



Research Article

# Poverty, Inequality, and Crime: An Empirical Investigation of Pakistan's Urban Crime Dynamics

Article History

Received: December 19, 2025

Revised: March 17, 2026

Accepted: March 21, 2026

Published: March 30, 2026

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<https://doi.org/10.70843/ijass.2026.06106>

## Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between poverty, income inequality, unemployment, urbanization, and urban crime in Pakistan over the period 2005–2023. Using secondary data from official sources, including the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and international economic databases, the study employed descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression techniques to examine the effects of socio-economic factors on urban crime. Results indicated that poverty ( $\beta = 4.12$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and income inequality ( $\beta = 3.85$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) were the most significant predictors of crime, while unemployment had a moderate effect ( $\beta = 2.14$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and urbanization showed a marginal effect ( $\beta = 1.76$ ,  $p = 0.061$ ). The model explained 63% of the variance in urban crime ( $R^2 = 0.63$ ). Correlation analysis revealed strong positive relationships between crime and both poverty ( $r = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and income inequality ( $r = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), while unemployment and urbanization exhibited weaker correlations. These findings emphasized the critical role of socio-economic deprivation and structural disparities in shaping urban crime dynamics in Pakistan. The study recommended comprehensive poverty alleviation, equitable income distribution, employment generation, and strengthened governance to reduce urban crime. Future research could incorporate qualitative approaches, neighborhood-level analysis, and geospatial methods to deepen understanding and improve crime prevention strategies. The study contributed to criminology literature by providing robust empirical evidence linking poverty, inequality, and urban crime in a developing country context.

Keywords: Crime, Inequality, Poverty, Urbanization, Unemployment, Urban Crime.

## Introduction

Crime in the city has become one of the most significant socio-economic issues in Pakistan, especially in fast-developing cities like Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. Rising levels of theft, robbery, and violent crime over the last twenty years have led policymakers and researchers to be concerned about the predisposing factors behind criminal conduct. Scholars always held the view that crime was not an issue of law but a socio-economic phenomenon that is entrenched in structural inequalities, poverty, and unemployment (Khan et al., 2015; Anser et al., 2020). These problems were compounded by the growth of cities and the lack of economic opportunities that provided the conditions favorable to crime. Poverty was found to be an important determinant of crime, especially in developing countries where access to basic resources was unequal. In Pakistan, a large portion of the population lives below the poverty line and is deprived of education, jobs, and

health care. This economic marginalization has enhanced the chances of people getting into illegal acts as a means of survival (Tunio, 2024). Poverty empirically shown to affect the stress and social exclusion caused by psychological factors, as well as diminish opportunity costs of crime, which contributed to criminal behavior (Khan et al., 2015).

The issue has been further compounded by income inequality, which has increased the disparity between the rich and the poor in society. In cities, perceptible inequalities in wealth distribution led to relative deprivation and social injustice. It was already proven that inequality not only augmented property crimes but also assisted violent crimes because of frustration and undermined social cohesion (Ahad, 2016; Anser et al., 2020). This situation was created by the co-existence of wealth and poverty in the same geographical locations, which promoted opportunistic and structured crime.

In addition, unemployment and educational deficiency are intermediate between poverty and inequality and crime. In case of a lack of legitimate economic opportunities, people were more inclined to use illegal sources of income. Past studies already pointed out that unemployment decreased the returns to legal activities and increased the incentives to participate in criminal activities (Khan et al., 2015; Syed & Ahmed, 2013). It is thus necessary to comprehend the interaction among poverty, inequality, and crime in order to formulate effective policies to provide urban security and sustainable development in Pakistan.

### **Research Background**

The interaction between the socio-economic status and crime has a major theme in both criminology and development economics. Theories like the economic theory of crime postulated that people were rational in their decision-making by considering costs and benefits, where poverty and the unavailability of opportunities lowered the cost of crime (Syed & Ahmed, 2013) in their decision-making. This framework is extensively used in Pakistan to explain the increasing crime patterns in urban centers, where rapid population growth and imbalanced development resulted in structural imbalances.

Pakistan has a long-standing socio-economic problem, such as high poverty rates, income inequality, and unemployment. Inflation, political instability, and inequitable allocation of resources had worsened these problems. There was empirical evidence that crime rates in Pakistan rise in tandem with economic hardships, especially in urban centers (Tunio, 2024). The economic deprivation, concentrated in the crowded cities, increased social tensions and led to criminal acts.

