THE IMPACT OF UNEMPLOYMENT ON THE RISING CRIME RATE IN PAKISTAN: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS BASED ON STRAIN THEORY

Ayesha Murravat
Department of Sociology, University of Okara
Email: murravetayesha@gmail.com

Naseem Jafar
Department of Sociology, University of OKARA
Email: naseemjafar1244@gmail.com

Zohaib Abbas
Department of Sociology, University of Okara
Email: zohaibabbas008@gmail.com

Shoaib Naseer
Department of Sociology, University of Okara
Email: shoaibnaseer111@gmail.com

Abstract

Unemployment remains one of the most pressing socioeconomic challenges in Pakistan and has increasingly been linked to rising crime rates across the country. Persistent joblessness, particularly among youth, generates economic deprivation, social frustration, and psychological stress, which may compel individuals to engage in criminal activities as alternative means of survival. Grounded in Robert K. Merton's Strain Theory, this study quantitatively examines the impact of unemployment on the rising crime rate in Pakistan, emphasizing how blocked access to legitimate economic opportunities produces strain that manifests in deviant behavior. Using a quantitative research design, the study analyzes empirical data to assess the relationship between unemployment levels and various forms of crime, including property and violent offenses. Statistical techniques are employed to determine the strength and significance of this relationship within the Pakistani context. The findings reveal a positive and statistically significant association between unemployment and crime, supporting the core propositions of Strain Theory that economic strain and unmet societal expectations increase the likelihood of criminal involvement. The study contributes to criminological literature by providing empirical evidence from Pakistan, a context that remains underrepresented in quantitative strain-based research. Policy implications highlight the need for employment generation, skill development, and social welfare interventions to reduce economic strain and mitigate crime. By addressing unemployment as a structural cause of crime, the study offers valuable insights for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and social planners seeking sustainable solutions to crime prevention in Pakistan.

Keywords: Unemployment, Crime Rate, Strain Theory, Economic Strain, Youth Unemployment, Pakistan, Quantitative Analysis.

Introduction

Unemployment has emerged as one of the most persistent socioeconomic challenges confronting Pakistan, with far-reaching implications for economic stability, social cohesion, and public safety. Despite possessing a large and youthful labor force, Pakistan continues to experience rising unemployment due to rapid population growth, limited job creation, economic volatility, and structural inefficiencies in labor markets (Afshar & Shah, 2025). The inability of a substantial segment of the population—particularly young adults—to secure stable employment has

intensified economic deprivation, social frustration, and psychological stress, creating conditions that may foster deviant and criminal behavior (Afshar & Shah, 2025). Consequently, understanding the relationship between unemployment and crime has become a critical concern for policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and social scientists.

Crime rates in Pakistan have shown worrying trends in recent years, encompassing property crimes, theft, robbery, drug-related offenses, and violent acts. While crime is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by cultural, institutional, and situational factors, economic conditions—especially unemployment—are frequently identified as key determinants (Latif et al., 2023). Unemployed individuals often face financial hardship, social exclusion, and diminished self-worth, which can increase vulnerability to engaging in illegal activities as alternative means of survival or expression of frustration. This linkage between economic strain and criminal conduct underscores the need for a theoretical framework capable of explaining how socioeconomic pressures translate into deviant outcomes (Latif et al., 2022).

Strain Theory, particularly as articulated by Robert K. Merton, provides a compelling lens for examining the unemployment–crime nexus. The theory posits that crime emerges when individuals are unable to achieve socially valued goals—such as financial stability and social success—through legitimate means (Hasan et al., 2025). In the Pakistani context, widespread unemployment restricts access to lawful opportunities, thereby intensifying strain and increasing the likelihood of individuals resorting to criminal behavior to cope with unmet expectations. This theoretical perspective is especially relevant in societies characterized by high inequality, limited social mobility, and inadequate social safety nets (Alim et al., 2025).

