

Poverty, social exclusion and delinquency: Criminological reflections on the Italian context



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This article examines how poverty and social exclusion can be related to delinquency. After an analysis about the problematic definition of poverty and its effects on behavior, using the latest official data of the National Institute of Statistics and the Report of the Home Ministry, the study shows the relatedness between two economic indicators (i.e., individual relative poverty and the Gross Domestic Product per capita), two social indicators (i.e., unemployment and low educational profile) and the rates of homicides, robberies, thefts in house, pickpocketing and bag-snatching in each Italian region. The results show interesting direct/inverse relations.

«They say, moreover, that grinding poverty renders men worthless, cunning, sulky, thievish, insidious, vagabonds, liars, false witnesses; and that wealth makes them insolent, proud, ignorant, traitors, assumers of what they know not, deceivers, boasters, wanting in affection, slanderers...».

Tommaso Campanella, *The City of the Sun*

Definition of “poverty”

Defining poverty analytically is not easy: indeed literature reputes mischievous ambiguity of the word ‘poor’ (Checkland and Checkland 1974), whereas it “is not a fixed constant and this opens the possibility that the same socio-political process that sets poverty policy also defines the poverty problem” (Bird 1999: 269). Poverty, as a complex phenomenon – not only in terms of material deprivation and inadequate consumption (Ruggles 1990) or as “enforced lack of a number of goods and services” (Muffels and Fouarge 2004: 301) but also the deprivation of non-material resources and its individual and social perception (Eckmann 1997) – is strictly linked with the concept of social exclusion: “defining poverty is actually a social process rather than a scientific one” (Bird 1999: 276). Social exclusion is principally perceived as the exclusion from the labor market, followed by other forms of exclusion (e.g., consumption, saving, social activities, and so on): social exclusion is a lack of agency (Smith 2005). Besides deprivation is also part of the concept of social exclusion (Atkinson et al. 2002; Muffels and Fouarge 2004).

Formerly, the EU 3rd Poverty Program, in the European Council Declaration of December 19th 1984 asserted that “poor are people, families and groups whose material, cultural and social resources are so limited to rule them out from the least life’s quality acceptable by community where they live”. Analyzing the relationship between poverty and social exclusion, there are lots of indicators of welfare problems linked to both of these concepts, as integration in the political process, neighborhood conditions, housing conditions, health impairments, anxiety and psychological distress, health hazards, social integration, educational marginalization, unemployment and economic vulnerability (Halleröd and Larsson 2008).

Actually, in the political debate of 1980s and 1990s the term of “poverty” has been replaced with others, as “social exclusion”, “social disintegration” and “social marginalization” (de Haan 1998), signifying a status of denial of the social, political and civil rights of citizens in society (Silver 1994; Walker and Walker 1997; Byrne 1999).

Sen's concept of deprivation is mostly identified at an ethical level: "If there is starvation and hunger, then – no matter what the relative picture looks like – there clearly is poverty [. . .]. Even when we shift our attention from hunger and look at other aspects of the living standard, the absolutist aspect of poverty does not disappear. The fact that some people have a lower standard of living than others is certainly proof of inequality, but by itself it cannot be a proof of poverty unless we know something more about the standard of living that these people do in fact enjoy. It would be absurd to call someone poor just because he had the means to buy only one Cadillac a day when others in that community could buy two of these cars each day. "The absolute consideration cannot be inconsequential for conceptualising poverty." (Sen 1983: 159).

Social marginalization is measured by the degree of social exclusion: weakness of familial relationships, residential segregation, exclusion from public spaces and denial or ineligibility to various forms of social welfare (Juska et al. 2004).

The socioeconomic transformations have moreover produced new dynamics of occupational structure (i.e., labor market deregulation and flexibilization, casual/irregular labor and odd jobs, unemployability, risk of losing one's job), sense of insecurity, inequality, loss of power and independence; thus it is clear that unemployment is problematic even if the employed person is protected from poverty (Nordenmark 1999; Strandh 2000). Employment, moreover, is clearly a central factor of social inclusion in both sense of income's source and active participation in society.

Even if the EU praxis refers the economical deprivation condition alternately to the available income or to the (outgoings for) consumption, this second indicator is a better measure of the economic well-being, whereas it is not affected by temporary income fluctuations (e.g., loss of job) or from underreporting (i.e., hiding real income for tax reasons).