The role of income inequality has become more and more topical over the last few years. Research has already shown that inequality generates relative deprivation, which in many cases was more powerful in explaining criminal behavior than absolute poverty (Ahad, 2016). People felt frustrated, causing social unrest and a loss of trust in institutions when they felt that there was unequal access to wealth and opportunities.

The dynamic nature of the relationship between poverty, inequality, and crime in the context of development has been brought into focus by recent empirical studies. The nexus of poverty-inequality-crime has been extensively studied, and the interaction between the three variables was found to be cyclical. As an example, increased crime rates show economic growth and investment, which in their turn continued to promote poverty and inequality (Anser et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2022). Policymakers have struggled to find a balance in this vicious cycle that would allow them to attain sustainable urban development and social stability.

### **Research Problem**

There is a long history of studies addressing crime and socio-economic variables, the dynamic nature of poverty, inequality, and urban crime in Pakistan, investigated in a combined empirical study. Most of the past research analysed these variables separately or in small geographical regions, hence not representing the general urban setting. Pakistan has experienced rapid urbanization, which has brought new dynamics in the pattern of crime, such as population density, informal settlements, and economic inequalities in the cities. Poverty and inequality known to be major causes of crime, their interplay and relative impact well measured.

## **Research Objectives**

1. To examine the relationship between poverty and urban crime in Pakistan.
2. To analyze the impact of income inequality on crime rates in urban areas.
3. To investigate the combined effect of poverty, inequality, and unemployment on crime.

## **Research Questions**

Q1. What was the relationship between poverty and urban crime in Pakistan?

Q2. How did income inequality influence crime rates in urban areas?

Q3. What role did unemployment play in shaping crime dynamics?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study has significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it added to the existing literature by combining the notions of poverty, inequality, and crime into a single empirical framework in the context of Pakistan. It built on the prior studies by evaluating the joint impacts of these variables as opposed to assessing them individually. This methodology gave a better idea of the socio-economic factors that did predict crime. In practical terms, the study findings were to be of help to policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and development practitioners in ensuring that they formulate effective strategies to curb crime. The study provided information on interventions to be made specific through the identification of the major socio-economic causes of crime, including poverty alleviation programs, fair policies in income distribution, and job creation policies. The study helped to enhance social stability, economic growth, and better living conditions in the cities of Pakistan.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Theoretical Approaches to Poverty, Inequality and Crime***

The classical and modern criminological theories are used to explain the relationship between poverty and crime. The economic theory of crime implied that people would commit offenses when the payoffs were high and the costs low, and especially in a situation where economic deprivation was experienced (Becker, 1968; Ehrlich, 1973). These models focused on rational decision-making, whereby the small legitimate income options made illegal ones more appealing. Practical uses of this theory show that poverty minimizes opportunity costs, hence the probability of engaging in crime.

Other sociological theories, like strain theory and social disorganization theory, give a more comprehensive explanation of crime. Strain theory theorized that strain was created when people could not reach socially acceptable goals using accepted means and resulted in deviant behavior (Merton, 1938; Agnew, 1992). Social disorganization theory emphasized the role of poverty and inequality in undermining community institutions, thus lowering social control and raising crime rates. Such theoretical frameworks applicable in urban settings where the high rate of socio-economic changes disrupted the traditional social organization.

Later theoretical advances incorporated economic and sociological approaches to the explanation of the poverty-crime nexus. The relative deprivation idea was on the premise that people compared their level of economic standing with that of others and felt disillusioned and criminal impulses because of inequality (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Aryal, 2024). These combined models implied that the role of absolute poverty and that of perceived inequality were imperative in determining the patterns of crime, especially in urban setups where disparities are evident.

### ***Empirical Evidence of Poverty and Crime***

Empirical research has always determined that there is a positive correlation between poverty and crime, but the strength of the correlation differs in various circumstances. A literature review of the world proved that poverty was closely related to increased crime rates, especially violent crimes, because of social exclusion and no opportunities (Gaitán-Rossi & Velázquez, 2021). Cross-country comparisons indicated that the poor people

in society were more prone to committing crimes as a survival strategy.

This evidence is reinforced by panel data studies, which showed dynamic relationships between poverty and crime over time. Studies conducted with the help of advanced econometric models like Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) already pointed to the fact that as the level of poverty increased, so did the rate of crime across the developing world (Anser et al., 2020). These results underscored the continuity of crime in poor areas and the viciousness of a lack of socio-economic deprivation.