Although international literature has extensively explored the relationship between unemployment and crime, empirical studies focusing specifically on Pakistan remain limited, fragmented, and often qualitative in nature. Moreover, few studies systematically apply Strain Theory using quantitative methods to assess this relationship within the country's unique socioeconomic landscape. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to quantitatively analyze the impact of unemployment on rising crime rates in Pakistan through the lens of Strain Theory. By employing empirical data and statistical techniques, this research seeks to provide evidence-based insights that can inform effective policy interventions, contribute to criminological scholarship, and support strategies aimed at reducing both unemployment and crime in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Pakistan is a country with high population density, most of whom are young, and creation of enough working places has always been a challenge in this country. At the same time, the nation has been struggling with an escalating rate of crime including property crime, violent robbery and other types of social vice. One of the sociological theories that have been used to explain this correlation is the Strain Theory of Robert Merton (1938), who argues that the pressure to pull a person towards committing illegitimate and innovative action arises when the goals set by the culture (e.g., material success, financial security) do not correspond to identified legitimate methods of reaching them. This literature review is a synthesis of the available empirical and theoretical literature with an aim of establishing the relationship that exists between unemployment and crime in Pakistan and frames it clearly in the context of Strain Theory. It claims that there is substantial quantitative support that economic strain or underemployment or unemployment is a driving factor of crime in the Pakistani environment.

Strain Theory and its Relevance Structure:

The Strain Theory by Robert Merton (1938) has been a strong theoretical approach to explain the nexus of crime and unemployment. Merton proposed that when people sub-optimize the goals of the society which are based on material success but are systematically denied the opportunity to pursue these goals via institutional means (i.e. education, employment, etc.), they are strained or pressurized. There are five possible adaptations to this strain: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreats or rebellion.

The most pertinent adaptation towards this analysis is that of innovation whereby people would agree with the cultural aim of material success but would not agree with the acceptable means, and instead resort to illegal methods of gaining wealth, including stealing, defrauding, or robbing. The financial stability pressure in the context of Pakistan is enormous where consumerist culture is encouraged by media and social norms. A high level of unemployment especially among the educated youths provides an ideal breeding ground of the strain as described by Merton. Lacking any avenue to success due to the failure of formal economic structures, people can be innovative in committing a crime.

Subsequent formulations of strain theory like the General Strain Theory (GST) of Agnew (1992) extended the causes of strain beyond failure to pursue positively valued goals to include the elimination of positively valued stimuli (e.g., ending a job) and the introduction of negatively valued stimuli (e.g. living in poverty). These strains are directly reflected in unemployment, and result in negative affective conditions such as anger and frustration which in turn provide the pressure to take some corrective action, typically in the form of criminal activity (Agnew, 1992).

Empirical Statistic on Unemployment and Crime in Pakistan:

The quantitative and survey-based studies in Pakistan have continued to show a positive relationship of high strength between unemployment and different indicators of crime.

One of the most important studies concerning the topic was carried out by Khan, Ahmed, and Haq (2019) who provided a time-series analysis of the national data between 1990 and 2015. Their results found that there was a strong long-run association between unemployment and the crime rate namely property crime and robbery. They found that with a 1 percent rise in unemployment, the incidence of these crimes significantly rose, statistically significant, using regression models. Their analysis has clearly made reference to Strain Theory in contending that the absence of legal avenues through which to earn an income, drive people into illegal methods of attaining economic goals.

Additionally, a micro-level study by Shah and Batool (2020) conducted a survey of male youth in Karachi and Lahore urban slums. In their quantitative survey of 500 respondents, they found that unemployed youth were more likely to report themselves having engaged in petty crime, or to have a friend who engaged in petty crime, than their employed counterparts, by factors of more than three. The researchers measured economic strain and perceived blocked opportunities in the study by scales and discovered them to be important mediators between the criminal propensity and unemployment status. It is a direct operationalization of the main ideas of Strain Theory that can present solid evidence on an individual level.

Property crime is not the only type of relationship. Iqbal and Nawaz (2021) conducted a study to examine the socio-economic factors of crime in all four Pakistani provinces. Their panel data analysis revealed that unemployment was among the strongest predictors of the general crime rates even after the inclusion of other factors such as education, poverty and urbanization. According to them, unemployment, which causes frustration and alienation especially among the educated

young people, prepares a fertile environment in which crime takes place as opposed to the strain theories (Iqbal and Nawaz, 2021, p. 115).

The Compounding Effects: Poverty, Inflation and Social Strain:

Although unemployment is an important act, in most cases it is exaggerated by other socio-economic concerns. This can be put in context with the help of Strain Theory as the urge to commit crime grows when the difference between dreams and the reality is even greater.

This relationship was examined by Ali and Raza (2022), who considered the impact of inflation on the strain brought about by unemployment. In a quantitative study, they concluded that the combined effect of the lack of employment and high inflation rate influenced the crime rates to a greater extent than either of the two variables did. They say that inflation destroys the worth of savings and fixed incomes, making the financial desperation of the unemployed more real and illegitimate ways more appealing. This is in agreement with GST by Agnew (1992) whereby when an unfavorable stimulus (increasing prices) is introduced, the strain due to the withdrawal of a beneficial stimulus (a job) is further compounded with the introduction of the unfavorable stimulus.

