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Field Paper: Living in Richmond, CA

The Bay Area is a region that displays wide variation and diversity within each of its cities. Differences can be found even amongst towns twenty minutes away from each other, where borders separating each town can sometimes be indistinguishable. I personally grew up somewhere relatively safe compared to other regions of the Bay Area, so I decided to interview a friend who will be named “Kim.” Kim was both born in and grew up in Richmond, CA–a city just fifteen minutes away from the small town that I grew up in (Pinole). Kim lives right on the busy street of Barrett Avenue where many cars and residents pass by each day, and although conditions have improved over recent years, the city of Richmond has been known for being a city prevalent with low-income rates, and moderately high crime rates that include gang violence and store and home thefts and burglary. This city may not be as infamous as Oakland in terms of being known for one of the “most dangerous cities” in California; however, Kim’s different experiences and observations in relation to criminogenic behavior and the various crime theories will be discussed.

One of the first questions I asked Kim was: “On a scale from 1-10, how dangerous do you personally perceive the city of Richmond to be?” She answered:

“I would say a six just ‘cause I am so used to the environment. Most times the most eventful thing that happens is a car collision across the street or on my sidewalk. But sometimes, I’d hear a heated argument outside or other things that I’m not so sure about. Where I live isn’t really one of the most ‘ghetto’ parts of Richmond, but there is one time I remember that sort of caught my family and I off guard.”

One afternoon, right outside of her family’s house, gunshots were heard ringing past the walls. According to Kim, there was a group of individuals shooting at police officers in attempt to prevent themselves from being arrested and detained. She does not know much other details because this sort of event isn’t one big enough to appear on the news; however, she mentioned just being initially worried about her parents’ and brother’s safety. After Kim was aware that her family members were safe and unharmed, she states that this event mostly felt like a disruption in her day because nothing *too* *bad* or too serious ever really happens to visitors and residents in presumably violent cities such as Richmond. This is just one of the lucky times where neither she nor her family were harmed because people can indeed get caught in the cross fire. Nevertheless, she argues that as long as individuals remain calm and neutral in their environment, they shouldn’t face too many troubles. Kim also states that living in Richmond is honestly laidback for the most part and asserts:

“If you go into Richmond with a pre-conceived scared mindset, you’re setting yourself up for trouble because looking scared or nervous while walking down the street might trigger someone to think you’re either looking at them the wrong way, or that you’re a vulnerable individual that is easy to target or taunt.”

This type of advice is linked to the idea of street smarts, where she states that one must know where to go and where not to go, know what to say and what not to say, and know what to do and where to do (certain activities like going for a leisurely walk, for example.)

Kim does mention an area that one should definitely try to avoid, which is nicknamed the “Iron Triangle”–located in central Richmond or otherwise also known as downtown Richmond. This area is an apparent “popular hotspot for crime” and “known for being a place where gunshots are heard firing many days and nights.” It is suspected that high concentrations of gang-related activity occur often here as rival gangs may have brawls, conflicts, and shootouts over things concerning territory disputes–usually set off by the desire to control important outposts for drug sales. Looking around, she says that the area gives off a depressed or dilapidated vibe because of the numerous abandoned or wrecked houses that line up the Iron Triangle.

Although busy, her neighborhood section off Barrett avenue is one of the more secure sections along this long street. Having rundown houses and stores in one location and then having an area with high gang activity in another is an example of the Social Ecology theorybecause of “space-based crime caused by crowding and mixed-use development” (Kaplan, “Classical Criminology Part 2) Here, it is shown that in spite of whatever individual that inhabits these areas, it is still criminogenic because of the space itself. However, one issue with this theory is the fact that El Cerrito, a town barely a couple of miles away and sometimes intertwined with certain areas of Richmond– contains businesses, shops, and establishments that people with more affluence shop at and inhabit. Therefore, “attributing characteristics to individuals based on statistics” (Kaplan, “Classical Criminology Part 2**)** ignores larger structural and economic issues that come into play.

