certain skills and resources that facilitate legal coping, their previous exposure to stress may increase their tolerance for and ability to cope with current stressors (Seery, Holman, & Silver, 2010).

Taken as a whole, there is, therefore, some uncertainty about how economic status influences the likelihood of criminal coping. Wright et al. (1999) argue that the forces promoting crime (and criminal coping) among poorer and richer individuals tend to balance out. Their argument, however, may not apply to the very poor, who are especially high in those factors that promote criminal coping and who may lack many of the factors that hinder such coping. For example, while the experience of moderate stress in the past increases the ability to cope with current stressors, past experiences with severe stress reduce the ability to effectively cope (Seery et al., 2010). And, as suggested above, the very poor are substantially more likely to have experienced severe stress.

**Conclusion**

Classic and general strain theory state that low economic status increases both strain and the likelihood of criminal coping, thereby contributing to what should be a strong relationship between low economic status and crime. Data on the relationship between economic status and crime, however, are mixed. Most studies find a weak relationship, but some a strong relationship. This chapter suggested certain revisions in strain theory to better explain these mixed results and guide future research. In particular, it was argued that economic status generally has a modest effect on strains and the likelihood of criminal coping over much of its range. Poorer individuals are often able to avoid strains through a variety of strategies, such as pursuing more limited economic goals, making downward or lateral social comparisons, avoiding social comparison, exaggerating their current and expected economic status, and limiting consumption. And richer individuals often experience strains because they pursue lofty or ever-escalating economic goals, make upward comparisons, and consume beyond their means. Likewise, while poorer individuals are more inclined to criminal coping for certain reasons, richer individuals are more inclined for other reasons. These arguments help explain the weak relationship between economic status and crime in most research.

At the same time, it was argued that very poor individuals are much more likely to experience most strains and to engage in criminal coping. This helps explain why certain studies show a strong relationship between economic status and crime. Such studies tend to employ measures that better identify the very poor and/or samples that better represent them. For example, such studies measure the duration of poverty. Community-level studies generally find that poor communities have higher crime rates partly because they pick up the offending of the very poor.
individuals who tend live in these communities. (Also, individual-level poverty in combination with residence in poor communities is especially conducive to crime (Agnew & Brezina, 2011).) Likewise, studies on crime trends are more likely to find an effect for economic status when they employ measures more likely to pick up severe deprivation. So very low economic status is strongly related to offending, but the relationship weakens among the less poor. It should be noted that the research on happiness provides indirect support for this argument. The very poor are less happy, but the relationship between income and happiness weakens once a minimal income level is passed (Drakopoulos, 2008; Wolbring et al., 2013).

It was further argued that the rich are more likely to experience certain strains, particularly those conducive to corporate and state crimes. Also, richer individuals, of course, have more opportunities to engage in such crimes. Finally, it was argued that the relationship between economic status and crime may vary across groups and over time. That is because a range of factors influence whether one’s economic status is viewed as a strain, including the goals that individuals pursue, the types of social comparisons they make, the extent to which they exaggerate their current and expected economic status, their level of consumption, and what they view as necessities. We lack anything close to a full theory here, although the important role that individual, group, and historical factors can have on the relationship between economic status and crime can be illustrated by considering three cases that might at first glance be taken as evidence against strain theory.

**The relatively low crime rate of very poor first-generation immigrants**

Immigrants usually migrate with the hope of improving their economic status, but they often experience much poverty after first arriving in the US. Their generally low crime rates might be explained in several ways. They have low economic goals, reflecting the more limited goals in their country of origin. They compare their current economic circumstances to the even worse circumstances that they experienced and others still experience in their country of origin. They exaggerate their current and expected economic status, partly because of their often optimistic orientation (associated with migration). They have a more limited view of what constitutes a “necessity,” reflecting their experiences in their country of origin. While they desire economic success, they also place great emphasis on other goals, such as family and religion. And they are less inclined to engage in criminal coping: they have elected to cope through migration rather than crime. They are better able to tolerate their deprivation, given their prior experience coping with stressors. And they possess characteristics that reduce the likelihood of criminal coping: among other things, they are often strongly tied to family and community, morally opposed to crime, heavily involved in work, and high in self-control. All of the above factors, however, are less characteristic of second- and subsequent-generation immigrants – helping to account for the increased crime in these groups.

