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THE FUNCTIONAL INTERDEPENDENCE OF CRIME AND COMMUNITY SOCIAL STRUCTURE*

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Sociological studies of crime and change in population size, based upon quantitative police statistics, have focused almost exclusively on urban areas. The direct relationship between population growth and the incidence of crime found in these studies has been generalized, by assumption only, to small rural cities experiencing population decline. The present analysis of a declining rural city, based upon quantitative and *socio-historical* data, describes how the economic, political, formal control, and value systems of a community can become functionally dependent upon a locally organized liquor-vice complex. The functional dependence of the social structure of the community on the criminal complex contributes to the explanation of a situation wherein a positive relationship between population growth and the incidence of crime is followed by a negative relationship between population decline and the incidence of crime.

Studies of the general relationship between changes in population size and crime rates have traditionally focused upon population *increase* in the large urban setting over a brief period of time. The general consensus of such studies is that as population increases, the incidence of crime also increases.¹ The lack of studies of population *decline* and the incidence of crime, with only the general conclusions of Shaw and McKay,² Reckless,³ and Lander⁴ having been reported, represents a gap in the sociological and criminological literature. Current literature deals with the relationship only in terms of assumptions based upon the finding of a positive relationship between population *increase* and crime rates in large urban areas. As stated by Tappan, the "popular conception" is that there is

a tendency for crime rates to increase *and decrease* positively with population size.⁵

The present investigation, which grew out of a more comprehensive analysis of the impact of economic failure on community social structure,⁶ attempts to shed some light upon the relationship between population *decline* and the incidence of crime in the small city setting, employing both socio-historical and quantitative police data.

THE COMMUNITY STUDIED

"Ebbtown" is a small city in the midst of an economically depressed area of the United States. Its location on a large navigable waterway and at the junction of several railroads exposed it to a large transient population throughout its history. During its period of population growth from 242 in 1850 to 15,505 in 1924, Ebbtown, like many frontier river and rail communities, experienced considerable lawlessness. After reaching a population peak in 1924, Ebbtown underwent a decline in total population of 39 per cent and a decline in the 15 through 44 age segment of 68 per cent

* Revision of a paper read at the Annual Meetings of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Chicago, Ill., August, 1965.

¹ Watts, *The Influence of Population Density on Crime*, 26 AM. STAT. ASSOC. J. 11 (1931); RECKLESS, CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR 51 (1940); TAFT, CRIMINOLOGY 207 (3d ed. 1942); RECKLESS, THE CRIME PROBLEM 88 (1950); TAPPAN, CRIME, JUSTICE AND CORRECTION 42 (1960); Cressey, *Crime*, in MERTON & NISBET (eds.), CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL PROBLEMS 50 (1961).

² SHAW & MCKAY, JUVENILE DELINQUENCY IN URBAN AREAS (1942).

³ RECKLESS, THE CRIME PROBLEM 88 (1950).

⁴ Lander, *The Correlation Technique—Analysis of Differential Delinquency Rates*, in WOLFGANG, SAVITZ, & JOHNSTON (eds.), THE SOCIOLOGY OF CRIME AND DELINQUENCY 110 (1962).

⁵ TAPPAN, CRIME, JUSTICE AND CORRECTION 42 (1960).

⁶ The study of which the present endeavor represents only one aspect was directed by Herman R. Lantz and funded by the Center for the Study of Liberty in America, Harvard University, and by the Office of Research & Projects, Southern Illinois University.

by 1960. In the face of the population decline, however, a high incidence of crime persisted in the community to the extent that in 1952 Ebbtown's reputation as a vice center rivaled that of nearly a hundred years earlier.

