

Poverty and Crime: A Thematic Review from a Sustainable Development Goals Perspective

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between poverty and crime through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), focusing on Goals 1 (No Poverty) and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Utilizing a qualitative approach grounded in thematic and document analysis, the research synthesizes insights from criminological theories—such as social disorganization, strain, and institutional anomie—with policy frameworks aimed at sustainable development. Findings indicate that structural poverty fuels criminal behavior by eroding social control, reducing access to opportunity, and weakening institutional trust. Furthermore, institutional fragility mediates this relationship by obstructing equitable justice and services. The study proposes a conceptual model integrating SDG policy with crime prevention strategies, highlighting the importance of inclusive institutions, community development, and social equity. By bridging development theory and criminology, this research offers practical and theoretical contributions toward achieving holistic development outcomes and reducing crime as part of the global SDG agenda.

Keywords

poverty; crime; sustainable development; institutional fragility; development policy

INTRODUCTION

Poverty and crime are persistent global challenges, intricately linked through complex socio-economic dynamics. Across various societies, poverty often correlates with higher incidences of crime, particularly in urban areas where unemployment, inequality, and social exclusion prevail (UNODC, 2016). Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goals 1 (No Poverty) and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), addressing this interconnection is essential for sustainable human development. The global commitment to end poverty and promote peaceful societies reflects the urgency of understanding the causes and consequences of this relationship (World Bank, 2016). Numerous studies have shown that socio-economic disparities foster environments conducive to crime, especially when institutional responses are weak or discriminatory (OECD, 2016).

The theoretical underpinnings of the poverty–crime nexus draw from classical and contemporary criminological perspectives. Social disorganization theory, for instance, emphasizes the role of structural factors such as residential instability and family disruption in weakening community controls and fostering criminal behavior (Shaw & McKay, 1942/2013, pp. 54–55).

Likewise, Merton’s strain theory suggests that poverty-induced strain between culturally approved goals and socially structured means can lead to deviant behavior (Merton, 1968, pp. 216–218). Empirically, studies across both developing and developed nations corroborate these theories, indicating that persistent poverty not only affects individuals’ material well-being but also contributes to broader social unrest and insecurity (Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Galtung, 1996).

In the Indonesian context, the National Socio-Economic Survey (Susenas) and crime reports from BPS–Statistics Indonesia indicate a parallel trend where regions with higher poverty levels report increased crime rates (BPS, 2016). These patterns resonate with global findings, suggesting a systemic issue that requires both theoretical insight and practical policy intervention.

However, despite the evident correlation, the causal mechanisms remain underexplored, particularly within the SDG policy implementation framework. While developmental goals promote inclusive institutions and poverty eradication, their integration with criminological realities remains inconsistent across global and local strategies (UNDP, 2016).

Existing literature tends to address poverty and crime either from a sociological or an economic standpoint, but rarely integrates the two within the SDG framework. Furthermore, many studies focus on micro-level or isolated community analyses, neglecting the macro-level institutional and policy dynamics that can exacerbate or mitigate the poverty–crime link (Clear, 2007, pp. 94–96). This gap highlights the need for a multidisciplinary approach that bridges criminology, development policy, and institutional theory. Addressing this gap is not only academically relevant but also crucial for informing policies that seek to fulfill the SDGs holistically.

This study therefore aims to explore the relationship between poverty and crime through the lens of the SDGs, focusing on the following research questions: (1) How does structural poverty influence criminal behavior in both developing and developed contexts? (2) What role do institutional weaknesses play in mediating the poverty–crime relationship? (3) How can the SDG framework be operationalized to mitigate the effects of poverty-induced crime? By addressing these questions, the study seeks to contribute a conceptual synthesis that informs sustainable crime prevention strategies aligned with global development goals.

Literature Review

The relationship between poverty and crime has long intrigued scholars across multiple disciplines, including sociology, criminology, and development studies. Foundational theories such as Becker's economic theory of crime argue that individuals engage in criminal activity when the expected benefits outweigh the costs, particularly under conditions of economic deprivation (Becker, 1968).