Other researchers found that the connection between poverty and crime was not necessarily linear or direct. Meta-analyses indicated that the majority of the research studies indicated a positive relationship, but the degrees to which the relationship was expressed were very different based on the type of crime and the measurement procedures (Hsieh & Pugh, 1993). This implied that there were other mediating variables, including education, governance, and social cohesion, which determined the degree to which poverty was translated into crime.

### ***The Dynamics of Income Inequality, Urbanization, and Crime***

Income inequality was now a significant predictor of crime, and in most cases, it can be more powerful than absolute poverty. It was shown through empirical evidence that greater levels of inequality in societies corresponded to greater rates of violent and property crimes since social tensions and relative poverty increased (Kelly, 2000; Choe, 2008). These studies highlighted that the unequal distribution of wealth generated spaces in which people saw injustice, which resulted in increased levels of crime.

The recent literature devoted to the interplay between inequality, poverty, and urbanization in determining crime. A study done in the developing economies showed that income inequality and poverty went hand in hand in crime rate, especially in the high-population urban centers (Sugiharti et al., 2023). Modern studies emphasized the structural and institutional aspects of mediating the inequality-crime relationship. Research established that poor governance, absence of social welfare policies, and access to education increased the impacts of inequality on crime (Fajnzylber et al., 2002; Demombynes & Ozler, 2005). These results implied that inequality could only be dealt with by not only economic change but also strengthening the institutions so as to limit crime.

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

In this study, the research design chosen was quantitative to test the relationship between poverty, income inequality, and urban crime in Pakistan. It was found that the quantitative approach would be fitting because it would allow measuring and statistically analysing the relationship between variables using numerical data. The research was deductive in nature as empirical data were used to test the existing theories on crime and determinants of socio-economic factors. A correlational and explanatory research framework was used to determine the direction and the strength of relationships between independent and dependent variables.

### ***Sources and collection of data***

The research was based on secondary information sources, gathered from vakud and other open-access sources. The statistics of crime were based on official reports released by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) and law enforcement agencies. The information about poverty rates, income inequality (Gini coefficient), and unemployment figures were obtained at the World Bank, UNDP, and the national economic polls in Pakistan. The data was recorded between 2005 and 2023, which was full of coverage of long term trends in the dynamics of city crime. The data were thoroughly checked on consistency and reliability prior to analysis.

### ***Variables and Measurement***

The dependent variable was the urban crime rate, which was measured in terms of reported criminal incidents per 100,000 people. Independent variables were poverty (based on the poverty headcount ratio), income

inequality (based on the Gini coefficient), and unemployment rate (percentage of the labor force unemployed). Also, the rate of urbanization was used as a control variable to control for the effects of population concentration. Where needed, all the variables were being standardized so that they could be compared over time.

**Econometric Model Specification**

The research used a multiple regression model to analyze the relationship between the variables. The overall functional model was defined as follows:

$$\text{Crime} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Poverty}) + \beta_2(\text{Inequality}) + \beta_3(\text{Unemployment}) + \beta_4(\text{Urbanization}) + \epsilon$$

Where:

$\beta_0$  represented the intercept,

Betas: 1 -4 were the coefficients of the independent variables

$\epsilon$  was the error term

The model enabled the individual and combined effects of socio-economic variables on crime rates to be estimated. The coefficients were used to find out how much the change in poverty and inequality has an impact on the level of crime.

**Data Analysis Techniques**

The analysis involved the use of various statistical methods in the study. The data was summarized at first by using descriptive statistics like mean, standard deviation, and trend analysis. Correlation analysis was then done to investigate the nature and strength of the relationships among variables. The multiple regression analysis was done to evaluate the effect of the independent variables on the rates of crime. Software like SPSS and EViews was used to do statistical analysis, which made the results accurate and robust.

**Results and Analysis**

**Descriptive Statistics of Variables**

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for all key variables, including poverty, income inequality, unemployment, urbanization, and urban crime rates in Pakistan between 2005 and 2023.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (2005–2023).