GUIDING ORIENTATION AND HYPOTHESES

The familiarity with Ebbtown gained in the course of the larger study suggested that the widely accepted conclusion that crime rates increase and decrease positively with population size would not hold for this community. Therefore, an alternative guiding orientation was constructed. This orientation proposed that in river and rail communities of the type represented by Ebbtown with a large transient population, crime may not be sensitive to a decline of the resident population, although it may be affected by the operation of other socio-cultural variables which developed during the community's growth and persisted throughout the community's decline. The present study attempted to identify and analyze the operation of such variables which intervened between the population variable, treated as an independent variable, and the crime variable, treated as a dependent variable.

Upon the basis of the guiding orientation, the following working hypothesis was derived:

A high incidence of crime in a community characterized by a transient population is to a significant extent a function of supporting intervening socio-cultural variables; as such, a high incidence of crime can persist despite a decline in the resident population of the community, as long as the intervening socio-cultural variables persist.

The working hypothesis was broken down into four sub-hypotheses:

1. The period of population growth will be characterized by a positive relationship between the population size and the incidence of crime.
2. During the period of population growth intervening socio-cultural variables will emerge which support a high incidence of crime.
3. During the period of population decline there will be a negative relationship between the population size and the incidence of crime.
4. During the period of population decline socio-cultural variables which were conducive to

the initial development of a high incidence of crime will persist.

DESIGN AND DATA

A socio-historical analysis of Ebbtown during the period of population growth concentrated on sub-hypotheses 1 and 2. A socio-historical and quantitative analysis of Ebbtown's period of population decline then focused on sub-hypotheses 3 and 4.

For the period of population growth, city council minutes, mayoral addresses, reports of local and state officials, and newspaper articles and editorials were used as indicators of the incidence of crime and of the development of intervening socio-cultural variables. For the period of population decline, for which arrest data were available, the incidence of crime was measured by a Gross Crime Index. This index consisted of the number of males and females arrested in Ebbtown for violation of local, state, and federal laws, with the exception of traffic arrests and arrests of juveniles for misdemeanors.⁷ The Gross Crime Index was then refined in terms of specific offense categories: murder, attempted murder, burglary, robbery, larceny, vice (consisting of arrests for prostitution, street walking, operating a house of ill fame, frequenting a house of ill fame, gambling, and the possession of gaming implements), and alcohol-based offenses (consisting of arrests for drunkenness, drunk and disorderly, disorderly conduct, vagrancy, and the violation of local, state, and federal liquor laws).

The population variable was measured by a Gross Population Index and by a Standardized Population Index. The latter index consisted of males and females between the ages of 15 and 44, determined by decennial and calculated intercensal figures.⁸

⁷ Juvenile offenders were deleted from the investigation whenever possible for the reason that the definition of the "juvenile offender" was significantly modified between 1850 and 1960, the time period covered by the investigation. Traffic arrests were deleted upon the basis of their not constituting "crime" in the sense employed by the investigator.

⁸ The use of the 15 through 44 age-segment prevented the total deletion of juvenile offenders from the arrest indices. However, in all cases where the arrestee was remanded to the custody of juvenile authorities for the commission of a misdemeanor or released to the custody of his parents, the arrest was not counted in the arrest indices. In all other cases, the arrest was included. This procedure was necessary since the arrest records contained no designation of the age of the arrestee until recent years.

FINDINGS

Sub-hypothesis 1: The socio-historical data for the period of population growth supported the first sub-hypothesis; namely, that in a community with a large transient population, the period of growth will be characterized by a positive relationship between the population and crime variables.

In the 1850's Ebbtown was characterized by a large and lawless transient population. The presence of over 2,000 Union troops in the 1860's provided further impetus for the development of prostitution and gambling. In the 1870's general lawlessness and especially prostitution and gambling continued to mount and Ebbtown gained a reputation as a "wide-open town."

The appearance in the city council minutes of sporadic reports of the annual number of arrests reflected an upward trend from 1881 to 1909. An analysis of the arrest figures indicated that whereas crimes against the person and property crimes tended to follow a widely fluctuating pattern, prostitution and gambling underwent a comparatively steady increase. A report on the crime situation in Ebbtown by a state official stated that for 1915 Ebbtown had the highest per capita arrest rate of any city in the state, with the number of arrestees equaling 15 percent of the population of the community. Of this percentage, however, over one-fourth consisted of arrests of non-residents or transients.