Complementary sociological frameworks, including strain theory and social disorganization theory, emphasize structural disadvantages—like inequality, social exclusion, and weak community institutions—as central catalysts for criminal behavior (Merton, 1968, pp. 210–215; Shaw & McKay, 1942/2013, pp. 49–52). These theoretical foundations have been supported by numerous empirical studies that demonstrate how poverty contributes to higher crime rates through mechanisms such as unemployment, lack of education, and residential instability (Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Bonger, 1969, pp. 62–63).

Contemporary studies expand this perspective by integrating development policy frameworks. Scholars have noted that poverty not only fosters criminal behavior but also impedes institutional capacity, creating a vicious cycle of underdevelopment and insecurity (World Bank, 2016). In particular, weak rule of law, inadequate access to justice, and corruption exacerbate poverty's impact on crime rates (UNDP, 2016).

Recent literature has also begun to link these dynamics with the SDGs, particularly emphasizing how failure to achieve Goals 1 and 16 compromises broader development progress (OECD, 2016). However, few studies offer a comprehensive synthesis that bridges criminological theory with the SDG policy agenda, thereby limiting our ability to formulate holistic interventions. This study addresses this gap by situating its analysis at the intersection of structural criminology and sustainable development, thereby contributing a novel lens through which to interpret the poverty–crime nexus.

Theoretical Framework

A foundational theory underpinning the relationship between poverty and crime is Social Disorganization Theory, originally developed by Shaw and McKay. This theory posits that crime is more likely to occur in communities characterized by poverty, residential mobility, and ethnic heterogeneity, which disrupt social cohesion and informal social control (Shaw & McKay, 1942/2013, pp. 46–49).

Communities facing economic hardship often experience the erosion of institutions such as schools, families, and religious organizations, reducing the capacity to regulate behavior through informal social norms (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993, pp. 35–38). In such environments, youth are more likely to engage in criminal activity due to lack of supervision and role models, reinforcing a cycle of social disorder and violence.

Strain Theory, proposed by Robert Merton, complements this view by asserting that societal structures can pressure individuals to commit crime when they are unable to achieve culturally defined goals through legitimate means (Merton, 1968, pp. 215–218). Poverty induces a structural strain that limits access to economic opportunities, making illegitimate avenues more appealing.

Particularly in societies with strong emphasis on material success, this mismatch between aspirations and means intensifies feelings of frustration, marginalization, and deviance. Scholars have noted that this strain can result in various adaptations, including innovation through criminal behavior (Agnew, 1992). The theory is especially pertinent in contexts where social mobility is restricted, and formal institutions fail to provide equitable opportunities for advancement.

From a development perspective, Institutional Anomie Theory, introduced by Messner and Rosenfeld, explains how institutional imbalance—particularly the dominance of economic goals over social institutions—creates an anomic environment conducive to crime (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994, pp. 72–76). In societies where economic success overshadows communal values and institutional integrity, poverty becomes both a symptom and a driver of systemic dysfunction.

As economic pressures mount and social support mechanisms weaken, individuals are increasingly exposed to the temptation of criminal activity. This theory aligns with SDG Goal 16, which emphasizes the importance of strong institutions, justice, and inclusive societies as prerequisites for development (UNDP, 2016).

Another significant contribution comes from Relative Deprivation Theory, which argues that crime emerges not from absolute poverty but from perceived inequalities within a society (Runciman, 1966, pp. 23–25). When individuals compare themselves unfavorably to others in their community or society, feelings of injustice and resentment can escalate into criminal behavior.

This perception of inequality is especially damaging in urban environments, where contrasts between wealth and deprivation are stark. Relative deprivation can be exacerbated by globalization and mass media, which constantly expose marginalized populations to unattainable lifestyles, fostering psychological strain and antisocial behavior (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, pp. 54–57).

