

## Exam 1

The criminal justice system has many different interpretations. For example, Guenther (1976) thought that it was “unfair, harsh, and biased.” How one views the criminal justice system depends on what one has experienced. Economic class, political background, and neighborhood or community may all influence one’s perception. Drawing on Guenther’s statement, I will examine perceptions and stereotypes, politicization of crime, and the relationship between social, economic, and political isolation. Unfortunately, many of the perceptions and problems that influenced Guenther’s statement still exist today.

Guenther’s statement is largely influenced by the time in which he lived. In “The Truly Disadvantaged,” William Julius Wilson helps us better understand the sociopolitical climate of the 1970s: “Despite a high rate of poverty in ghetto neighborhoods throughout the first half of the twentieth century, rates of inner-city joblessness, teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, welfare dependency, and serious crime were significantly lower than in later years and did not reach catastrophic proportions until the mid-1970s.”<sup>1</sup> Wilson’s stark description opens a window to lower class neighborhoods, explaining how conditions became worse than they ever had been during the mid-1970s.

Perceptions and stereotypes are based on individual experiences. This does not necessarily mean that they are true, but it certainly does not make them irrelevant. Misconceptions often lead people to believe that those in poorer socioeconomic conditions choose to live jobless or depend on welfare. People living in middle class or higher have the privilege to see what life with an education is like, including stable employment. This creates stereotypes. Many people think that they have to live the same way that their parents lived. All of these individual perceptions and experiences influence how people experience the criminal justice system.

“Politics has no place whatsoever in the criminal-justice system. We are a country based on the rule of law and the principle of equal protection for all citizens, regardless of who they are or what they believe.”<sup>2</sup> This principle deeply resonates with me and it almost seems true. That is not the case, however, when it come to politics and crime. Take, for example, civil rights. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King gave a speech that made a huge impact on people’s lives. Segregation should have come to an end shortly thereafter.

Unfortunately, segregation is still happening today, it just looks different. We now have movements such as Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter and politics heavily influence

1 Wilson, William Julius. The Truly Disadvantaged (p. 3). University of Chicago Press. Kindle Edition.

2 Hans A. Von Spakovsky. When Politics Drives Law Enforcement. National Review. September 12,2014

both. At the end of the day, it should be about the law. If someone does something wrong, they should be convicted for their wrongdoing. If an officer shoots and it can't be justified, that officer should be tried for his actions. It shouldn't matter what a political person has to say during their speech. Law should remain the same because it is the law without political parties involved.

Lastly, the relationship between social, economic, and political isolation is clearly evident in the harshness and bias of the Criminal Justice System. In "The Truly Disadvantaged," William Julius Wilson illustrates social and economic isolation. Wilson begins with the Civil Rights Movement, emphasizing economic isolation. For example, if they lived in a "ghetto" neighborhood they were treated differently.

In his article, "Being Poor Black and American," Wilson highlights Hurricane Katrina, explaining its devastation not only as a natural disaster, but also as economic isolation. "When television cameras focused on the flooding, the people trapped in houses and apartments, and the vast devastation, many Americans were shocked to see the squalid living conditions of the poor."<sup>3</sup> This was only the beginning. Katrina exposed the socioeconomic isolation of poor Louisiana neighborhoods, forcing the rest of the country to pay attention. Ironically, if the media would have championed the disadvantaged neighborhoods of Louisiana before Katrina, no one would have cared. "Few people would have reflected on how the larger forces in society—including segregation, discrimination, a lack of economic opportunity, and failing public schools—adversely affect the inner-city poor."<sup>4</sup> Katrina exposed racial and economic isolation to a wide audience.

Many of the problems of the 1970s that caused Guenther to say that the Criminal Justice System was "unfair, harsh, and biased" still exist today. Prejudices, politicization, and social and economic isolation all exercise undue influence on the criminal justice system. When it comes to criminal justice, the law must supersede each of these. We still have a lot of work to do to make that happen.

<sup>3</sup> William Julius Wilson. *American Educator* (pg.10) Spring (2011)

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