The final years of Ebbtown's period of population growth witnessed wholly unsuccessful local reform movements to suppress gambling, an effort by local, state, and federal authorities to suppress prostitution which met with only temporary success, and an emerging complex of criminal activities centered around bootlegging, Prohibition having gone into effect in 1919.

Sub-hypothesis 2: The socio-historical investigation of the second sub-hypothesis indicated that at least four intervening socio-cultural variables, interwoven into the social structure of the community and conducive to the development of locally organized criminal activity, were operative during the period of population growth. Such variables were intervening in the sense that they emerged out of the efforts of the population to meet recurrent community problems, predominantly of an economic nature, and in turn played a role in the emergence of crime.

The first intervening socio-cultural variable

consisted of the community's value system. The data suggested that the presence of the large transient population provided the matrix for the emergence of a frontier value system which condoned lawlessness, particularly a liquor-vice complex. The extent and influence of this value system were manifested in the ineffectiveness of reform movements and by the apathetic response of the resident population to law enforcement in general.

The second socio-cultural variable was the community's economic structure. The economic structure of Ebbtown, including both its municipal and commercial aspects, was characterized by instability, due mainly to the community's repeated failure to attract industry and hence attain an industrial economy. In light of this deficiency, considerable support was derived from revenue furnished by the liquor-vice complex in the form of liquor license fees and fines. Liquor license fees constituted the community's chief source of municipal revenue in a majority of the years of the growth period, and in the other years was second only to corporation tax revenue. Revenue from fines, especially for gambling, was consistently among the city's top five revenue sources and was derived through a practice referred to by a local editor as "rotation fining".⁹ The profusion of loosely regulated bars and taverns in Ebbtown, in addition to contributing to municipal revenue and housing a substantial portion of the gambling and prostitution, attracted customers to the community whose spending contributed to the community's commercial economic structure. The failure of the community to attain an industrial economy and its compensating dependence upon the liquor-vice complex created a need met by the persistence of a frontier value system in Ebbtown, long after it had subsided in other frontier river and rail communities. From condoning lawlessness in general, the value system developed into a more subtle normative orientation in terms of which the liquor-vice complex was perceived as an integral

⁹ The practice of "rotation fining" in Ebbtown consisted of a procedure under which fines were imposed on houses of prostitution and especially on gambling establishments on a rotating basis. This procedure amounted to a taxation system which assured a steady source of municipal revenue while at the same time permitting the prostitution and gambling activities to continue with only periodic disruption. The low "visibility" of these types of criminal activity made such a practice possible inasmuch as the attention of state and federal authorities were not unduly attracted to Ebbtown by such activities.

and necessary part of the community's social structure and functioning.

The third intervening variable identified was the community's political structure. Throughout the period of population growth, a reluctance on the part of local political officials to enforce the laws was manifest. Such reluctance was to be expected in view of the prevailing value system and the position occupied by the city government in the social structure and functioning of Ebbtown. Responsible for maintaining the financial integrity of the municipality, the incumbents of the political structure found themselves dependent upon revenue from liquor license fees and fines. Charged with the responsibility for law enforcement, they found that their chief sources of revenue were also the bases of operation for gambling and prostitution, their main law enforcement problems. Faced with this dilemma, the political structure of Ebbtown functioned in an adaptive manner which was conducive to the development of a liquor-vice complex.

The fourth intervening socio-cultural variable identified was Ebbtown's formal control structure. The existence of widespread lawlessness, its initial acceptance, and its subsequent endowment with a utilitarian aura rendered law enforcement largely ineffective. The impotent position occupied by the police force in Ebbtown's social structure was indicated by an institutionalized practice of the city council; namely, when faced with a financial crisis, the reduction of the police force was the initial economy measure. In addition, police salaries were far below that of other communities of comparable size in the state, and frequently were as much as four months in arrears.