Collectively, these theories form the conceptual bedrock of this study. By integrating social disorganization, strain, institutional anomie, and relative deprivation frameworks, this research constructs a multidimensional model of how poverty interacts with crime. The inclusion of SDG principles further enriches the analysis, offering a normative policy orientation that traditional criminological models often lack. This theoretical integration enables a more nuanced exploration of how structural inequalities and institutional weaknesses drive criminal behavior, while also suggesting pathways for sustainable and inclusive policy interventions.

Previous Research

In a seminal study, Sampson and Wilson (1995) examined the enduring effects of racial segregation and economic disadvantage on urban crime in the United States. Their findings supported the social disorganization theory by showing that structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods lacked the social cohesion necessary to deter crime. This research highlighted the role of concentrated poverty and institutional failure in perpetuating cycles of violence, especially among youth populations in marginalized communities.

Clear (2007, pp. 88–90) further contributed by exploring the consequences of mass incarceration in impoverished neighborhoods. He demonstrated how punitive criminal justice policies not only failed to address the root causes of crime but also intensified poverty by removing economic contributors from households and reducing community-level trust. His work emphasized the need for systemic reform in law enforcement strategies and underscored the interdependence between economic conditions and public safety.

In Indonesia, Arsyad and Nugroho (2010) investigated regional disparities in poverty and their correlation with criminal activity. Using data from BPS–Statistics Indonesia, they found a significant association between poverty levels and property crime rates in several provinces, supporting the claim that economic distress plays a critical role in shaping criminal behavior. Their research offered localized insights that paralleled international findings, confirming the universality of the poverty–crime link.

A study by Wilkinson and Pickett (2009, pp. 51–53) introduced the concept of inequality as a more relevant predictor of social problems, including crime, than absolute poverty. Drawing on data from multiple countries, they showed that societies with higher income inequality experienced more frequent and violent crimes, a phenomenon they attributed to increased social tensions and reduced mutual trust. This perspective emphasized relative deprivation as a driver of criminal behavior and informed the policy discourse around redistributive justice.

Jaitman (2015), working under the Inter-American Development Bank, provided a policy-focused analysis of crime costs in Latin America, revealing how economic inequality and underinvestment in social infrastructure exacerbated criminal activity. Her work bridged academic theory and development practice, aligning with SDG principles by advocating for integrated policy frameworks to reduce crime through social development.

Lastly, UNODC (2016) released a comprehensive report linking global crime trends with socio-economic indicators. It highlighted that poverty and unemployment remained key risk factors for involvement in crime, especially among youth. The report also stressed the importance of SDG-aligned criminal justice systems that promote fairness, inclusion, and prevention over punishment.

Despite this extensive literature, a significant research gap remains in integrating criminological theory with sustainable development frameworks. Most existing studies treat poverty and crime either as socio-economic or criminological issues, without exploring their interrelation within the SDG context. There is a need for a more holistic analysis that links structural poverty, institutional integrity, and development policy. This study addresses that gap by offering an integrative framework that connects theoretical insights with policy imperatives, particularly focusing on how Goals 1 and 16 of the SDGs can be operationalized to mitigate crime.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, conceptual research approach, relying on textual data to explore the nexus between poverty and crime from a Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) perspective. The research prioritizes in-depth understanding over numerical generalizations, consistent with Creswell's (2013, pp. 27–28) assertion that qualitative inquiry is ideal for exploring complex social phenomena. By interpreting narrative content, theories, and policy documents, this approach captures the multifaceted dimensions of the poverty–crime relationship and allows a critical evaluation of development strategies under the SDG framework.

The primary data sources for this research include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, official reports, and governmental publications. These sources are selected based on their credibility, relevance to the research questions, and alignment with international development and criminological frameworks (Yin, 2011, pp. 88–89). Key data repositories include the United Nations, World Bank, BPS–Statistics Indonesia, and academic databases such as JSTOR and ProQuest. Utilizing such sources ensures the inclusion of both global and Indonesian perspectives, thus offering a comprehensive analytical scope.

