

## AN EXAMINATION OF PROPERTY CRIME IN LIGHT OF LEFT REALISM'S THEORETICAL CAPACITY

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### Abstract

This paper explores the influence of socio-economic, demographic, and environmental conditions on property crime within the framework of left realist theory, highlighting the complex dynamics between the main themes such as victims, policing, and relative deprivation in England and Wales. It examines the reliability of crime statistics, suggesting that they might exaggerate or fail to capture the true state of property crime and its relationship with unemployment. The analysis also considers unemployment as a form of relative deprivation, potentially exacerbating property crime and victimization in the absence of adequate opportunities and support systems. However, the paper acknowledges that other factors, such as effective policing and criminal justice measures, may also play significant roles. It further examines how demographic factors, particularly in socially marginalized and economically deprived areas, can contribute to higher rates of property crime and increase the number of victims. Left realism provides valuable insights into the underlying causes of property crime and its victimization, advocating for a comprehensive understanding that goes beyond conventional analyses to address the root conditions of environmental deprivation and their impact on vulnerable communities. This paper argues that socio-economic and demographic factors, particularly forms of relative deprivation, significantly influence property crime and victimisation. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that left realism also has weaknesses which merit further explanation.

**Keywords:** Left realism, property crimes, unemployment, criminology

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## **Mülkiyet Suçlarının Sol Realizmin Teorik Kapasitesi Işığında İncelenmesi**

### **Öz**

Bu makale, sol realist kriminoloji teorisi çerçevesinde sosyo-ekonomik, demografik ve çevresel koşulların İngiltere ve Galler'deki mülkiyet suçları üzerindeki etkisini mağdurlar, polislik ve nispi yoksunluk gibi ana temalar arasındaki karmaşık dinamikleri vurgulayarak incelemektedir. Suç istatistiklerinin güvenilirliğini ele alarak, bu istatistiklerin mülkiyet suçlarının gerçek durumunu abartabileceğini veya tam olarak yansıtamayabileceğini ve bu suçların işsizlikle ilişkisini incelemektedir. Analiz ayrıca işsizliği nispi yoksunluğun bir biçimi olarak değerlendirerek, yeterli fırsatlar ve destek sistemlerinin yokluğunda mülkiyet suçlarını ve mağduriyetini artırma potansiyelini vurgulamaktadır. Ancak, makale etkili polislik ve cezai adalet önlemleri gibi diğer faktörlerin de önemli roller oynayabileceğini kabul etmektedir. Ayrıca, özellikle sosyal olarak marjinalleşmiş ve ekonomik olarak yoksun bölgelerde, demografik faktörlerin daha yüksek mülkiyet suç oranlarına ve mağdur sayısının artmasına nasıl katkıda bulunabileceğini incelemektedir. Sol realizm, mülkiyet suçlarının ve mağduriyetinin altında yatan nedenlere dair değerli içgörüler sunmakta ve çevresel yoksunluğun kök koşullarını ve bu koşulların savunmasız topluluklar üzerindeki etkisini ele almak için geleneksel analizlerin ötesine geçen kapsamlı bir anlayış savunmaktadır. Bu makale, sosyo-ekonomik ve demografik faktörlerin, özellikle nispi yoksunluk biçimlerinin, mülkiyet suçlarını ve mağduriyeti önemli ölçüde etkilediğini savunmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, sol realizmin de daha fazla açıklamayı hak eden zayıflıkları olduğunu kabul etmek önemlidir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sol realizm, mülkiyet suçları, işsizlik, kriminoloji

### **Introduction**

*When I was a kid, I used to pray every night for a new bike. Then I realised, the Lord doesn't work that way. So, I just stole one and asked Him to forgive me...and I got it!*

*(Emo Philips-Comedian)*

A notable approach of criminological studies is related to in which the concept of crime is addressed (Matthews, 2009; Tham 2013). Criminology

scholars use different notions as analysis tools to explain crime such as culture (Tham, 2013) and deprivation (Runciman, 1966; Lea & Young, 1984). The above quote of Emo Philips illustrates how unfulfilled desires may eventually lead to criminal actions when conditions do not permit or do not arise spontaneously after some time. Various theories offer explanations for the causes of this wrongful action and propose solutions. Given the systemic and complex nature of the crime, left realism has endeavored to provide a comprehensive approach to its analysis and mitigation, particularly through the concept of relative deprivation.