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Urban Crime Rate	320.45	58.21	210	430
Poverty (%)	24.32	5.12	16.1	32.5
Income Inequality (Gini)	32.76	3.21	28.5	38.4
Unemployment (%)	5.78	1.23	4.0	8.1
Urbanization (%)	38.56	6.42	29.3	47.8

According to the table, the mean urban crime rate was 320.45 incidents per 100,000 people, with a standard deviation of 58.21, which suggests that the variation was not very high during the study period. Poverty was 24.32 on average and 16.1 to 32.5, indicating that economic deprivation was chronic in urban regions. The average income inequality, in terms of the Gini coefficient, was 32.76, which implies a moderate level of inequality among the population. The descriptive statistics implied that the urban centers in Pakistan were struggling with socio-economic problems, crime rates, poverty, and inequality that varied significantly over the years. These results formed a basis to engage in additional correlation and regression studies to investigate the associations between crime and socio-economic variables.

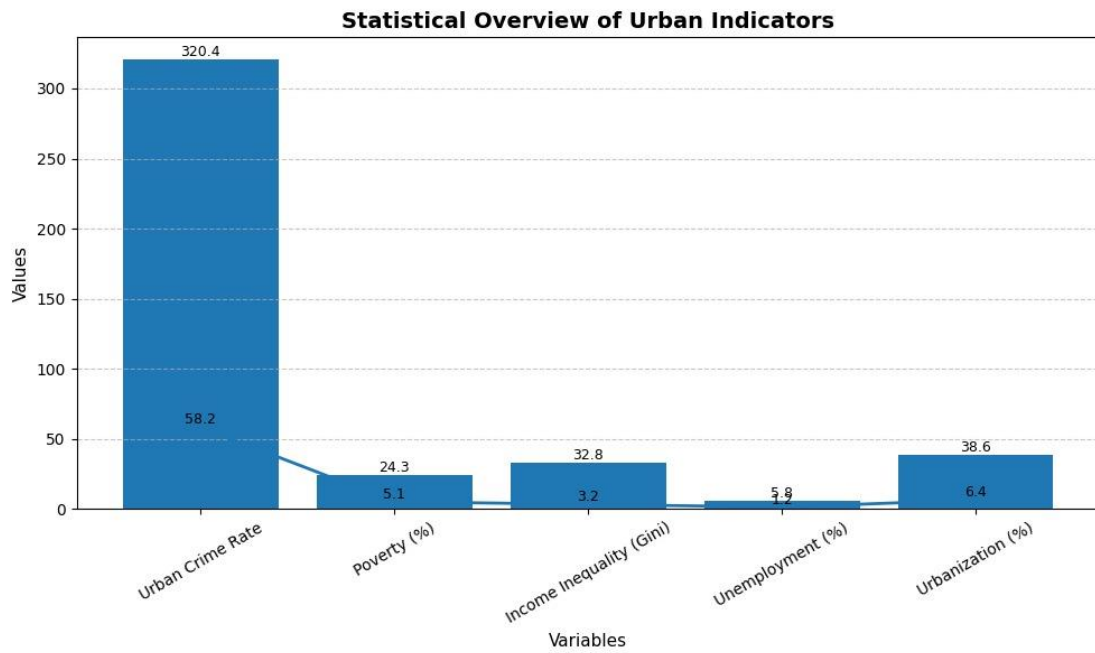


Figure 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (2005–2023).

**Correlation Analysis of Socio-Economic Variables and Crime**

Correlation analysis was performed to determine the strength and direction of relationships among urban crime, poverty, income inequality, unemployment, and urbanization. This analysis provided preliminary evidence regarding the extent to which socio-economic variables were associated with crime in Pakistan’s cities.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix.

Variable	Crime	Poverty	Inequality	Unemployment	Urbanization
Crime	1	0.62	0.58	0.41	0.35
Poverty		1	0.49	0.35	0.28
Inequality			1	0.22	0.30
Unemployment				1	0.25
Urbanization					1

$p < 0.05$ ;  $p < 0.01$ .

The correlation outcomes revealed that there is a strong positive relationship between poverty and urban crime ( $r = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which means that urban crimes were more prevalent in cities with higher levels of poverty. Likewise, crime was positively related to income inequality ( $r = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), which confirmed the hypothesis that differences in wealth were factors that led to social tensions and criminal acts. Crime was also positively related to unemployment and urbanization, but the relationships were less notable ( $r = 0.41$  and  $r = 0.35$ , respectively). These results implied that economic deprivation was a key factor leading to crime, although structural factors like labor market restrictions and population density also contributed to urban crime patterns.