Data collection was conducted through structured document analysis. This method involves a systematic review of literature to identify recurring themes, theoretical models, and empirical trends related to poverty and crime (Bowen, 2009). Each document was evaluated for its theoretical contribution, methodological rigor, and contextual relevance. The inclusion criteria emphasized publications no later than 2016, ensuring that the analysis reflects both continuity and change in the discourse over time. Special attention was given to documents addressing SDG implementation challenges and localized studies of poverty and crime.

Data analysis was executed through thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method allowed for the identification of patterns across multiple texts, enabling the development of themes such as institutional failure, economic inequality, and social exclusion. Thematic analysis is particularly suited for interdisciplinary studies, as it facilitates synthesis across various academic domains. Coding was conducted manually, and themes were iteratively refined to maintain coherence with the research questions and theoretical framework. This analytical technique was essential in aligning abstract theories with concrete policy discussions.

The process of drawing conclusions was guided by interpretive synthesis, which involves integrating insights from diverse sources into a coherent conceptual framework (Patton, 2002, pp. 433–435). This synthesis did not aim to generalize findings statistically but rather to build theoretical clarity and propose practical implications. Conclusions were validated by cross-referencing themes against the SDG goals and criminological theories, ensuring consistency and relevance. Ultimately, this methodology supports the development of a nuanced understanding of how poverty contributes to crime, and how development-oriented policies can address this nexus effectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The relationship between poverty and crime is embedded within a broader structural context characterized by economic inequality, institutional fragility, and socio-political exclusion. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks elaborated earlier—such as social disorganization, strain, and institutional anomie—this study underscores the need to interpret crime not merely as individual deviance but as a response to systemic failure (Shaw & McKay, 1942/2013, pp. 46–49; Merton, 1968, pp. 210–215). Prior research has shown that environments with persistent poverty are more likely to witness a breakdown in informal social controls, thereby increasing the likelihood of criminal behavior (Sampson & Wilson, 1995). When state institutions are perceived as unresponsive or biased, trust diminishes, and individuals may turn to illegal means as both survival and protest.

This research contributes to the field by integrating criminological theory with the normative objectives of the SDGs, particularly Goals 1 and 16. Unlike studies that treat poverty and crime as isolated variables, this work constructs a thematic dialogue between theory, policy, and empirical insight. By using qualitative thematic analysis, new patterns emerge, such as how informal economic networks in impoverished areas may substitute for formal institutions, creating alternate forms of governance that can either deter or encourage crime (UNDP, 2016). This synthesis not only bridges the academic gap but also reinforces the SDG agenda's multidimensional nature, highlighting that crime prevention must be grounded in economic justice and institutional reform.

1. Structural Poverty as a Catalyst for Crime

This section addresses how structural poverty influences criminal behavior in both developing and developed contexts. Poverty, when persistent and deeply rooted in systemic inequities, creates environments where criminal activities are both a means of survival and a response to perceived injustice (Becker, 1968; Agnew, 1992). In urban slums and underdeveloped rural areas alike, lack of access to education, healthcare, and stable employment leaves many individuals with limited legitimate options. Studies from Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia illustrate that in contexts of entrenched poverty, crime often serves as an adaptive mechanism (Jaitman, 2015; Arsyad & Nugroho, 2010).

Social disorganization theory further explains how economically deprived neighborhoods suffer from weakened social bonds and deteriorating institutions, which reduce communal oversight and increase opportunities for deviant behavior (Shaw & McKay, 1942/2013, pp. 49–52). In such contexts, young people are particularly vulnerable, often recruited into criminal networks or gangs that offer financial incentives and social status absent in legal employment sectors. The UNODC (2016) report corroborates this trend, indicating that crime is concentrated in areas with poor infrastructure, overcrowding, and weak public services.

