

West Coast Poverty Center

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Poverty Research Flash

Highlighting New
Poverty Research

by Bob Crutchfield

Crutchfield, Robert. 2014. *Get a Job: Labor Markets, Economic Opportunity, and Crime*. New York City: NYU Press.

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The West Coast Poverty Center's **POVERTY RESEARCH FLASH** highlights new research by faculty affiliates and others on causes, consequences, and effective policy responses to poverty, with an emphasis on changing labor markets, demographic shifts, family structure, and social and economic inequality.

The West Coast Poverty Center at the University of Washington serves as a hub for research, education, and policy analysis leading to greater understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and effective approaches to reducing it in the west coast states. For more information about the West Coast Poverty Center, visit our website: <http://wcpc.washington.edu>

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Get a Job: Labor Markets, Economic Opportunity, and Crime

Scholars have observed that there is not a consistent relationship between increasing unemployment rates and increasing crime rates at the macroeconomic level. In *Get a Job: Labor Markets, Economic Opportunity, and Crime*, WCPC Affiliate and Professor of Sociology Robert Crutchfield takes a more nuanced look at the relationship between the economy and crime. Rather than focusing solely on unemployment rates, Crutchfield argues that we must examine the structure of economic opportunities and individuals' relative access to those opportunities to understand criminality and crime rates.

Crutchfield starts from the observation that individuals experience economic conditions through their connection (or lack of connection) to the labor market, which determines wages and benefits in the short term as well as future opportunities. Employment conditions vary greatly, with an increasing share of jobs being located in the "secondary sector" with few or no benefits, limited job security, and little hope for advancement. This segmentation of the labor market leaves secondary sector workers trapped in less desirable jobs and at higher risk of criminality. This lack of opportunities – or the lack of ability to compete for even these undesirable opportunities – contributes to unemployment, which creates circumstances that may, in turn, promote crime.

Crutchfield further argues that labor market stratification influences increased crime rates indirectly, through the effects of concentrated disadvantage in areas with large numbers of unemployed or secondary sector workers. Concentrated social and economic disadvantage both results from and contributes to crime through the quality of available education in poor neighborhoods, child-rearing practices, and residential segregation that increasingly isolates the poor, providing less exposure to practices and opportunities to disrupt the cycle. One policy response to crime, mass incarceration, can actually worsen labor market marginalization and therefore leads to additional crime as it reduces the employability of former prisoners returning to their communities.

Considering the availability and quality of labor market opportunities and the impact of these conditions on communities can help explain some of the seemingly contradictory trends in the relationship between unemployment rates and crime rates. Current and future opportunities are not evenly distributed across space or across communities. Some neighborhoods and some populations may be facing increasing crime even while overall drops in crime are occurring.

While disadvantage and labor market marginalization affect all workers to some extent, Crutchfield notes that two groups experience these forces in particularly damaging ways. Women, with their historical over-representation in secondary sector jobs and their role as the sole or main breadwinner for an increasing number of families, have been particularly vulnerable to the effects of concentrated disadvantage, which indirectly affects their criminality because of what it does to families. African Americans have also experienced labor market stratification and other disadvantages in ways that can help explain some puzzling links between unemployment and crime patterns. For example, Crutchfield notes that frustration with slow economic progress might help explain increasing crime rates amid low unemployment in Northern States after the Great Migration.

Crutchfield relies on analyses of survey data, international comparisons, case studies, and his own experience working in the criminal justice system to draw these connections and make his arguments. Based on these analyses, Crutchfield makes some recommendations about interventions to disrupt these relationships. In particular, he calls for acknowledging and then addressing the ways that disadvantage contributes to labor market marginality and crime rather than focusing only on crime and its effects.