Left realism emerged in the 1980s as a response to the conservative 'law and order' approach, offering a more nuanced understanding of crime by focusing on the socio-economic and demographic conditions that influence crime problem (Lea, 2010). However, political and ideological development did not allow the application of this policy. Today's criminal justice system and its problems such as the high rate of prison population and reoffending reflect the main theoretical and practical needs. This necessity warrants an examination of the crime issue in the UK. Thus, this paper will consider a certain type of crime, namely property crime, in light of the left realist theoretical perspective.

There are some specific themes: (i) skeptical analysis of crime data, (ii) policy and policing, (iii) victims and offenders, and (iv) relative deprivation left realism to take them into consideration in crime analysis. It can be evaluated as a theoretical opportunity consisting of an analysis of these elements which also refers to principles of left realism and 'the square of crime' (Lea, 2015). This theoretical opportunity helps to explicitly explain property crime by underlying reasons such as relative deprivation, being suspicious about statistics, and involving criminals and victims in research (Currie, 2010). Some of them are mentioned by Young (1986) that left realism observes that individuals from the working class are susceptible to crime from various quarters. It highlights that economic and social vulnerabilities increase the likelihood of being targeted by crimes, encompassing both working-class offences and white-collar transgressions. This paper argues that socio-economic and demographic factors, particularly forms of relative deprivation, significantly influence property crime and victimisation in England and Wales. However, it also acknowledges the limitations of left realism, including its potential overemphasis on socio-economic factors while potentially underestimating the influence of individual characteristics and broader systemic issues such as criminal justice policies. The left realist approach not only enriches the discourse on the relationship between unemployment and crime but also underscores the importance of addressing the underlying conditions of environmental deprivation to mitigate property crime and its impacts on vulnerable communities.

This paper first gives a brief overview of the principles of left realism explaining their relevance to understanding crime. The second section divides into the relationship between unemployment, a key aspect of relative deprivation, and property crime, using empirical evidence and theoretical insights to elucidate this connection. The third section shifts focus to demographic and environmental factors, such as the security level and type of residence, examining how these elements contribute to property crime rates and victimization. In the fourth section, the paper considers the influence of criminal justice policies and individual characteristics on property crime, acknowledging the limitations of left realism.

### **Principles of Left Realism**

Four main themes of left realism—sceptical analysis of crime data, policy and policing, victims and criminals, and relative deprivation—create a theoretical opportunity for analysing crime. This section briefly explains these points and the other important concepts of left realism.

The cornerstone of this perspective is being skeptical about both the inherent reliability of crime data and its analysis. Critics state that crime data may be unreliable because the figures of crime are generated by the political power and police, and exaggerated by both media and some political and economic powers and this causes fear of crime (Young, 1999; Lea & Young, 1984; Downes, 1983; Currie, 2010). Left realists criticise right realism and mainstream criminology because of the importance they give to statistical knowledge (Young, 1986). Exaggerated criminal statistics can be used by politicians or other people, resulting in a blind spot within an analysis. In addition, one may ignore the reality of crime. Young (1999, p.37) mentioned that the hidden figures in statistics lead to invisible victimisation.

Policing is a key concept in the examination of crime for left realists. It refers to a social democratic crime-fighting strategy focused on the 'police and society' (Lea, 2015). For instance, Lea and Young (1984) pay attention to policing in an area as an important factor in crime rates. They (1984, p.169) proposed 'consensus policing' in place of 'military policing' basically relying on 'support of community' and 'high flow of information'. Left realism considers some conditions and factors such as victims and socio-economic factors in the implementation of regulation and punishment. Left realists propose that criminals can be punished due to the type and level of damage of crime to society. These themes can be further conceptualised with the following elements.