As explained above, poverty is not only an economic issue: there are, in fact, further specific aspects linked to families' conditions of life. Home, for example, is one of the most important evaluation factors about material deprivation: lack of basic housing services (warm water, WCs, household appliances), space shortage and overcrowding, grungy structures, expensive cost of management, are essential as well for analyzing the phenomenon of poverty.

Related to the construction of the social marginalization concept are the status of dwelling-place zone and problems such as dirty streets, pollution, hard noise, criminality, inadequate lighting system, bad urban décor, the sale and use of drugs, streetwalkers, beadsmen, drunken, homeless, vandalism, etc., – issues that cannot be inappreciable for a complete examination. Service accessibility pertains as well to this context of material deprivation, that is, when people have problems for achieving access to pharmacies, hospitals, precincts, school buildings, supermarkets, post offices, parks and so on.

Poverty effects on behavior

Inadequate material and social resources (in terms of health, job, education, lodgings, social net, rights) can seriously lead to marginalization and to adopt a "culture of poverty", whereas people reproduce and transmit, not affecting value and norm systems behavior, being forced to cope with life's problems resorting to alternative strategies. Children from poorer families, for example, "are less able to satisfy their desires for material goods, excitement and social status by legal or socially approved methods, and so tend to choose illegal or socially disapproved methods. The relative inability of poorer children to achieve their goals by legitimate methods could be because they tend to fail in school and tend to have erratic, low status employment histories" (Farrington 1995: 948).

Poverty, as a multidimensional disadvantage, is irregularity in income and social condition that during childhood causes a chronic cycle of transmission from one generation to another (i.e., intergenerational persistence), with serious reflection on later life (Warzywoda-

Kruszynska and Rokicka 2007). Poverty gives rise to harsh impairment of neural (language, memory) and abilities development (Krugman 2008). A negative association has been noted between poverty and array of children's health, cognitive and socioemotional outcomes (McLeod and Shanahan 1993; Bolger et al. 1995; Bradley and Whiteside-Mansell 1997; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Vrijheid et al. 2000).

Children living in poverty are at a higher risk for engaging in delinquent behavior (Peterson and Krivo, 2005; Pratt and Cullen 2005), and whereas the family's poverty, including low income, poor housing, unemployment and other social problems, could be some of the most important childhood (aged 8–10 years) predictors and risk factors of later delinquency; early prevention through policy actions is needed to reduce it: “convicted delinquents tended to be from poorer families, from large-sized families, living in poor houses with neglected interiors...” (Farrington 1995: 939).

Even if there is no agreement about the importance of the role of socioeconomic status (Hindelang et al. 1981), poverty clearly increases family stress (Larzelere and Patterson 1990), that is obviously the context where it plays an important role in child outcomes.

It is surprising that studies on the link between poverty and antisocial behavior have not been widely conducted.

One of the most relevant studies is one that income maintenance experiments carried out in the United States, and which provided extra income for poor families: however, the only evaluation of the effects of income maintenance on children's delinquency did not deliver positive results (Groeneveld et al. 1979). There is some evidence that extra welfare benefits given to ex-prisoners can in some cases lead to a decrease in their offending (Rossi et al. 1980). A study emphasizes the effect of unemployment on delinquent boys and leaving school at an average age of 15 years (Farrington et al. 1986): more offences were committed while unemployed, and the offences were limited to theft, burglary, robbery and fraud, excluding others like violence, vandalism or drug abuse. It could be owing to lack of money, although these effects involved only those with the highest prediction scores for crime. Another research conducted in Lithuania shows that unemployed youth, who abandoned school before higher education, are the most criminogenic members of society, and are 24 times more probable to be criminally active than those who remain in higher education (Babachinaite and Kurapka 2000): “this group committed 63% of all solved crimes in 1999. Young people between ages 18–29 accounted for 47% of all persons charged with a criminal offence during 2000 and yet this group makes up only 17% of the entire population” (Juska et al. 2004: 166).

But how is crime related to poverty? Do those ‘who have less’ want to take from ‘who have more’? Does crime increase when the gap expands between the haves and the have-nots? Does poverty drive people to crime?

Of course poverty and crime can sometimes be symptoms of some form of lack of social integration: in October 11, 2005 the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime saw crime as both the cause and consequence of poverty, insecurity and underdevelopment.