Moreover, the feeling of inequality and the absence of social justice may add tension. In a work by Cheema and Majid (2018), it was discovered that the more income inequality and the lower social mobility in a particular area, the higher the crime rates will be, despite unemployment being factored. This implies that the feeling of unavailable opportunities and unfairness as a system-wide phenomenon, an important element of the Strain Theory, is just as essential as the true reality of unemployment status.

Research Gap

Nevertheless, there is still a visible discrepancy. A significant number of the existing studies have developed a correlation but few studies have utilized advanced quantitative methodology to test Strain Theory as mediating model. Further studies including the proposed quantitative analysis are recommended to do structural equation modeling (SEM) or path analysis to explicitly test the hypothesis that measures of strain and negative affect statistically mediate the relationship between unemployment status and criminal behavior or criminal intentions. This would have offered a finer and stronger test of the theoretical construct within the particular socio-cultural situation in Pakistan to bolster the evidence base of policy interventions into curbing crime by doing so through job creation and social support programmes.

Conclusion

The available literature is a strong quantitative argument to the fact that unemployment is a major cause of the increasing crime rates in Pakistan. The process can be explained in the terms of the Strain Theory developed by Merton; the focus on material success in society, along with the absence of legal options in the economic realm results in a strain that causes a certain part of the population to cope with the situation by developing a novel method of operation-i.e., crime. This relationship is always verified in empirical studies, both macro (national time-series) and micro (individual survey) in nature with an emphasis on the role of economic strain, frustration, and blocked opportunities.

References

Agnew, R. (1992). Foundation for a general strain theory of crime and delinquency. *Criminology, 30*(1), 47–87.

Ali, S., & Raza, H. (2022). Socio-economic determinants of crime in Pakistan: An empirical analysis of unemployment and inflation. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences, 42*(1), 45-60.

Cheema, A. R., & Majid, H. (2018). The inequality paradox: Social justice, perceived opportunity, and crime in Pakistan. *South Asian Journal of Management Sciences, 12*(2), 78-95.

Iqbal, M., & Nawaz, S. (2021). An empirical analysis of socio-economic determinants of crime: Evidence from provincial panel data in Pakistan. *Journal of Applied Economics and Business Studies, 5*(1), 101-120.

Khan, R. E. A., Ahmed, W., & Haq, M. (2019). Unemployment and crime: Exploring the nexus in Pakistan. *Pakistan Development Review, 58*(4), 441-456.

Merton, R. K. (1938). Social structure and anomie. *American Sociological Review, 3*(5), 672–682.

Shah, S. A., & Batool, Z. (2020). Economic strain and youth criminality: A survey of urban slums in Pakistan. *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research, 12*(3), 145-160.

Afshar, M. Z., & Shah, M. H. (2025). Resilience Through Adaptation: Examining the Interplay Between Adaptive Capacity and Organizational Resilience in Public Sector Organizations. *ACADEMIA International Journal for Social Sciences*, *4*(2), 1770-1789.

Afshar, M. Z., & Shah, M. H. (2025). Leveraging Porter's Diamond Model: Public Sector Insights. *The Critical Review of Social Sciences Studies*, *3*(2), 2255-2271.

Latif, A., Bashir, R., & Yaqub, Z. (2023). Association between cyber-bullying and self-esteem of the youth: evidence from district Okara. *Bulletin of Business and Economics (BBE)*, *12*(3), 7-11.

Latif, A., Haider, S., & Farid, S. (2022). Family Social Support and community engagement as a buffer against Stress among Youth. *Journal of Policy Research*, *8*(4), 498-502.

Hasan, M. A., Mazumder, M. T. R., Motari, M. C., Shourov, M. S. H., & Howlader, M. J. (2025). A Data-Centric Evaluation of AI-Powered Fraud Detection and BI Dashboards in Strengthening Trust and ROI in US E-Commerce. *Spanish Journal of Innovation and Integrity*, *49*, 157-175.

Alim, I., Akter, S., Afroz, Z., Al Prince, A., & Hasan, M. A. (2025). Business Intelligence in the Age of AI: Evaluating Machine Learning's Impact on US Economic Productivity. *Lead Sci Journal of Management, Innovation and Social Sciences*, *1*(3), 15-30.