Another significant point is that both victims and criminals should be part of the criminal justice policy-making process and crime analysis (Lea & Young, 1984). Lea and Young (1984) state that crimes can be evaluated according to the type of crime and circumstances surrounding it. They (1984, p.268) noted that "To judge an unemployed youth stealing £50 as equal to an accountant fiddling £50 on income tax is invidious". This explanation underscores the importance of considering the socio-economic context and the underlying motivations behind criminal acts, highlighting the disparities in the impact and implications of crimes committed by individuals from different social strata. Additionally, the imprisonment policy is not an appropriate solution for left realists, as they feel it should be restricted to violent or excessively serious crimes that might damage society (Lea & Young, 1984, p.267). A likely instance is that there might be different levels of punishment between white-collar crime and property crime that might be committed because of adverse social conditions. However, this approach was recently criticized by some scholars (see, Hall & Winlow, 2015) for its reliance on conventional legal definitions of crime without considering the wider implications of harm, and its minimal contribution to debates about the adequacy of these legal classifications in reflecting people's actual experiences of harm (Lea, 2017). These concepts (policing based on society and police, victims and criminals) are also parts of the square of crime (Lea, 2015). The analysis of the square of crime changes according to various types of crime and conditions. The square of crime can be conceptualised throughout the analysis of relative deprivation and examination of different kinds of relative deprivation such as unemployment and relatively deprived environments.

In a broad sense, deprivation refers to inequality, grievance, unequal distribution, and adverse conditions which are prominent among the poor and working class. Runciman (1966) states that when person A, lacking a desired object, contrasts their situation with person B, who possesses said object, A experiences a sense of 'relative deprivation' about B. This framework can be extended to understand societal issues like unemployment or income inequality, which are manifestations of general deprivation in a society. Indeed, Runciman critically examines these factors, along with education, as indicators of relative deprivation across social classes in England between 1918 and 1962.

Furthermore, the concept of relative deprivation extends beyond mere emotional experiences. Lea and Young (1984) illustrate this by stating that crimes among the working class arise from both the structural and cultural aspects of society, reflecting an individualistic reaction to the harsh conditions wrought by various forms of deprivation, which in turn perpetuates these harsh conditions. This viewpoint sheds valuable light on the dynamics of property crime and the

impact of environmental factors. Left realism emphasizes the importance of recognizing these significant factors in comprehensively understanding crime, its victims, and its perpetrators. Unemployment can be seen as one of the important indicators of relative deprivation within society and is widely accepted as a factor that affects crime problem (Lea & Young, 1984).

In this article, I focus on certain types of harsh conditions one of them is unemployment as a socio-economic factor and secondly demographic conditions such as low-quality accommodation and low-level security.

Left realists assert that the phenomenon of relative deprivation disproportionately affects lower social strata, notably the working class and impoverished groups. This framework elucidates the drivers behind criminal behaviour, identifying the lack of opportunities and support as critical factors. Such conditions render these communities particularly susceptible to crime, underscoring a cycle of vulnerability and deprivation (Currie, 2010).

The phenomenon of crime can be understood via various criminological theories, but a few theories take socio-economic conditions and class approaches are popular theoretical frameworks. Currie (2010, pp.112-113) argues that:

*“Left Realism is not only an essential perspective on the problems of crime and justice in the early 21st century, but that it is the perspective that offers the best hope of providing the intellectual underpinnings for a genuinely progressive approach to crime around the world.”*

Left realist (or critical realist) criminology takes intervention, methodology, structure, the state and social class into consideration when they examine crime phenomena (Matthews, 2009).

According to left realists, crime is not a disease, rather, it is a social problem in society (Lea & Young, 1984; Currie, 2010). In addition, offences reflect complex and problematic social, economic, and political environments. Policy, related to all these areas, might affect this social problem (Currie, 2010). In other words, criminal justice policy is not a merit policy that determines the phenomenon of crime in real life. Left realists utilise social justice and human rights concerning the criminal justice system, in contrast to right realists or radical criminologists (Currie, 2010).