Having been around Richmond myself, seeing drug exchanges or drug users along the streets are sights not too uncommon–in addition to the theft and burglary that usually occurs in worse-off neighborhoods and in liquor or department stores. From the concepts learned in class, I can infer that one of the reasons for why certain individuals decide to sell drugs or steal as a means of income and product gain can be connected to the Strain Theory by Durkheim in the way that he or she may lack the more legitimate means to gain income. Because the individual may have always lived in an environment where money is tight or relatively difficult to attain as a result of only low, minimum-wage jobs being available, they may sometimes turn to crime as a way to receive what others who may either have been born rich or middle class, or grew up with better access to higher quality education and resources. According to Durkheim, “everybody thinks they deserve stuff, but the processes of capitalism dictate that not everyone can have it (Kaplan, “Classical Criminology Part 2”).

This type of thinking can begin at an early age. For instance, at her middle school, Kim explains being banned from wearing red and blue because of the presence of rival gangs (Crips vs. Bloods). Both her classmates and a few people she had befriended earlier in childhood have attempted to join such gangs and actively intimidate each respective gang or negatively influence others to become part of these gangs by wearing these colors and also displaying certain symbols. To further impede these actions and take precautions to protect other children, local middle and high schools hold regular, morning security checks. I then asked Kim, “Have you ever witnessed crime yourself at or around your own school?” Kim answered by telling me a short story about how one student had been walking down the sidewalk was a victim in a drive-by shooting right outside of her local high school. There were rumors that this individual had tried joining a gang but had said or done inappropriate things to instigate a certain group of gang members at his high school.

Regardless of what actually happened, examples of such early involvement in crime can be attributed to concepts in the Broken Bond theory where “children that do not obtain ‘attachment’ and ‘commitment’ to parents a young age are more likely to deviate” (Kaplan, “Classical Criminology Part 1”). Kim herself knows friends who did not have close relationships to their parents either because of being away in jail or for being away from the home. Parents who leave their children mostly unattended and unguided and then are also entangled in illicit or unlawful activities themselves may lead to the acceleration of a child’s belief that crime is a rational or acceptable behavior. Children may also believe that being associated with a gang is the only way to attain family or obtain other commodities that are highly difficult to reach as a result of growing up with little money and poor education. Deviant behaviors, under this theory, then become naturally ingrained as the child grows up as it can be difficult to “break free” or leave such lifestyles because crime has been a norm for such a long period of their lives. Furthermore, these types of values and behaviors also connect to the Differential Association theory because if an individual spends the most time with family members or friends who have been in and out prison, they take on a lifestyle that mimics these actions despite knowing its consequences. Criminal behavior is learned here in terms of “techniques of committing the crime” and “the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes” (Kaplan, “Classical Criminology Part 1”) within each crime.

Under the Social Control theory, there are attempts to intervene in illegal behaviors in order to encourage individuals to stray away from criminal engagement. *Involvement* is one of the few methods under the theory that can work to backtrack or discourage such lifestyles by encouragement of higher self-esteem and improving interpersonal skills. Youth enrichment programs are instilled so that young children and teenagers can instead participate in after-school programs or extracurricular activities. An example of this exists in Richmond and the Bay Area in general. The YMCA is an organization built around shaping values and positive behaviors as a foundation for becoming successful adults. Other programs include the RYSE Center and Youthworks, whose goals and focuses are similar. However, regardless of these programs, involvement is not always a definite solution as it can be difficult to keep certain individuals on track and away from illegal activity. When it does work, dedicating time to learning to play a new instrument, playing a sport, or just gaining direct mentorship from an adult can help immensely in getting individuals to realize that there are legitimate and reachable means available to them. These programs can teach children that just because they might have come from unfavorable backgrounds and unfortunate circumstances, they can still build their lives up.

From these observations and Kim’s experiences, it is evident that it is important to analyze the social and economic effects of living in such neighborhoods. Young children who lack immediate guidance and positive influences may lean towards criminal behavior because they learn to accept and act out deviant behavior from the groups of people they are closest to and interact with the most. It is also important to note that youth programs can have a huge impact in preventing higher rates of incarceration. Overall, these various crime theories have given me a deeper awareness of why certain characteristics surrounding criminal behaviors affect the crimes that occur in various environments.

Works Cited

Kaplan, Paul. “Classical Criminology Part 1,” “Classical Criminology Part 2.” Lectures10/11/17-10/18/17. UC San Diego.