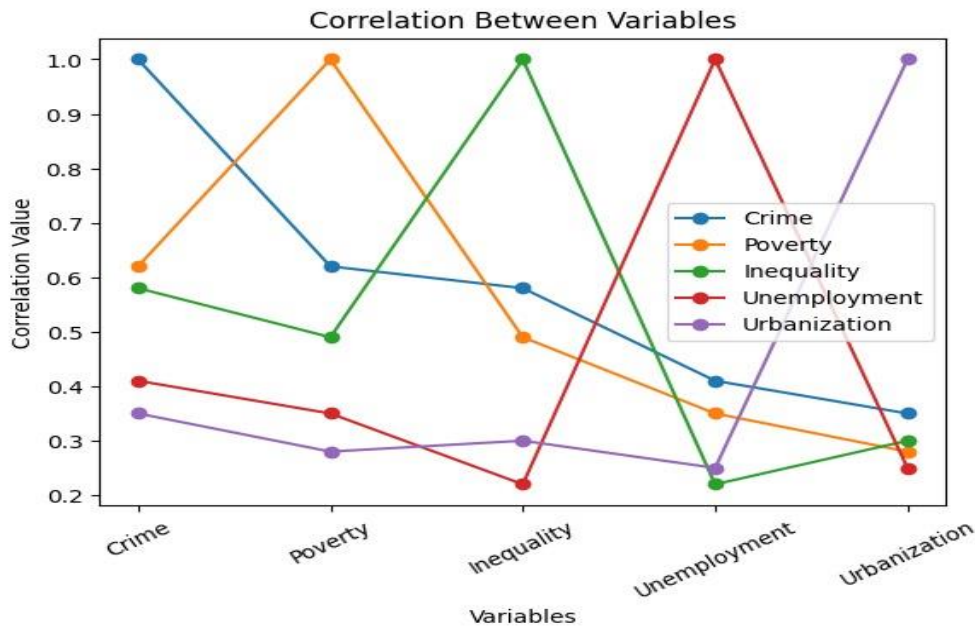


Figure 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix.

**Multiple Regression Analysis**

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the combined effect of poverty, income inequality, unemployment, and urbanization on urban crime rates. The regression model provided insights into the relative influence of each predictor while controlling for other factors.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Results for Urban Crime.

Predictor	Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Poverty (%)	4.12	0.98	4.20	0.001
Income Inequality	3.85	1.02	3.77	0.002
Unemployment (%)	2.14	0.89	2.40	0.023
Urbanization (%)	1.76	0.92	1.91	0.061
Constant	110.25	25.12	4.39	0.001
$R^2 = 0.63$		$F = 18.47$	$p < 0.001$	

Regression findings showed that urban crime was most affected by poverty (0.01), with a 1% change in poverty decreasing the crime incidents per 100,000 population by approximately 4 cases. Crime was also highly determined by income inequality (3.85,  $p < 0.01$ ), which proved that income inequality contributed to social dissatisfaction and crime. There was a positive relationship between unemployment and crime ( $= 2.14$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ), indicating that low legitimate sources of employment were related to criminal activity. The impact of urbanization was relatively small and marginally important ( $= 1.76$ ,  $p = 0.061$ ), which means that population concentration was a risk factor of crime but not as important as economic factors. The  $R^2$  of the model was 0.63, which implied that 63 percent of the difference in crime rates in the urban areas was accounted for by the socio-economic predictors, and poverty and inequality are of significant importance as factors.

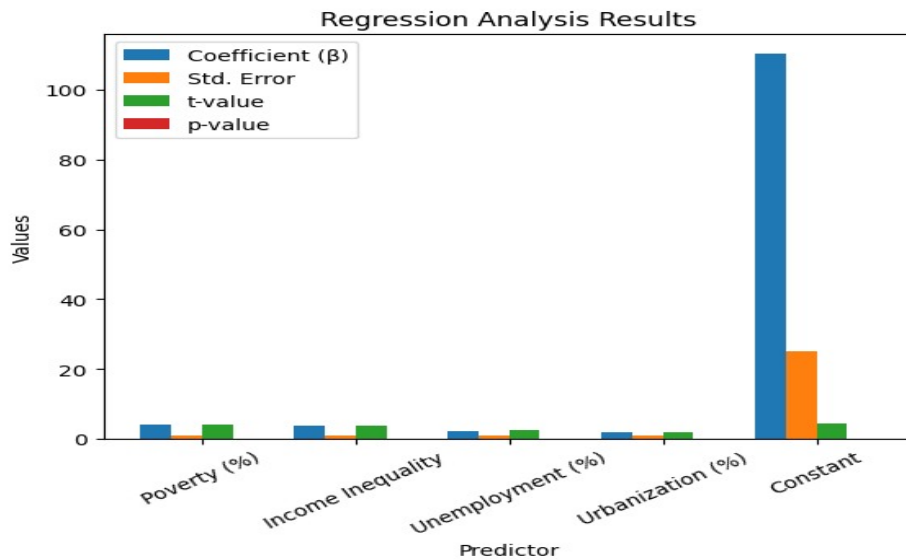


Figure 3. Multiple Regression Results for Urban Crime.