Even 2000 years ago, emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius Antoninus claimed that “Poverty is the mother of crime”, but now things are partially different. Indeed, it is plainly unfair to people in poverty to suggest that they are more disposed to crime than other people, as all these suggestions arise out of oversimplification of relationships between facts: we have to begin from what definition of crime is being used, and what type of crime and criminal behavior is being parsed.

It could be possible to try a correlation between poverty and criminality in these two hypothetical ways:

Direct relation: On the whole, the so-called “predatory activities”, e.g., theft in house (art. 624-bis, 1° paragraph, Italian criminal code), robbery (art. 628 Italian criminal code),

pickpocketing (art. 625, n. 4 Italian criminal code) and bag-snatching (art. 624-bis, 2° paragraph, Italian criminal code) over the last 30–40 years has grown in the European countries. Economic growth and consequently, a better level of life (i.e., income growth) could have a positive correlation with lucrative crimes (Barbagli 1995);

Inverse relation: Violent crimes (e.g., murders and homicides) have notably reduced in those countries where the Gross National Product (GNP) has grown, compared with poor countries where indeed number of murders is higher. In other words, the number of homicides seems to have an inverse relation with economic conditions, therefore with the education/acculturation levels of the population.

Poverty in Italy

During the last four years, the incidence of relative poverty in Italy has been quite uniform: Istat's Report 2006 shows that 12.91% of the whole population was living in relative conditions of poverty or 7,537,351 persons, that means 11.13% of resident families or 2,622,921. Measures of the incidence of relative poverty are computed using a conventional value on average consumption outgoes (the "poverty line"), where outgoings under it define a family as poor in relative terms. In 2006, the poverty line for a two-member family was estimated at 970.34 euros per month.

It has been observed that while in the Center–North less than 7% of the families were poor (5.2% in the North and 6.9% in the Center), highest values were condensed in the South, where 22.56% of the families – i.e., 65% of the Italian poor families – were below the poverty line. The lowest northern values were in Piemonte (6.68%), in Veneto (5.00%), in Lombardia (4.96%) and Emilia-Romagna (4.01%). In the South 5,201,330 persons were relatively poor and poverty's incidence was 31.51% in Sicily, 19.45% in Sardinia, 31.40% in Calabria, 24.55% in Basilicata, 20.05% in Molise, 22.34% in Puglia, 24.18% in Campania and 13.16% in Abruzzo. In the South, poverty was more critical, as the monthly outgoings amount on average 752.01 euros, compared to 797.62 euros in the North and 806.35 euros in the Center. Number of members was linked with poverty: 24.3% of the families with five or more members were poor, of them 37.5% lives in the South. Besides, families with minors had a sharper economic privation.

Poverty is strongly linked as well with low educational levels, low job profiles (the so-called "working poor") and to the exclusion from the job market: the incidence of poverty in families where two or more members were searching for a job was, in fact, higher by four times to families where there were no jobless persons. Families with an employee had low poverty incidence, equal to 9.3%; among those with a self-employed householder it was equal to 7.5% and, when he was a professional worker, it was equal to 3.8%. Though, when he was a factory worker, it increases to 13.8%. In the South, families with enterprises and professional workers had a poverty incidence of 9.0%; among those with managers and employees the incidence is 13.3%, and it is equal to 27.5% for the factory workers. Incidence of poverty was 28.3% in families with a jobless member and if there was a retired person and pension was the only income. The lowest levels of poverty were allocated in those families where all their members were workers (3.8%). Families with an enterprise or a professional worker as householder had the highest outgoings levels: they spent, on average, 3,857 euros monthly, twice that of the outgoings of families where the householder was jobless.

Obviously, the more a family gains, the broader is the variety and quantity of goods and services consumed: leisure and free time, education, transits and trips, communications, clothes and footwear. Contrarily, the poorest families expend most on food and housing. Lombardia (2,886 euros) and Bolzano (2,906 euros) had the highest outgoings levels, while Sicily had the lowest value (1,724 euros).