**The increase in crime during the 1960s, despite increasing prosperity**

While prosperity increased during the 1960s, structural and cultural changes may have led to an increase in economic goals as well. Many of the structural barriers to economic progress
were crumbling as a result of the civil rights movement, the War on Poverty, and a robust economy. There was a strong cultural emphasis on economic success, reflected in the increased mass marketing of consumer products and the political/media coverage devoted to the eradication of poverty. People may have become more likely to compare themselves to more advantaged others; both those regularly depicted in the media and to their socially mobile friends and neighbors. Relatedly, the increase in prosperity at the local level may have made it harder to exaggerate one’s economic status, since people were surrounded by visible symbols of economic success. But while most people were doing well, some were not, particularly teenagers and young adults in poor, inner-city communities (LaFree, 1998; Wilson, 1983). Among other things, manufacturing jobs that paid a decent wage began to move out of such communities in the 1960s (Carlson & Michalowski, 1997; Colvin, 2000; LaFree, 1998). As a result, there was a widening gap between the rich and poor (LaFree, 1998; LaFree & Drass, 1996). The goal blockage and sense of relative deprivation experienced by those not sharing in the increased prosperity was probably quite strong. Further, this strain occurred in a context that was conducive to criminal coping. Among other things, moral values were being questioned, inner-city communities were becoming more disorganized as the working and middle-classes fled to the suburbs, there was an increase in family disruption, and the certainty and severity of punishment were low (LaFree, 1998; Wilson, 1983).

The decline in crime since 2008, despite the severe economic recession

The crime drop occurred despite a sharp increase in unemployment, a drop in real wages, a dramatic drop in household wealth, and an increase in poverty. This drop was surprising given that the crime drop in the 1990s appears to be partly due to the economic expansion during that time, especially the increase in entry-level jobs and wages (e.g., Barker, 2010; Baumer, 2008; Parker, 2008; Rosenfeld & Fornango, 2007; Yearwood & Koinis, 2011). The post-2008 crime drop might be explained by arguing that cultural and structural conditions led many individuals to lower their economic goals and make downward or lateral comparisons. The economic decline was widespread, frequently affecting family, friends, and neighbors; the decline was the main topic of political conversation; and stories of economic hardship were regularly featured in the media. While inequality increased, the increase was concentrated in the top 1% or, more accurately, fraction of 1%. Social comparisons with this very privileged group seem unlikely. Further, the conservative political movement had some success in diverting attention from economic issues (Frank, 2004). In addition, the recession was quickly followed by a major increase in government spending, a significant portion of which was devoted to food, housing, and unemployment compensation – allowing many to obtain necessities. Related to this, a large percentage of the young males who might otherwise be living in poverty were in prison or the military. Beyond that, the larger cultural and political context in which the decline occurred was quite different from that of the 1960s. Among other things, there was an increased emphasis on moral values and the certainty and severity of punishment were high.

Most of these arguments are speculative, but many can be tested. This chapter, in fact, contains numerous suggestions for further research. The most basic involve better measuring economic status, in an effort to distinguish the very poor from others; collecting samples that contain
sufficient numbers of the very poor; examining the strains described above, certain of which have been neglected by criminologists; and better measuring these strains, including their magnitude and perceived injustice. Researchers should also devote more attention to those factors that may influence the subjective reaction to one’s economic status, including the relative and absolute emphasis placed on economic success, the types of social comparison that are made, the extent to which current and future economic status is exaggerated, views about what constitutes a necessity, and the emphasis placed on consumerism. Finally, researchers should devote more attention to those factors that condition the relationship between the above strains and crime. Engaging in these efforts will of course involve much work, but it will help make better sense of perhaps the most perplexing relationship in criminology – that between economic status and crime.

References


715–752.