Sub-hypothesis 3: The statistical testing of the relationship between the Standardized Population Index and the Gross Crime Index for the 35 years of Ebbtown's population decline, the data for which are shown in Table I, yielded a statistically significant Spearman coefficient of $-.42$.¹⁰ Sub-hypothesis 3 which predicted such a negative relationship was therefore supported. (See Figure 1.) It must be pointed out, however, that although arrest data specifying non-residency (transiency)

¹⁰ An alpha of .05 was employed only as a heuristic standard: no statistical inference is implied. The probability of the relationship between the Standardized Population Index and the Gross Crime Index, stated as a one-tailed hypothesis at 33 degrees of freedom, was: $p < .01$. The same relationship measured by Kendall's Tau yielded a Tau of $-.25$, also significant at an alpha of .01.

TABLE I
INDEX OF STANDARDIZED POPULATION, INDEX OF GROSS CRIME, AND CRIME RATE FOR PERIOD OF POPULATION DECLINE (1926-1960)

Year	Standardized Population	Gross Crime	Crime Rate
1926	8720	1572	180.28
1927	8255	1186	143.67
1928	7790	916	117.59
1929	7325	683	93.24
1930	6863	627	91.36
1931	6882	1081	157.08
1932	6901	1011	146.50
1933	6920	1217	175.87
1934	6939	1173	169.04
1935	6958	1332	191.43
1936	6977	1341	192.20
1937	6996	1372	196.11
1938	7015	1670	238.06
1939	7034	1522	216.38
1940	7055	1450	205.53
1941	6905	1244	180.16
1942	6755	1080	159.88
1943	6605	861	130.36
1944	6455	1166	180.64
1945	6305	1460	231.56
1946	6155	2365	384.24
1947	6005	1936	322.40
1948	5855	1860	317.68
1949	5705	1829	320.60
1950	5561	1700	305.70
1951	5285	2064	390.54
1952	5009	2703	539.63
1953	4733	2684	567.08
1954	4457	2575	577.74
1955	4181	1688	403.73
1956	3905	1585	405.89
1957	3629	1216	335.08
1958	3353	1251	373.10
1959	3077	1348	438.09
1960	2807	1388	494.48

existed for only 14 non-consecutive years of the 35 year period of decline, the correlation of these data with the total number of arrests yielded a statistically significant Spearman coefficient of $+.80$. Thus, although the resident population of Ebbtown declined substantially, the continued presence of a large transient population appeared to play a major role in keeping the incidence of arrests high.

The breakdown of the Gross Crime Index into the selected offense categories shown in Table II revealed the following. First, whereas arrests for