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita is another indicator of the individual's prosperity, even if it pretermits some of the most important social and economical aspects: the South had a GDP per capita clearly lower than the Center and the North. Bolzano, Valle d'Aosta and Lombardia had the highest value in 2006 (up to 27,000 euro per inhabitant), while Campania (13,700 euro per inhabitant), Calabria and Puglia (14,000 euro per inhabitant) had the lowest. With regard to education in Italy, in 2007, 48.2% of the population aged 25–64 had achieved only the primary school diploma, compared to 30% of EU27's average. The internal highest values were for Sardinia, Sicily, Campania and Puglia (on average, 56–57%). Around 75% of young people aged between 20 and 24 achieved at least the secondary school diploma that is lower than the EU27's average (77.8%): it was comparable with Germany, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark and Romania. Sicily, Sardinia, Campania and Puglia had low values (less than 70%), compared to Basilicata (81.8%), Abruzzo (80.7%) and Molise (80.2%). Trento had the highest national value (86.2%).

In 2007, the job market showed that 58.7% of population aged 15 to 64 was working. However, in 2006 the Italian male workers' rate was lower than EU27 by about 1%, while the rate for female workers was lower by 11%. Only Hungary, Malta and Poland had national rates lower than Italy. The highest worker levels are in the North, specially in the North-East, where the rate was 67.6% – more than the national average, though there were still big internal differences; whereas in Emilia-Romagna and Bolzano the rate was 70%, in Campania, Calabria and Sicily it was around 45%.

The unemployment rate comprises the percentage of the population aged 15 years and older looking for a job and the global population of those who work or would want to work. The Italian unemployment rate in 2007 was 6.1%, which still shows gender differences: there were 7.9% unemployed females compared to 4.9% of males. In 2006, compared with EU27's average, Italian unemployment rate was lower by 1.5% and the rate of unemployed males was among the lowest in the group. The rate of unemployed females, indeed, was the same as that of the EU27's average. Internal differences were very big: in the North-East the unemployment rate in 2007 was on average 3.1%, while in the South it was on average 11%; in Sicily it was 13%, and in Campania 11.2%. Concerning the Italian youth – those between the ages of 15–24 – the rate of unemployment in 2007 was 20.3% (14% more than the national), and gender differences were relevant: unemployed females were 23%, compared to 18% of males. In Italy the youth unemployment rate was higher than the EU27, lower than in 2006 only to Poland (29.8%), Slovakia (26.6), Greece (25.2%) and France (23.4). Female unemployment rate was at 25%, one of the highest rates in comparison with the EU27's average. Austria, Ireland, Denmark and the Netherlands had the lowest youth unemployment rates (17.2% on average) in EU27. In 2007 the South had rates of youth unemployment higher by 10% than the national average, but Molise (23.9%) and Abruzzo (17.2%) were lower. The lowest rates were in the North-East (9.6%) and the North-West (13.9%).

Criminality in Italy

Official data of 2005 show that denounced crimes had a value of 44 points per 1,000 inhabitants that means over 2,500,000. In EU27's context, after an increase of 15.6 points from 2002, Italy in 2005 was at 4th position, after Germany, United Kingdom (UK) and France. Indeed, a decreasing number of denounced crimes (more than 5%) were observed in Belgium, Bulgaria, UK, Finland, Czech Republic, France, the Netherlands, Denmark and Romania.

In Italy the most relevant increasing values (more than 10%) from 2000 to 2005 were in four northern regions: Trento, Valle d'Aosta, Lombardia and Emilia-Romagna; Toscana in the Center and Abruzzo in the South. In Sicily and Sardinia there were a decreasing values, equal to –3.7 points and –4.8 points, respectively. The highest values were in Piemonte (51.9),

Lombardia (51.4), Liguria (60.9), Emilia-Romagna (56.2), Toscana (47.9) and Lazio (54.1); indeed the lowest ones were in Basilicata (18.8) and Molise (23.4).

Data on homicides, meaning both murder and manslaughter, in the period 2000–2005 show progressive reduction: in fact, numbers have decreased from 13.1 to 10.3 per million inhabitants. In EU27's context, Italy was below the average (that is equal to 14 homicides per 1 million inhabitants), staying at eighth position after Austria, Luxembourg, Sweden, Germany, Malta, Slovenia and Czech Republic. In first three positions were Lithuania (118.3), Estonia (83.9) and Latvia (55.2), respectively.

Most of the homicides in Italy were perpetrated in the southern regions: the highest values were in Calabria, (34.4) and Campania (22.1), where there is a big presence of historical criminal organizations, such as 'ndrangheta' and 'camorra'; while Sardinia (14.5) and Sicily (14.0) had lower values.