## **Unemployment As a Type of Relative Deprivation and Cause of Property Crime in England and Wales**

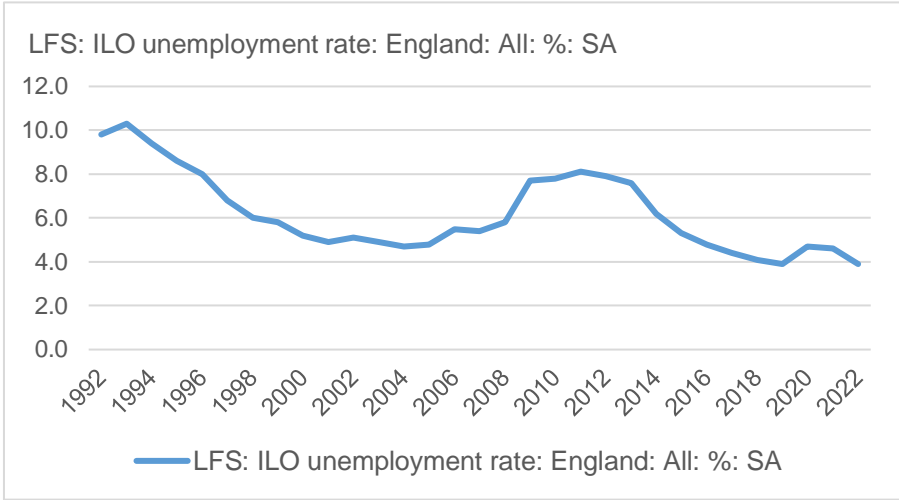
Unemployment is a significant form of deprivation for the poor and working class, reflecting a high potential for crime, as it can compel people to find wrongful ways to sustain their life such as committing crimes. The stolen property is convertible to money and money is a vital tool for sustaining life. Rational choice theory indicates reasons and solutions for the crime that the pursuit of excitement and thrills is nearly as influential as financial gains in motivating such acts (Matsueda, Kreager & Huizinga, 2006). Matsueda and colleagues summarise critically rational choice theory that 'Even if a person has determined that the rewards to crime outweigh the costs, that person cannot commit a crime until an objective opportunity is not only present but also perceived' (2006, p.102). However, it does not acknowledge that some property crimes are committed for survival rather than gaining value to increase their wealth. The left realist perspective enriches the reasons and conditions that contribute to crime phenomena. Thus, this section investigates various factors behind property crime through left realism.

According to the 2016 Crime Survey for England and Wales, among the crimes recorded by the police, the most frequently committed type of crime is property crime, accounting for 66% of all crimes (Flatley, 2016). Left realism provides significant points to elucidate this type of crime and its relation to unemployment. For instance, Young and Lea (1984) highlighted that it is difficult to say explicitly that unemployment causes crime all the time as not only absolute deprivation but also relative deprivation can lead one to commit a crime. They (1984, p.93) noted the following:

*"Our argument is that it is not absolute deprivation that causes crime. Relative deprivation, on the other hand, can occur in employed people as well as in unemployed people since it is dependent on subjectively experienced discontent. It can occur during the period of low unemployment and rising prosperity, and of high unemployment and falling living standard."*

In this perspective, it is often posited that periods of high unemployment correlate with an increase in property crime, a trend observed in the 1970s and 1980s. Subsequently, a general trend of low unemployment coinciding with a reduced rate of property crime was noted between 1995 and 2002, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. This phenomenon can be briefly explained by the high unemployment rates prevalent throughout the 1970s and 1980s, which are