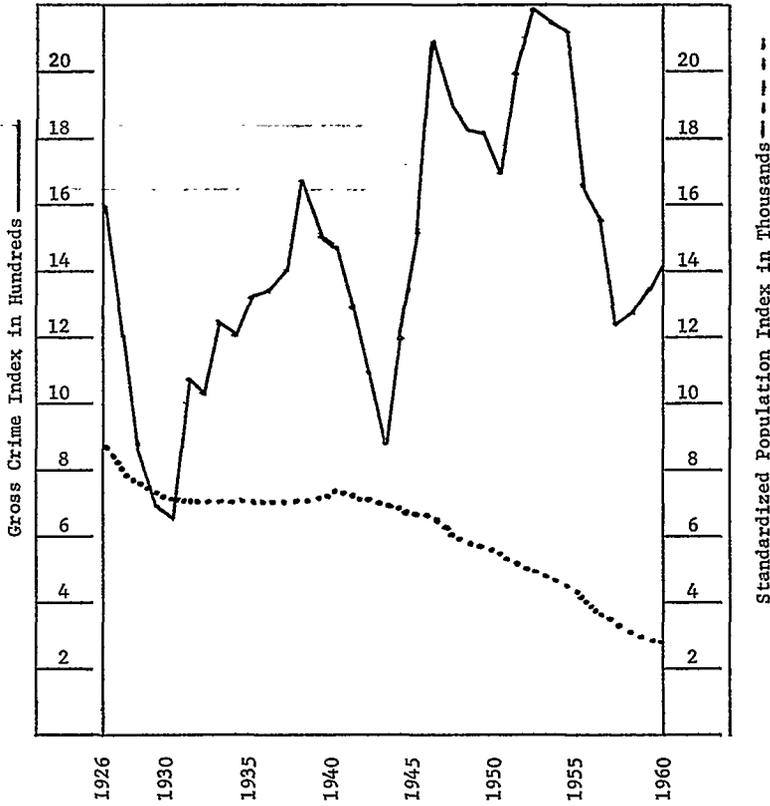


FIGURE 1

GRAPH OF INDICES OF STANDARDIZED POPULATION AND GROSS CRIME FOR PERIOD OF POPULATION DECLINE (1926-1960).

robbery, murder, and attempted murder were positively related to the population decline, larceny and burglary were negatively related. Only in the case of the positive relationships of murder, $+ .52$, and attempted murder, $+ .46$, with the population decline, however, were statistically significant Spearman coefficients obtained. Second, the two offenses which constituted the bulk of the crime in Ebbtown during the decline period, which together constituted the liquor-vice complex, were vice and alcohol-related offenses averaging 7 percent and 62 percent of the Gross Crime Index, respectively, for each year of the period.

Although arrests for vice offenses increased from 1926 to 1945, and constituted 31 percent of the total arrests in 1945, they declined to such an extent in the 1948-1960 period as to yield a statistically significant Spearman coefficient of $+ .33$, indicating that vice tended to decline with population. The validity of this statistical finding, however, was challenged by the socio-historical

data which suggested that although *arrests* for vice declined sharply from 1948 to 1960, the *incidence* of vice in the community persisted to a substantial degree. Assuming that the local and out-of-town newspapers, the sources of the socio-historical data, were less implicated in the liquor-vice complex than was the Ebbtown police department, the source of the arrest data, the socio-historical reflection of the actual incidence of vice may have been more valid. In contrast to the contradictory findings in regard to vice, the socio-historical data supported the statistically significant Spearman coefficient of $- .39$ which resulted from the correlation of the Standardized Population Index with the index of alcohol-related offenses.

Sub-hypothesis 4: The socio-historical data supported sub-hypothesis 4 by indicating that the four variables identified as having been conducive to a high incidence of crime during Ebbtown's growth period persisted throughout the period of decline. The value system, characterized by the

TABLE II
 PERCENTAGE CONTRIBUTIONS OF SELECTED OFFENSES TO GROSS CRIME INDEX FOR PERIOD OF
 POPULATION DECLINE (1926-1960)*