Furthermore, relative deprivation amplifies criminal tendencies, especially in densely populated urban settings where the contrast between affluence and destitution is stark (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, pp. 54–56). Media exposure and consumer culture elevate expectations without providing the means to achieve them, generating frustration that can manifest in theft, robbery, or drug trafficking. These patterns hold across multiple geographies, suggesting that poverty's impact on crime is not a cultural aberration but a structural phenomenon linked to unequal access to economic and social capital.

The impact is compounded in developing countries like Indonesia, where regional inequalities persist despite national economic growth. Data from BPS–Statistics Indonesia (2016) shows that regions with higher poverty rates tend to report elevated crime levels, especially property and petty crimes. The findings suggest that alleviating poverty through targeted social investments, infrastructure development, and inclusive education policies can serve as long-term crime prevention strategies.

Moreover, the SDG framework reinforces the view that sustainable poverty reduction is essential for peace and security. Goal 1 (No Poverty) and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) intersect directly in this context, emphasizing the importance of tackling both the symptoms and structural causes of crime. This analysis aligns with institutional anomie theory, which posits that when economic goals dominate social norms and institutions are weak, criminal alternatives become normalized (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994, pp. 74–77).

2. Institutional Fragility and the Enforcement Gap

This section addresses the second research question by exploring how institutional weaknesses mediate the relationship between poverty and crime. In both high- and low-income nations, weak institutions fail to deliver equitable justice, compounding the grievances of marginalized populations and undermining public trust (Clear, 2007, pp. 90–92). Corruption, biased law enforcement, and inaccessible legal systems disproportionately affect the poor, who are more likely to be both victims and perpetrators of crime due to systemic exclusion (World Bank, 2016).

Institutional fragility manifests in several ways—delays in judicial proceedings, discriminatory policing, and lack of legal aid. Such failures erode legitimacy and can lead individuals to seek alternative justice through vigilantism or organized crime. Sampson and Wilson (1995) noted that when institutions are perceived as illegitimate, informal networks often assume authority, but these are not always benign. In impoverished areas, informal actors may fill institutional voids by enforcing order through coercion and violence, thereby creating cycles of crime that are difficult to dismantle.

Indonesia's justice system, while improving, continues to face challenges in accessibility and consistency, particularly in rural and impoverished regions (Arsyad & Nugroho, 2010). Corruption and legal costs discourage the poor from seeking justice, effectively denying them protection and perpetuating

inequality. Institutional failure also impairs the capacity to implement SDG-aligned policies, creating an enforcement gap between international goals and local realities (UNDP, 2016).

This enforcement gap is not merely a matter of capacity but also of political will and societal values. Where institutional priorities skew towards elite interests, poverty-alleviation programs and legal protections for the marginalized receive less attention. Institutional anomie theory helps explain this, as it attributes such imbalances to societies where economic objectives override social cohesion and fairness (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994, pp. 72–74). Without institutional integrity, poverty reduction strategies risk being undermined by rent-seeking behavior and misallocation of resources.

Crucially, the SDGs call for institutions that are inclusive, accountable, and just. Goal 16's emphasis on building effective and transparent institutions is not ancillary but foundational to achieving broader development aims. Strong institutions mediate social tensions, enforce equitable laws, and deliver services that uplift vulnerable populations, thereby reducing the socio-structural incentives for crime. This research thus affirms that institutional reform is not a complementary but a necessary condition for breaking the poverty–crime cycle.

3. Operationalizing the SDGs to Mitigate Crime

This section addresses the third research question by examining how the Sustainable Development Goals can be operationalized to reduce poverty-induced crime. While the SDGs provide a normative framework for tackling global challenges, their effective implementation requires localized, intersectoral strategies that integrate economic, social, and legal dimensions (UNDP, 2016). Current development efforts often treat crime prevention and poverty alleviation as separate policy domains, limiting their impact and efficiency.

