

## **Nicholas Pell**

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### **To steal or not to steal; what is my salary?**

I stood in the hallway and watched in horror as my older brother, Chris, hurried into my mother's room and demanded that she give him money. He had apparently been shooting up as his eyes were blood-shot and was breathing very heavily. He didn't give a reason, but spat in her face when she said, "no." He snatched the purse which was strapped to her waist and threw her to the ground as he frantically searched for anything that could help him get his next fix. He grabbed the contents and threw them sporadically throughout the room. Chris found nothing and threw her purse to the floor in disgust. He stormed out of the room leaving her to clean up the mess. My mom, cheeks soaked with tears, picked herself up off the floor and sat back down in her wheelchair. She just sat there trying to figure out what just happened. Crimes, such as physical abuse, and drug addiction are all too evident in many poor urban neighborhoods.

I grew up in a single-parent home. My parents divorced when I was two and my dad disappeared. Our family was easily considered to be under the poverty threshold, as my mother only made an annual salary of Twenty thousand dollars. She would take us to a baby-sitter early in the morning, and we sometimes stayed there until eight or ten o'clock at night. My mom worked a lot of over-time in order to put food on the table. Because she was a single mom and working all the time, we kids almost never saw her. We lived in Rose Park, Utah, which, at the time, was a very rough neighborhood rampant with gang violence and drug dealers. My step dad was an alcoholic and was addicted to cocaine and methamphetamines. Many times while under the

influence, he would stomp on my mom's head and shove her face into the corner. My older brother, Chris, was involved in gangs while we lived there and got into legal trouble for participating in gang violence, committing petty theft, and using illegal substances.

What is the root cause of these crimes? Many researchers have worked tirelessly to discover *causes* of crime. One philosophy is that the poverty level has an effect on the crime rate. Ed. Tamara L. Roleff, however, has separated the two as separate problems in and of themselves. [Connecting them will result in flawed conclusions and the flawed mentality that poor people will inevitably become criminals.](**9. Roleff**, par. 3). Barr, puts it this way; "Now frankly, I think the argument that poverty causes crime is too much over-stated. I think poverty is probably a contributing factor toward crime. But standing alone, the correlation between poverty as a causal factor in crime is very *weak*." (**3. Barr**, par. 30)

The biggest factor playing into the crime rate is living in a poor urban neighborhood. "Child development is influenced by family functioning, peer relationships, schools, communities, and larger societal influences (e.g., media). [...we know that delinquency is disproportionately concentrated in impoverished urban neighborhoods.]" (**1. Gorman-Smith**, par. 1). This only asserts my personal experiences as a young child, having grown up in a poor neighborhood and witnessing some of the crimes that were committed. I think that although poverty may not directly *cause* crime, it does have an influence on it.

One supporting theory of living in poor urban neighborhoods being an influence on crime is the Broken Windows Theory. The theory was originally created by Frédéric Bastiat. He wrote an essay entitled "That which is seen and that which is unseen." Karen Hopkin, reporting for Scientific American, describes the *Broken Windows Theory*, "...In neighborhoods with broken

windows, people are more likely to engage in bad behavior. These may include posting graffiti or stealing bicycles.” She stipulates that they may commit crimes in such neighborhoods because “no one will care” or that “there’s little chance they’ll get caught.” The theory suggests that a child may, while playing, innocently break a window. The child’s parent can either spend however much it costs to fix the window on fixing the window, or, if the parent needs new shoes, forget about the broken window and spend the money on a new pair of shoes. Whichever choice the parent makes will either improve the glass-making business, or fatten the wallet of the local cobbler. Because people naturally react to such a situation by fixing the broken window, the glass-making business is usually the one to make the money. The innocent child breaking the window thusly improves the glass-making industry. (**11. Hopkin** par. 1)

Since others may not care to fix the broken window, it is left broken and in disrepair. This sends a message to passersby that the people in such a home may not care about the disrepair of their buildings. If there are *enough* homes with broken windows, again passersby may think that the entire neighborhood doesn’t really care about how it looks. This may even send an invitation to graffiti a run-down building at the edge of town because “the town already looks bad, what will adding a little color hurt?” This is an interesting perspective that suggests subliminal influences on crime as opposed to causes of which one may be consciously aware.

Another aspect of living in a poor urban neighborhood is the exposure to crimes committed and even influence to participate. Well, if poor people are more likely to commit crimes, then maybe kids who grow up in poor families are destined to fail from the start because they are poor. “Nationwide over 20% of our children live in poverty.” (**2. Holmes**, par. 2). So, in the future we will most likely see one-fifth of that generation in prison, being labeled criminals? Wrong! Ed. Tamara

L. Roleff defines the correlation of living in a poor urban neighborhood and the crime rate as “risk factors” instead of causes and effects. He explains, “...There are two main factors that affect a child to commit crime; *exposure* and *influence*.” If a child lives in a poor neighborhood and every day while walking home from school, he sees a group of kids standing on the sidewalk puffing on cigarettes, he may be influenced to participate in those actions as well. Maybe, when the child goes home he occasionally sees his father physically abuse his mom because dinner is late. That child may assume that such behavior is acceptable because that’s what he’s witnessed. Such a circumstance may even lead the kid to beat on his own wife when he grows up, because that’s just how he learned to treat women when the food is late.

