

# Welfare and Burglary

**James DeFronzo**

*This study analyzed burglary rates for 141 cities for which data on burglary, AFDC, cost of living, unemployment, household status, and other social and economic variables were available. Cost-of-living-adjusted AFDC payment per recipient person was found to have a direct negative impact on burglary and a separate indirect negative relationship to burglary through its association with household status. The results provided support for strain and control theories and Sampson and Wilson's (1995) social disorganization-strain perspective.*

Does government welfare assistance to low-income persons mitigate economic pressures to engage in illegitimate activities to achieve, at least partially, "the American Dream?" "Conservative" political figures have argued that if there is a relationship between welfare and property crime it is likely to be a positive indirect one. They have suggested that high and easily accessible levels of welfare assistance may promote criminogenic lifestyles primarily by prompting many poor people to rationally choose to raise children in female-headed households and rely on government assistance rather than seeking gainful employment (thereby undermining traditional crime-limiting family patterns and values such as the two-parent household and the "work ethic"). "Liberal" politicians, in contrast, have suggested that high levels of welfare assistance may have a direct negative effect on property crime by acting to alleviate some of the economically generated stress among the poor that might otherwise result in crime. Some have also speculated on a possible negative indirect effect of welfare on property crime in that higher levels of assistance, in lessening emotional stress, might promote more contraceptive use, lessen the incidence of unprotected sex outside the institution of marriage, and, in so doing, limit the number of children raised in one-parent households.

Research on the relation of welfare assistance to property crime has been limited. DeFronzo (1983) found that variation in cost-of-living-adjusted levels of AFDC assistance per person among 39 SMSAs had a statistically

---

**JAMES DEFONZO:** Associate Professor, Sociology Department, University of Connecticut.

Thanks to Dr. Mark Littman of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for providing AFDC data.

CRIME & DELINQUENCY, Vol. 42 No. 2, April 1996 223-230  
© 1996 Sage Publications, Inc.

significant negative effect on variation in 1970 burglary rates. Devine, Sheley, and Smith (1988), in a series of analyses of burglary rates for the United States during 1948-1985, found a statistically significant negative effect of welfare (mainly AFDC) relief levels (although they apparently used total government expenditures rather than average payments per recipient).

In the present study, the potential direct and indirect effects of welfare assistance levels on the variation in burglary rates were examined for a sample of 141 U.S. cities for which burglary rates, cost of living information, and data on other utilized variables were available.

### *THEORY AND HYPOTHESES*

Advocates of "strain theory" (Agnew 1992; Land, Cantor and Russell 1995; Merton 1938; Paternoster and Mazerolle 1994) have suggested that, both in the absolute and relative sense, economic deprivation and lack of access to legitimate means to attain aspirations generate frustrations that lead to "traditional crimes," such as burglary. This perspective, especially as reformulated by Agnew (1992), implies that cities with higher levels of welfare assistance will have poor residents who are characterized by less frustration and, consequently, are less likely to perpetrate property crimes than cities where welfare assistance levels are relatively low. Proponents of "social control-disorganization" perspectives (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Hirschi 1969; Sampson and Laub 1990), in comparison, have argued that the central cause of crime is not so much economic distress or blocked aspirations, but rather the deterioration or absence of important social controls that would otherwise inhibit deviance.

Sampson and Wilson (1995) have recently proposed an integrated social disorganization-strain theory in which strain factors are viewed as causing the deterioration of social controls that are hypothesized to have the more direct effects on crime. Sampson and Wilson argued that the forms of social disorganization that promote crime most likely include disrupted, dysfunctional or structurally impaired households, ethnic heterogeneity, ethnic, racial, and class segregation and hostility, and the development of deviance-tolerating subcultures. Sampson and Wilson concluded that strain factors, such as economically generated frustrations or lack of access to legitimate opportunities, tend to give rise to forms of social disorganization. For example, limited economic resources might be expected to result in stress, which in turn increases the likelihood of excessive use of alcohol or other drugs and unprotected sexual intercourse outside of marriage, often resulting in children being raised in one-parent households.