One way to bridge this divide is through integrated development programs that simultaneously improve economic opportunities and strengthen social institutions. Conditional cash transfer programs, for example, have shown success in Latin America in reducing both poverty and crime by incentivizing school attendance and healthcare utilization (Jaitman, 2015). Such initiatives align with Goal 1 and also fulfill the preventive aims of Goal 16 by fostering social inclusion.

Another approach involves community-based policing and participatory justice mechanisms that empower local populations to co-manage public safety. These models, when coupled with educational and vocational training, have proven effective in rebuilding trust between citizens and law enforcement, especially in low-income areas (Clear, 2007, pp. 88–90). This supports the SDG principle of inclusive governance and resonates with social disorganization theory's emphasis on communal cohesion as a deterrent to crime.

Furthermore, spatial justice must become a central planning principle. Urban policy should prioritize infrastructure, housing, and public services in marginalized areas, reducing spatial inequality that fuels crime (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, pp. 56–58). In Indonesia, programs that focus on rural development, such as the National Program for Community Empowerment, have shown that economic participation and local leadership can significantly decrease both poverty and local crime (BPS, 2016).

Ultimately, operationalizing the SDGs to mitigate crime requires aligning macro-level goals with micro-level realities. This includes disaggregating data to target vulnerable groups, ensuring participatory governance, and fostering policy coherence across ministries. It also demands a shift from punitive criminal justice approaches to preventative, developmental models rooted in equity and opportunity. By synthesizing development theory and criminological insight, this study proposes a framework for embedding crime prevention within sustainable development policy, thereby addressing root causes rather than symptoms.

This study has explored the multifaceted relationship between poverty and crime within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, addressing three core research questions. First, it demonstrated that structural poverty contributes directly to criminal behavior by limiting access to economic and social resources. Drawing from social disorganization and strain theories, the findings confirm that impoverished environments often lack the informal social controls and opportunities needed to prevent crime. Second, the analysis highlighted how institutional weaknesses exacerbate the poverty–crime nexus. In both developing and developed contexts, fragile institutions fail to deliver justice and services equitably, thereby undermining public trust and encouraging alternative, often illicit, systems of governance. Lastly, the study offered a practical framework for operationalizing SDG Goals 1 and 16 to mitigate crime, emphasizing integrated development strategies that promote social equity, participatory governance, and community resilience.

The contribution of this study lies in its synthesis of criminological theory with sustainable development policy. By positioning institutional integrity and economic justice as mutually reinforcing pillars, it introduces a new integrative framework that enhances both conceptual clarity and policy relevance. Theoretically, this research advances Institutional Anomie Theory and Relative Deprivation Theory by embedding them within the SDG paradigm. Practically, it provides actionable insights for policymakers seeking to address crime through development planning, community empowerment, and institutional reform. The implications are clear: achieving the SDGs requires not only economic investment but also structural transformation that addresses the root causes of both poverty and crime.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the poverty–crime nexus through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals, synthesizing criminological theory and development policy to generate a comprehensive understanding of their interdependence. The key findings reveal that structural poverty fosters conditions conducive to crime by eroding social controls and limiting legitimate opportunities, especially in marginalized communities.

Institutional fragility further exacerbates these conditions, impeding access to justice and public services while undermining societal trust. The research also confirms that sustainable development strategies—when aligned with inclusive governance, social equity, and preventive justice—can effectively mitigate crime.

By integrating theories of social disorganization, strain, institutional anomie, and relative deprivation into the SDG discourse, this study affirms the necessity of a multidimensional approach to crime prevention. It confirms that poverty reduction and institutional reform are not separate policy arenas but interdependent pathways toward sustainable peace and justice. The research contributes to both academic theory and applied policy by offering a conceptual model that bridges development goals with criminological insight.

Based on these conclusions, this study recommends a shift from punitive to preventive frameworks, grounded in economic justice and community resilience. Policymakers must prioritize inclusive institutions, equitable development programs, and participatory governance as strategies for sustainable crime reduction. Future research should build on this foundation by exploring empirical case studies, disaggregated by region, age, and gender, to further refine and localize effective interventions.

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