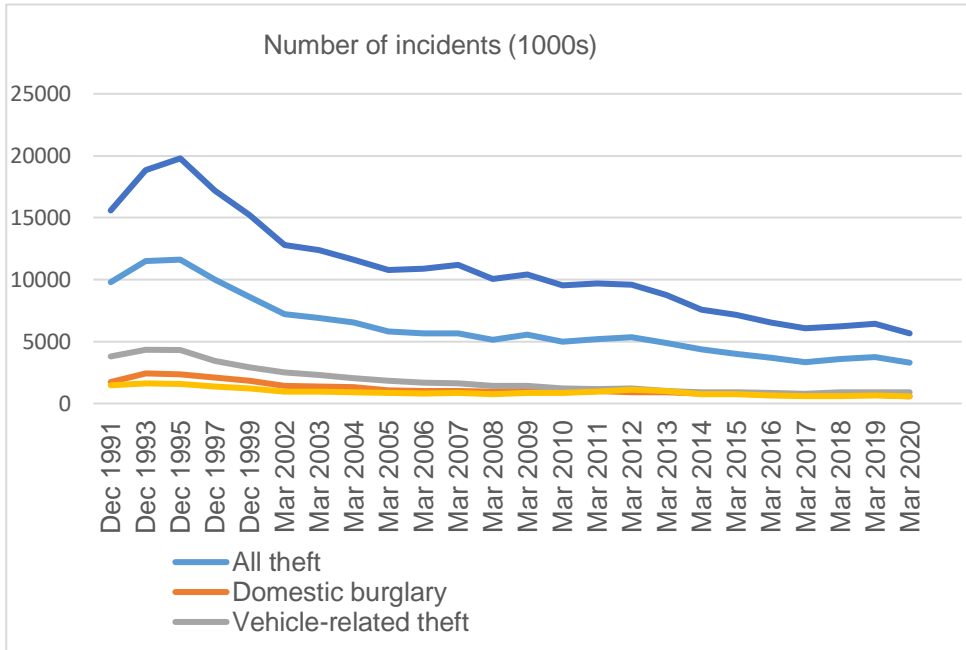
closely associated with the policies of Thatcher's government. During the same period, a significant increase in property crime was recorded in England and Wales (Farrall et al., 2012). Moreover, this similarity is apparent in relevant statistical findings after this period. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate a progressive fall of almost 50% in the number of property offences (from 1995 to 2005) and the rate



**Figure 1. Unemployment rate in England 1992 until 2022 (Office for National Statistics, 2024a)**

of unemployment (in 1993 and 2005). Likewise, these statistics reveal that there was a significant gradual decline in both issues in 2012 and 2017.





**Figure 2. Total recorded Theft Crime and Crime estimates from the CSEW in England and Wales from 1991 to 2020 (Office for National Statistics, 2024b)**

The similarity between the two figures (Figures 1 and 2) allows us to say there was a relationship between unemployment and property crimes. In another instance, in a survey conducted by Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction in 2005 and 2006 with a sample of 1,435, 13% of the offenders were unemployed and only 32% had a job at 4 weeks before coming into custody (Hopkins, 2012). It shows that unemployment might have forced some to commit crimes. However, the left realist perspective urges caution in interpreting this data, highlighting those factors other than unemployment, such as inadequate economic and social support, might also significantly influence criminal behaviour. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that unemployment does not invariably lead to crime in every context or at all times. Bandyopadhyay et al. (2011) highlight one of these contexts that in economically prosperous areas, residents affected by a recession generally do not resort to criminal behaviour following unemployment, specifically, the archetypal office worker who experiences job loss is unlikely to engage in criminal acts such as burglaries.

Also, the two graphs show that there is an exceptional trend of increased unemployment when the percentage of property crime decreased between 2005 and 2013. Some of the reasons behind this finding could be rough punishment, criminal justice policy, and police power (Carabine et al., 2009). The role of power is comparatively accepted by Downes (1983) that while the effectiveness of the police in curbing crime might not be as high as often assumed, they still have crucial roles to play. These include educating the public on how to prevent becoming victims of crime and working to decrease the level of fear within communities. Moreover, recorded crime by police might be decreased according to previous years and high-tech security tools might be effective in decreasing crime rate (Flatley, 2016). All these factors have the potential to reduce the number of crimes. This irregular situation may occur because of these factors.

Downes (1983) argued that despite there being a link between unemployment and crime, unemployment cannot be seen as the main and independent reason behind crime. Indeed, the inverse proportion between unemployment and property crime in 2005 and 2013 supports this argument. However, it just should be stated that unemployment as one of the relative deprivations may not be the only reason to explain property crimes. The key question arising here is why all unemployed individuals do not commit property crimes or other types of crimes. A possible explanation is that some do not have enough economic, social, and psychological support. Relative deprivation can change with social class or individual characteristics.

Overall, unemployment might be seen as a type of relative deprivation and this type of relative deprivation has an impact on property offences in England and Wales for a certain period which is mentioned although there is an irregularity. However, this relationship relies on statistical data and all these might be routed us wrong way according to left realists. Lea and Young (1984) argue that there might be a connection between unemployment and crime, but it is not so appealing and compelling reason.