Strain theory implies that higher levels of welfare assistance to the poor should have a direct negative relationship to burglary and Sampson and Wilson's (1995) social disorganization-strain perspective suggests that higher levels of welfare assistance to the poor should also have a negative indirect impact on burglary by limiting forms of social disorganization, such as one-parent households. In contrast, "rational choice" theory (Cornish and Clark 1986) can be interpreted as suggesting that higher levels of welfare assistance to the poor indirectly promote crime by motivating poor women to raise children outside of a two-parent household to gain welfare benefits.

This article evaluates the potential direct and indirect impacts of welfare assistance levels on the variation of burglary rates among American cities.

### *SAMPLE, VARIABLES, AND METHODS*

Because the cost of living varies among American cities, a cost-of-living adjustment appeared appropriate to evaluate the relationship of welfare assistance levels to burglary rates. The Department of Commerce (U.S. Bureau of Census 1992) published cost-of-living adjustment ratios for the third quarter of 1991 for more than 100 metropolitan statistical areas (far more MSAs than in previous years) selected to represent the various regions and communities of the United States. Of these, data were available on burglary rates and other economic and social variables used in the analyses for a total of 141 cities.

The dependent variable used in the initial regression analysis was the city burglary rate, logarithmically transformed to the base 10 (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1992). Among the traditional property crimes of the Uniform Crime Index, burglary was most appropriate for the present analyses. Burglary was much more accurately represented in the Uniform Crime Reports than larceny since approximately 50% of burglaries were reported to the police in 1991, compared to only about 28% of larcenies (U.S. Department of Justice 1993, Table 3.11). Further, because the average burglary reported to the police in 1991 involved a property loss of \$1,246, it was economically more rewarding than the average reported larceny, which involved a property loss of only \$478 (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1992). Many motor vehicle thefts, unlike burglaries, appear to be perpetrated by young people out for excitement and enjoyment rather than economic gain.

The measure of welfare assistance used in the analyses was the average AFDC payment amount per recipient person for each state in which a sample city was located (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1994). AFDC payments constitute the major form of assistance to the poor in the

United States. The levels of payments per person are set by the individual states and vary significantly (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1991). AFDC payments are the type of government assistance most likely to have a relationship to traditional property crimes because this aid goes only to the poor and overwhelmingly to households with juveniles, the age segment of the population disproportionately involved in burglaries. The large majority of AFDC recipient households, though typically female-headed, has been found to constitute a major social resource for nonfamily adult males in low-income areas (Sharff 1980; Stack 1974). A cost-of-living-adjusted AFDC measure was obtained by dividing the local mean AFDC payment per person in 1991 by the cost-of-living ratio for the relevant metropolitan statistical area (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992).

Other variables used in aspects of the analyses included the unemployment rate, median per capita income, percent of persons with income below the poverty level, percent of city population composed of 16-year-old to 24-year-old males, city population size logarithmically transformed to the base 10, and the percent of city households that were female-headed (U.S. Department of the Census 1992, 1993, 1995).

## RESULTS

The logarithmically transformed burglary rate correlated with AFDC average payment per recipient person at  $-.35$  ( $p < .001$ ). When AFDC was adjusted for cost-of-living differences among the cities in the sample, the magnitude of the correlation increased to  $-.42$  ( $p < .001$ ).