While exposure and influence may affect crime, a deeper issue is moral poverty. Rosen reports, “Often abused or neglected, increasingly born out of wedlock, these young people have grown up without the guidance of ‘loving, caring, and responsible adults willing to teach them the difference between right and wrong. In short, they suffer from a condition the authors fittingly define as ‘moral poverty.’” (5. Rosen, par. 6) As a result of single-parent homes, kids miss out on decent loving relationships and turn to social placebos, such as drug use and gang affiliation to fulfill their affiliation needs. These kids are neglected and are left to fend for themselves. They grow up feeling forgotten and unloved. When they grow up they have to choose for themselves whether they want to live in poverty for the rest of their lives, or overcome it through education and dedication. Even still, some don’t make it.

Vogel says, “Several people living in poverty...have criminal records. Others *chose* to live clean lives, though they are often affected by crimes committed by loved ones or crimes committed against them. People in poverty are more likely than others to be the victims of crime

because they don't have the resources to protect themselves," (4. Vogel, page. 2 par. 3). It is interesting to me that the author uses the word "chose." This implies that a person in such a situation has the ability to make the decision, according to their own volition, as to whether they will be poor. Frankly, some people are just misfortunate and happen to lose their job. This puts them in a financial strain and they may eventually end up in poverty and on the streets. If they can't afford to eat, they might choose to steal in order to survive.

Victor Hugo, author of "**Les Miserables**," based his novel on poverty, unjust legislation and social misery. (6. Hugo). In the emotional story, main character Jean Valjean, is caught stealing a loaf of bread in order to feed his starving family. He is sentenced to nineteen years in prison including hard labor. He is finally released and no one trusts him because he's been labeled a "thief." The priest invites him in, and Valjean steals the priest's silver dinnerware. (7. Hugo, *Les Miserables*, plot overview). Although this isn't a direct historical account, it is a likely account of petty crimes committed by poverty-stricken individuals trying to provide food for their families.

Not until I watched the *Les Miserables* clip on You-tube (10. *Les Miserables* [1/16]) did I realize that maybe some "petty crimes" shouldn't be considered crimes at all. I question whether stealing a meager loaf of bread to feed one's family is actually *wrong*.

I recently interviewed Nyoul A. Nyoul, the Social Services Case Managers' Supervisor (SSCMS) at a non-profit organization called the **Asian Association of Utah**. He works for the **Utah Refugee Center** to provide government assistance to refugees that have recently come from eastern Africa and the Middle East. In his interview he speaks of the intense level of poverty these people are in when they come to America. "Most have been in refugee camps for twenty or more years without as much as running water or even electricity. When they come to the United

States,” Nyuol states, “They have nothing. When they come here they are so grateful to finally be in America that they *can’t* commit crimes.” He later goes on to explain that they are so appreciative for the opportunities they have in this country, that they aren’t *willing* to jeopardize their stay by committing crimes. This behavior would result in their deportation, something highly dreaded by these immigrants. I then inquire, “Might poverty cause someone who is naturally honest and virtuous to commit crimes regardless of their morals?” In response to this he relates a case in which a poor African refugee employed as a donation receiver for a local D.I. found \$6,000 cash in a donated coat, something from which he could have greatly benefitted. He, however, decided to turn the money over to his boss instead of pocketing it. “In this instance,” Nyuol explains, “The refugee was very poor, but he decided to do the right thing, because it was the right thing to do.” In his testimony Nyuol declares that people, no matter how poor they may be, choose whether they want to commit crimes, and that such behaviors aren’t necessarily based on their poverty level. (8. Nyuol, Nyuol A., personal interview) This is something I had never even considered in my research until this point.

My interview with Nyuol, A. Nyuol (SSCMS) really shifted my beliefs. He said that the refugees he works with came to the United States very poor, yet none that he has worked have reported to him to have committed any serious crimes. I got to thinking as well, why do people commit crimes? If not because of poverty, what is the actual cause?

I was shocked to find out that my childhood idol, Martha Stewart, was involved in insider-trading (a crime that is associated with stocks and investments; one in which an employee of the company gives financial advice to an investor as to improve their revenue on investments made). I always thought that people with as much money as she wouldn’t have to steal because they would

already have what they need. Being poor doesn't cause someone to become a criminal. There are countless variables that factor into the equation of criminal activity. If poverty itself were to be the sole determinant of criminal activity, crimes such as embezzlement, tax fraud, and insider-trading wouldn't exist. Get this, rich people commit crimes too!

Conclusively, let me just say that, in both my academic and personal research, I have found that "poor" people are no more likely to commit crimes than "rich" people. Many risk factors definitely play into the likelihood of poor people committing crimes, but they don't make a poor person automatically a criminal. People ultimately choose whether they want to commit crimes, regardless of how influenced by their circumstances they may be. Poverty itself does not directly *cause* crime.

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