### **Victimisation in Property Crime: The Role of Demographic and Environmental Conditions**

In exploring the implications of property crime within the framework of left realism, this discussion shifts focus from the perpetrators to the victims, emphasizing the role of specific demographic and environmental conditions. This section examines how variables such as socio-economic status, residential quality, and geographic proximity to police resources influence the likelihood and nature of victimisation. High-density areas and low-quality accommodations, economic disparities, and relative distance from central security facilities

disproportionately expose the working class and economically marginalized communities to property crime. This analytical shift helps in understanding not only who commits these crimes but more critically, who suffers because of them.

As mentioned in the introduction, demographic factors and environmental deprivation have an impact on property crime. In areas of high deprivation, there is a notable presence of repeat offenders and high rates of crime, leading to an increased number of victims. Low-quality residences make it easier for criminals to target these areas, leaving residents, particularly the poor and working classes, vulnerable to crime. Environmental deprivation exacerbates this issue by creating conditions that perpetuate crime and victimisation. Lea and Young (1984, p.44) highlighted the importance of environmental deprivation: "So, a brutalizing environment becomes all the more brutalizing by particular survival responses." In light of this explanation, environmental conditions can help researchers understand why people commit specific property crimes and how dwellers can be seen as potential victims who live in that area. There might not be enough resources for security and survival. This deprivation might lead to the development of high-crime areas and more people are converted to victims.

Left realists analyse property crime and victimisation in light of certain conditions. Lea and Young (1984) determined three important conditions for high victimisation and repeated crime:

*"a) In terms of the most direct violence, sexually and economically, a concentration in the lower regions-the margins of society;*

*b) In terms of direct economic robbery with treat victimization is still highest within the margins, spreads out into the middle-income group and is rare beyond the margins;*

*c) In terms of simple economic theft whether of money or of motor cars, victimization is proportional to income and spreads out beyond the margins (p.46)."*

According to Hirschfield and Bowers (1997), who looked at the geographical and statistical evidence in Merseyside, state that regions experiencing significant socio-economic challenges and joblessness often face elevated incidents of burglaries and assaults, attributed to a higher prevalence of offenders in these areas. This area might be evaluated as deprived in terms of many criteria such as high-density area and low-quality accommodation in such areas, low level of security and police power, and distance from the center. To

illustrate, if a high-crime area is far away from the police station or local police department, it might encourage some offenders. If the houses in an area do not have the appropriate security, residents are likely to be victims of property crime within the area.

As mentioned earlier, relative deprivation affects the poor and working class. They also do not have enough security as compared to the rich. Hope (2001, p.214) argues, "The 'poor' may also be more vulnerable to household property crime than the rich, because they are less able to afford, or have available, security measures and protection". Hope (2001) mentioned that the ability or inability to avoid danger fundamentally shapes the contrasting social risk profiles of the wealthy and the poor, leading to a skewed distribution of justice. In essence, the affluent enjoy disproportionately greater protection from crime than the economically disadvantaged. Lea and Young (1984, p.73) criticized other adverse conditions of housing and then concluded that 'one problem multiples its effects on another and they all focus on the most vulnerable'.

In addition, they mentioned that a higher number of crimes can emerge in a special area which can be defined as marginal and between particular stratum high victimization rates can be observed in that area (Lea and Young 1984). Hirschfield and Bowers (1997, p.173) found a similar finding that "Poverty segregation was greater in Birkenhead and Tranmere, which were less uniformly disadvantaged and contained a mixture of affluent, middle income and disadvantaged areas". This situation falls under condition (b) mentioned above by Lea and Young (1984). Moreover, Hirschfield and Bowers (1997) indicated that in Tranmere, the property crime frequency is a relatively high 20.3%, while in Birkenhead it is 24.6%, and these areas also exhibit ethnic heterogeneity and diverse income levels. A similar study has recently been conducted by Gulma (2022) in Leeds. One of the important findings of this study is that communities with a high degree of homogeneity tend to form stronger social connections and experience fewer incidents of crime.