Multivariate regression analyses of burglary rates incorporated, along with cost-of-living-adjusted AFDC levels, unemployment rate, median per capita income, percent of persons below the poverty level, percent of city population made up of 16-year-old to 24-year-old males, logarithmically transformed city population size, and percent of city households that were female-headed. The results indicated that of these variables only three—cost-of-living-adjusted AFDC level, city population size, and percent of households female-headed—had the predicted statistically significant relationships to variation in burglary rates. Virtually identical results were obtained when estimates of median income per capita and percent of persons in poverty were proportionally adjusted for intercity cost-of-living differences and were substituted for the unadjusted measures of these variables. Further regressions were carried out, including only the cost-of-living-adjusted AFDC level per recipient, logarithmically transformed city population size, percent of households female-headed, and unemployment rate. These factors, none of which corre-

lated with each other at more than .42, explained about 42% of the variation in burglary rates with AFDC ( $\beta = -.28, p < .001$ ), population size ( $\beta = .21, p < .01$ ), and percent of households female headed ( $\beta = .38, p < .001$ ) having significant relationships.

It is conceivable that in addition to its direct negative relationship to burglary rates AFDC could have an indirect relationship to burglary through having a relationship to the percent of households female-headed. One possibility is that higher levels of AFDC support could promote female-headed families by constituting an economic inducement to family instability or out-of-wedlock pregnancies. Or, higher AFDC payment levels might act to limit the number of female-headed households by helping to alleviate stress among recipients and thus promote more effective parenting among adults and more responsible sexual behavior among both adults and juveniles.

Because percent of households female-headed was obtained from the 1990 census, it was regressed on 1989 AFDC average payment per recipient person (the 1989 AFDC levels correlated at .98 with the 1991 AFDC levels). The 1989 AFDC per recipient payment level was significantly negatively correlated with percent of households female-headed ( $-.20, p < .05$ ). When the available cost-of-living ratios were used to provide an estimate of cost-of-living-adjusted 1989 AFDC payment per recipient person, the magnitude of the correlation of 1989 AFDC to percent of households female-headed increased to  $-.28 (p < .001)$ .

When the percent of female-headed households was regressed on the adjusted 1989 AFDC levels, logarithmically transformed city population size, and unemployment rate, AFDC maintained a significant, independent negative relationship ( $\beta = -.23, p < .01$ ), whereas unemployment rate had a more powerful positive relationship ( $\beta = .41, p < .001$ ) and population size also had a positive relationship ( $\beta = .20, p < .01$ ). Thus, besides its direct negative relation to burglary rate, AFDC had an additional indirect negative relation to burglary through its negative relation to percent of households female-headed.

Table 1 presents an analysis of variance that compares the means for burglary rates within ranges of average cost-of-living-adjusted monthly AFDC payments per recipient person selected to divide the city sample into approximate thirds. The observed means are presented in the first column whereas in the second column the interval means were adjusted by removing the effects of three covariates: city population size logarithmically transformed to the base 10, city unemployment rate, and the residual of percent of city households female-headed after the effect of 1989 AFDC was removed from this variable (so that the indirect as well as the direct relationship of

**TABLE 1: Analysis of Variance of Burglary Rates by AFDC Intervals**

<i>Cost-of-Living-Adjusted Average AFDC Monthly Payment per Recipient Person</i>	<i>Observed Means</i>	<i>Means Adjusted for Covariates</i>	N
	<i>Burglary Rate*</i>	<i>Burglary Rate*</i>	
Less than \$93.00	2,421	2,356	48
\$93.00 to \$120.00	1,989	2,026	46
More than \$120.00	1,545	1,573	47
Total	1,988		141 cities

\* $p < .001$ .

AFDC would be reflected in the differences among the adjusted means). Significance levels were similar when a logarithmically transformed version of the dependent variable was substituted for the actual rate.

Supplementary analysis of variance of 1990 burglary rates (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1991) with the same covariates for the smaller set of cities ( $n = 64$ ) for which cost-of-living (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1991) and other relevant data were available for 1990 yielded similar results for cost-of-living-adjusted 1990 AFDC average payment per recipient person (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1994).