Year	Specific Felony Crimes								
	Gross Crime Index	Other Crime	Robbery	Burglary	Larceny	Murder	Att. Murder	Vice Index	Alcohol Index
1926	100%	19%	.3%	.7%	.0%	.0%	.9%	6.0%	70%
1927	"	25	.8	.5	.8	.4	.4	.3	72
1928	"	21	.1	1.0	2.0	.3	.0	6.0	69
1929	"	22	1.0	1.0	2.0	.1	.3	8.0	65
1930	"	17	.3	1.0	2.0	.1	.0	1.0	78
1931	"	50	.7	1.0	2.0	.4	.1	3.0	43
1932	"	50	.5	.4	.7	.1	.0	1.0	47
1933	"	49	.4	1.0	4.0	.3	.2	.6	45
1934	"	27	1.0	1.0	4.0	.6	.6	2.0	64
1935	"	35	.2	1.0	3.0	.6	.4	10.0	49
1936	"	38	.4	.7	4.0	.3	.1	9.0	47
1937	"	37	.1	.5	3.0	.4	.1	9.0	50
1938	"	33	.3	.1	3.0	.2	.1	4.0	59
1939	"	35	.1	.5	2.0	.3	.1	8.0	54
1940	"	32	.8	.7	5.0	.1	.5	14.0	47
1941	"	29	.2	.7	6.0	.1	.5	16.0	47
1942	"	32	.4	.5	2.0	.2	.5	12.0	53
1943	"	19	1.0	1.0	1.0	.0	.0	16.0	60
1944	"	16	.3	.8	1.0	.1	.0	20.0	63
1945	"	4	.3	.5	1.0	.1	.1	31.0	62
1946	"	4	.1	.2	.5	.0	.0	19.0	76
1947	"	3	.1	.1	.5	.0	.0	20.0	76
1948	"	5	.1	.2	.9	.1	.0	16.0	77
1949	"	12	.3	.1	1.0	.0	.0	3.0	85
1950	"	14	.1	.4	2.0	.1	.1	1.0	83
1951	"	10	.2	1.0	2.0	.0	.1	.9	86
1952	"	19	.3	.5	2.0	.1	.1	.0	77
1953	"	27	.4	.6	3.0	.1	.1	2.0	67
1954	"	37	.6	1.0	2.0	.0	.1	1.0	58
1955	"	44	.2	.6	2.0	.1	.1	2.0	51
1956	"	50	.4	.1	2.0	.0	.0	.5	47
1957	"	35	.1	.5	3.0	.0	.0	.0	62
1958	"	38	.1	.9	3.0	.2	.2	.5	57
1959	"	42	.2	1.0	3.0	.0	.0	.7	52
1960	"	41	.3	.6	3.0	.1	.0	.6	55

* All percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number or tenth.

utilitarian aura which had come to surround the liquor-vice complex during Ebbtown's growth period, was frequently attacked by highly vocal but largely ineffective voluntary associations during the period of decline. Local editors, church groups, and ministerial organizations claimed that vice conditions in the city were responsible for the "better elements" of the population moving away, and urged the suppression of vice and the stricter regulation of bars and taverns. The result of

repeated confrontations between active representatives of the traditional utilitarian orientation on the one hand, and the advocates of reform on the other, demonstrated the relative power of the traditionalists and the weakness of the reformers. Unsuccessful reform movements and the inability of reform organizations to persist for any considerable length of time suggested that a substantial proportion of the citizenry continued to adhere to the value orientation which defined the liquor-vice

complex as vital to the community's economic well being.

The nature of the other intervening socio-cultural variables—that is, the economic, political, and formal control structures—also remained conducive to a high incidence of liquor-vice crimes during this period. As Ebbtown underwent depopulation and the base for corporation tax revenue declined, the economic structure became even more dependent upon revenue from liquor license fees and a system of controlled fining. The Depression increased the dependence of the commercial segment of the economic structure on patrons drawn to the community by vice, as indicated by claims of local merchants that revenue from slot machines enabled them to survive the Depression.

The dilemma faced by the political structure during the growth period was intensified during the period of decline. Prohibition curtailed one of the city's chief sources of revenue and resulted in a continuous series of local economic crises. When Prohibition ended, the mayor of Ebbtown was made local liquor commissioner, responsible for the activities of taverns, a duty which intensified the dilemma of attempting to satisfy the historically incompatible revenue and law enforcement demands. The increased agitation for reform in Ebbtown, which accomplished little in the way of suppressing vice, nevertheless did bring considerable pressure to bear upon the incumbents of the political structure serving to further intensify their dilemma. A climax was reached in the late 1950's when local merchants who served on political reform committees lost their contracts with the city government for the provision of goods and services.