The importance of consensus policing highlighted by Lea and Young (1984) coincides with a recent study's finding conducted by Gulma (2022). Gulma (2022) demonstrates that a positive relationship within neighbourhoods significantly lowers crime rates and aids police efforts in combating crime in the area (in Leeds).

Consequently, environmental deprivation, as one of the left realism's concepts, has affected property crime rates and property crime victimization. The significant demographic factors, including the quality of residence, whether the area consists of socially marginalized individuals, and whether the majority of the

population is poor, may play a crucial role in repeated crime and increasing victimization. Property crime victimization levels may change depending on environmentally deprived and socially marginal areas. Therefore, environmental deprivation brings significant outcomes that clarify the adverse circumstances of being a criminal and victim within such areas.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that socio-economic and demographic factors, analysed through the lens of left realism, have significant impacts on property crime in England and Wales. These factors have undeniable effects on the issue of property crime, although it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of left realism. Left realism does not cover all factors such as social media and psychological factors to elucidate property crime. For instance, social media usage in combating crime may be a factor. Gulma (2022) indicates that social media can enhance census data, providing a deeper understanding of communities for informed policy-making.

Diverging from left realism, there are some other possible explanations for the causes of crime. First, the right-wing explanation (right realist criminology), in a very simple manner, focuses on individuals and biological reasons rather than inequalities and policy as the causes of crime. In contrast, the left-wing perceives poverty and capitalism as causes of crime, and thus, the working class is predominantly affected by the crime problem (Webber, 2007).

Webber (2007) highlights some fundamental weakness of the left realist explanation (based on Runciman's analysis) that the scope for explaining crime is overly broad, leading to a potentially overwhelming variety of groups for comparison and this leaves open the possibility for other theories to further elucidate the causes of crime. Further, Webber (2007) criticizes that left realists pay close attention to street crimes rather than 'crimes of the powerful'.

In the same vein, Lea (2017) summarises two fundamental problems within left realism identified by Hall and Winlow (2015) firstly, for its reliance on conventional legal definitions of crime without considering the wider implications of harm, and its minimal contribution to debates about the adequacy of these legal classifications in reflecting people's actual experiences of harm. Secondly, it points out left realism's failure to address the need for broader societal interventions, such as economic reforms to tackle issues like unemployment, suggesting that these are outside the ambit of left realism and criminology as a whole.

Left realism presents some prominent arguments about property crime. The first one is that crime statistics may be exaggerated, and their analysis may not show the real situation of crime. Although statistical data show a strong connection between property crime and unemployment, a realistic perspective shows us that this relationship may not be so clear all the time, and other factors might be included. Secondly, unemployment leads to relative deprivation which may be a factor in the rising property crime rate and victimization in the absence of opportunities and support. Nonetheless, although unemployment is a cause of deprivation and reason behind property crimes, this factor may not be valid at all times and under all conditions because of the existence of other factors such as rigid punishment and sufficient criminal justice, successful policing, and existing provisions. The third point is that demographic factors impact property crimes, with these offences likely to be repeated in disadvantaged areas that are socially marginal and consist mostly of deprived residents. It also may cause a rise in the number of victims of property crime. Deprived accommodations are vulnerable to crime, in addition to this, brutal environmental conditions also cause people to commit crimes.

Lastly, left realism provides useful and comprehensive insights into property crimes. The fundamental reasons behind of property crime can be explicitly understood thanks to principles of left realism even though some other approaches such as right wing (right realist criminology) offer an alternative analysis. This approach not only enriches the discourse on the relationship between unemployment and crime but also underscores the importance of addressing the underlying conditions of environmental deprivation to mitigate property crime and its impacts on vulnerable communities.

### ***Limitations and Future Studies***

It should be accepted that left realism does not address all the issues in property crime, at least in this paper. Socio-economic and demographic factors need to be examined more deeply in terms of property crime in England and Wales. Unemployment and pro-custody employment situation of offenders should also be evaluated at the same time. Additionally, relative deprivation can be analysed by extensive surveys involving prisoners.

***Çıkar Çatışması Bildirimi:*** Yazar, çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.

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