## DISCUSSION

The results of the analyses have both social policy and theoretical implications. First, average AFDC payments per recipient were negatively, not positively, associated with both burglary rates and the percentage of households that were female-headed. The magnitude of the correlations increased when adjusted for cost-of-living variations among the sample cities. Though seemingly overlooked in recent discussions of strategies to engineer social control of crime (Marx 1995), the findings are consistent with a social policy of utilizing welfare assistance to the poor as a means of limiting burglary. In no way did the results support the notion that reduction of welfare assistance levels to the poor is likely to cause a reduction in property crime rates, either directly or indirectly through a relationship of female headed households to burglary.

The results provide support for both the strain and control theories of crime and, in particular, for Sampson and Wilson's integrated social disorganization-strain perspective. As predicted by control theory, percent of households female-headed had a positive direct effect on the variation in burglary rates.

Although unemployment rate had no significant direct effect on burglary rates, cost-of-living-adjusted AFDC payments had a significant negative direct effect as suggested by strain theory. However, unemployment rate had a powerful positive relationship to the variation in the percent of households female-headed, as predicted by Sampson and Wilson, and thus an important positive though indirect relationship to burglary rates. The observed significant negative relationship of AFDC level to percent of households female-headed was also consistent with Sampson and Wilson's social disorganization-strain approach.

## REFERENCES

- Agnew, R. 1992. "Foundation for a General Strain Theory of Crime and Delinquency." *Criminology* 30:47-87.
- Cornish, D. B. and R. V. Clark. 1986. *The Reasoning Criminal*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- DeFronzo, J. 1983. "Economic Assistance to Impoverished Americans: Relationship to Incidence of Crime." *Criminology* 21:119-36.
- Devine, J. A., J. F. Sheley, and M. D. Smith. 1988. "Macroeconomic and Social Control Policy Influences on Crime Rate Changes, 1948-1985." *American Sociological Review* 53:407-20.
- Gottfredson, M. and T. Hirschi. 1990. *A General Theory of Crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hirschi, T. 1969. *Causes of Delinquency*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. 1991. *Crime in the United States—1990*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- . 1992. *Crime in the United States—1991*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Land, K. C., D. Cantor, and S. J. Russell. 1995. "Unemployment and Crime Rate Fluctuations in Post-World War II United States: Statistical Time-Series Properties and Alternative Models." Pp. 55-79 in *Crime and Inequality*, edited by J. Hagan and R. D. Peterson. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Marx, G. T. 1995. "The Engineering of Social Control: The Search for the Silver Bullet." Pp. 225-46 in *Crime and Inequality*, edited by J. Hagan and R. D. Peterson. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Merton, R. K. 1938. "Social Structure and Anomie." *American Sociological Review* 3:672-82.
- Paternoster, R. and P. Mazerolle. 1994. "General Strain Theory and Delinquency: A Replication and Extension." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 31:235-65.
- Sampson, R. J. and J. Laub. 1990. "Stability and Change in Crime and Deviance Over the Life Course: The Salience of Adult Social Bonds." *American Sociological Review* 55:609-27.
- Sampson, R. J. and W. J. Wilson. 1995. "Toward a Theory of Race, Crime and Urban Inequality." Pp. 37-54 in *Crime and Inequality*, edited by J. Hagan and R. D. Peterson. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Sharff, J. 1980. "Life on Dolittle Street: How Poor People Purchase Immortality." Ms. Hispanic Study Project, Columbia University.
- Stack, C. 1974. *All Our Kin: Survival Strategies in a Black Community*. New York: Harper & Row.



- U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1991. *Statistical Abstract of the United States—1991*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- . 1992. *Statistical Abstract of the United States—1992*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- . 1993. *1990 Census of the Population: Social and Economic Characteristics of the Population*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- . 1995. *County and City Data Book, 1994*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 1991. *Characteristics of State Plans for Aid to Families with Dependent Children*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- . 1994. *Total AFDC, Average Monthly Payment Per Recipient, Fiscal Years 1984-1993*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Information and Measurement Branch.
- U.S. Department of Justice. 1993. *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 1992*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.