The events which affected the economic and political structures were also felt by the formal control structure. The police department was the first to feel the financial stringencies imposed by Prohibition and later by the Depression in the form of reductions in the size of the force, and difficulties in getting paid.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The literature in suggesting that crime is somehow a function of population size implies a positive mechanistic relationship between the two variables. The findings of the Ebbtown study suggest that although the incidence of crime increased as the population increased, and hence the relationship was of a positive nature, the intervention of

selected socio-cultural variables indicated that it was not a mechanistic relationship. In the case of population *decline* and the incidence of crime, the data suggest that the positive relationship found to exist between population *increase* and the incidence of crime cannot be uncritically generalized to the case of population *decline*. Indeed, the data of the present study supported the general hypothesis which predicted a negative relationship between the two variables, at least in regard to the offenses herein designated as the liquor-vice complex.

The present study would seem to have the following sociological and criminological implications. First, Merton has suggested that the general concept "crime" may serve to obscure rather than to clarify our understanding of the numerous types of deviant behavior to which it refers.¹¹ The Ebbtown data suggest that certain kinds of criminal activity may be differentially related to community social structure. To have dealt with crime as an undifferentiated phenomenon would have obscured these relationships.

Second, the social disorganization interpretation of criminal activity has been criticized for stressing the dysfunctional aspects of such activity at the expense of analyzing its functional aspects. The Ebbtown data suggest that although those aspects of the social structure of the community which were conducive to crime were dysfunctional for law enforcement and morality, they were functional for the community's economy. Indeed, they played a significant role in Ebbtown's ability to maintain itself as an ongoing social system while other communities in the immediate area experienced much more pervasive deterioration. The documentation offered by the Ebbtown data, therefore, suggests the applicability to the small town setting of the work in the tradition of Whyte,¹² Cloward and Ohlin,¹³ and Kobrin,¹⁴ among others, which has emphasized the functionality of criminal behavior in large urban centers.

Third, the analysis of crime through the use of both quantitative and socio-historical data, particularly in the small town setting, is shown by the

¹¹ MERTON, *SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND ANOMIE: CONTINUITIES, SOCIAL THEORY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE* 176 (Rev. ed. 1957).

¹² WHYTE, *STREET CORNER SOCIETY: THE STRUCTURE OF AN ITALIAN SLUM* (1943).

¹³ CLOWARD & OHLIN, *DELINQUENCY AND OPPORTUNITY* (1951).

¹⁴ Kobrin, *The Conflict of Values in Delinquency Areas*, 16 *AM. SOCIOLOGICAL REV.* 653 (1951).

present study to serve as a valuable cross-check on the degree to which each type of data reflects the actual condition of the phenomenon under investigation.

Fourth, the present study suggests the potential of a focus and a methodology which have been neglected, for the most part, in recent sociological criminology. In the February, 1967, report of the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, popularly called the President's Crime Commission, the need for basic research on the problem of crime was stressed. Recommended settings for such research included *both* the large metropolitan area *and the small community*. Of particular need, according to the commission's report, is research on the economic impact of crime on society, research which goes beyond journalistic essays on the subject.¹⁵ In sociological criminology of the last two decades little attention has been devoted to the study of crime, including its economic ramifications, in the

small city. Since the publication of Tannenbaum's *Crime in the Community* in 1938,¹⁶ the study of locally based crime in the small city has been neglected in favor of the study of organized crime in the large urban area. Accompanying the urban focus has been a highly quantified methodology based upon various types of police statistics. That such data are suspect in terms of validity and reliability is continually stressed in articles appearing in sociological and criminological journals. However, recommendations for coming to grips with such problems usually take the form of refining old or developing new statistical indices based upon the same type of data. Seldom has a socio-historical methodology been recommended. A focus on locally based crime in the small city, employing an integrated quantitative and socio-historical methodology, holds considerable potential for providing much needed knowledge on the impact of crime on society.

¹⁵ N.Y. Times, February 19, 1967, at 68.

¹⁶ TANNENBAUM, *CRIME IN THE COMMUNITY* (1938).