With regard to "predatory activities", the 2007 Report on Criminality compiled by the Home Ministry shows that in Italy on the whole, robberies are constantly on the rise; in 2006 the southern regions registered a value of 124 per 100,000 inhabitants, while in the North–Center the value was 65. The highest value was in Campania, with 296.2 robberies every 100,000 inhabitants in 2006. In Sicily, indeed, from 2000 (98.3) the value has decreased: in 2005 it registered a rate of 77.5 robberies, though in 2006 it increased to 94.5. In the North–Center, the highest values were in Piemonte (91.2), Lazio (89.9) and Lombardia (85.6); Valle d'Aosta (16.9), Trentino Alto Adige (17.5), Molise (12.2) and Basilicata (6.7), had the lowest values in Italy.

Thefts in house and pickpocketing were more common in the North, compared to bag-snatching that was typical in the South. Analyzing data per 100,000 inhabitants, for thefts perpetrated inside homes in 2006, the highest values were in the North: Valle d'Aosta, with a rate of 369, Piemonte, with 355, Emilia-Romagna, with 331, and Lombardia, with 324; the southern regions had lower values: Sicily, with 192, Campania, with 145, Calabria, with 107, and Basilicata, with 103.

Pickpocketing in 2006 was most common in the North–Center as well, whereas the highest values were in Liguria (727), Lazio (521) and Piemonte (451); indeed, in the South, this illegal activity was not so frequent: Sicily (86), Calabria (40) and Basilicata (25) had the lowest national levels.

The situation is reversed in terms of bag-snatching: in fact, the highest value in 2006 was in Campania, with 97 per 100,000 inhabitants, followed by Sicily (57) and Lazio (50); the northern regions had lower values. It is interesting to note that, from 1998, in the Southern regions pickpocketing surpassed bag-snatching, and in 2006 it increased by 1.7 points (92 and 52).

Conclusions

Even if scientific correlations between different factors are not easily possible, concluding from a strictly cause/effect relatedness, an analysis of the above data allows to find some important relations between poverty and some types of crimes committed in the Italian context.

As noted in the discussion, the poorest Italian regions are in the South (including islands), each one with an individual incidence of relative poverty higher than 10%, while the central and northern regions have a relative poverty lower than 10%.

The southern regions on the whole have the highest rates of homicide but the lowest in theft in house; while the northern regions have highest rates of theft in house, specially the North-West. The highest rates for robbery are reported in Campania and in Sicily; followed by Piemonte, Lazio and Liguria. Pickpocketing is an activity most common in the North-West

regions, and of important value is Lazio, because of Rome: the South and the Islands do not have relevant rates (the south's highest is in Campania). The highest rates for bag-snatching are distributed especially in the South and the Center, even if Liguria has a relevant position as well.

It seems that crimes requiring strength and aggression against people (where it is not possible to avoid human contact) – such as homicide, robbery and bag-snatching – are most common in poorest zones with high levels of social exclusion/marginalization. In contrast crimes that require no violence and target private property (possessions found inside house or with an individual), where slyness and speed is necessary to avoid human contact – or sparring, as the action directly involves goods – are most common in “richer” zones, with low levels of social exclusion and marginalization.

These relations are shown in the table below (the five highest values are indicated in bold).

Policy interventions have an essential role in remedying poverty; it may help nurture the young and reduce the stresses that exacerbate social disorder and delinquency, even if the benefits from crime control are often speculative.

Reflecting deeper on child poverty, “governments have a responsibility to ensure that children in their countries have equal rights to participate in education, health care, etc., and that they should be entitled to the necessary resources in terms of nutrition and housing so that they can take full advantage of these rights. If children cannot be blamed for being poor, the reason why they are to be found in poverty is in one sense irrelevant. Whether it is unemployment, sickness, divorce, or simply indolence and/or negligence on the part of their parents, it can be argued that in no case should children be deprived of the opportunity of becoming full citizens. Yet it is for policy purposes of course important to identify the causes of child poverty” (Palme 2006: 392).

However, a civil society engagement should deal with poverty regardless of the effects on the crime rate, even if Bird concludes that “(1) poverty is relative and its definition is changeable, (2) the definition is subject to political manipulation, and (3) as a social problem, poverty persists through time, and both before and after transfers” (Bird 1999: 276).

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