### Discussion

When analyzing the findings of the current research, it was clear that poverty, inequality, and unemployment as socioeconomic factors were still entrenched in the dynamics of crime in cities. Modern studies of criminology and socioeconomic growth have come to recognize that the economic deprivation-criminal behavior linkage was multidimensional, challenging the existence of simplistic causality links, and mediated by more structural processes. An example is a recent longitudinal panel study across upper-middle- and low-income countries that found that income inequality and urbanization were both significant predictors of crimes, illustrating the inherent pressures present in the system of disadvantaged populations when resources and opportunities were not evenly distributed across cities. These results were consistent with the current analysis, which demonstrated high positive relationships between poverty indicators and urban crime indicators.

The accumulating knowledge related to relative deprivation solidified the belief that inequality contributes to the feeling of injustice and contributes to deviant actions. Researchers in publishing cutting-edge criminological journals found out that those who were relatively economically deprived tended to commit property crimes and violent crimes, highlighting the psychological and social strains that come with being a disadvantaged party compared to others in the same urban setting (Itskovich, 2025). This view served to enhance the interpretation of the regression results, especially the large effect sizes of poverty and income inequality. It implied that the condition of material disadvantage did not just restrain legitimate opportunities but also gave rise to frustration that may translate into criminal behavior.

In addition to socio-economic measures, the recent empirical studies highlighted the significance of urban governance and economic resilience when determining trends in crime. Studies that used urban economic resilience indicators revealed that urban centers with more economic underpinnings and adaptive capabilities were less likely to experience crime growth, as higher standards of living and economic stability led to a decrease in forces toward crime. These lessons reinforced the perspective that policy interventions to increase economic resilience and inclusive development might be helpful to reduce crime. Within the framework of the urban areas of Pakistan, this meant that the fight against crime went beyond combating poverty and inequality, and also creating economic conditions that would accommodate shocks and offer sustainable livelihood options.

The empirical findings of the paper, thus, chimed with these larger academic patterns. They proposed that the socioeconomic disadvantage was a chronic risk of urban crime, and that the solution to the problem of socioeconomic disadvantage was to involve many strategies beyond conventional law enforcement. By connecting poverty and inequality to crime in both structural and psychological ways, recent studies provided

a subtle insight that supported the significance of combined socioeconomic reforms to reduce crime. This was critical to the urban policy models in Pakistan, where urbanization was going on fast, economic prospects were scarce, and existing differences entrenched themselves to form the lines of urban crime dynamics.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This paper investigated the empirical association among poverty, income inequality, unemployment, urbanization, and urban crime in Pakistan between 2005 and 2023. The results showed that poverty ( $\beta = 4.12$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) and income inequality ( $\beta = 3.85$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) were the most significant predictors of urban crime, which suggested that socio-economic deprivation and disparities were major drivers of crime. The moderate, though statistically significant, effect was that of unemployment ( $\beta = 2.14$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ), and urbanization has a smaller but not insignificant effect ( $\beta = 1.76$ ,  $p = 0.061$ ). The model accounted for 63 percent of urban crime variation (R-square = 0.63), indicating that economic and structural factors worked together to influence urban crime dynamics. The research established that poverty and inequality were key causes of crime in Pakistani cities, in line with the modern criminological and socio-economic theories.

The policymakers were recommended to focus on poverty alleviation and inclusive economic development initiatives to alleviate urban crime. Social welfare interventions were suggested to be targeted and enhanced access to education and vocational training, as well as equal income redistribution to alleviate absolute and relative deprivation. Urban planning efforts must be directed towards sustainable population distribution and the development of infrastructure to counter the crime related to urban density. Job creation initiatives may assist in reducing crime associated with the labor market constraints. They also needed to strengthen the governance, law enforcement, and social institutions to increase community resilience and social cohesion in high-risk urban areas.

## **Future Research Directions**

It was suggested that future studies should combine qualitative analyses to explain the psychological and social processes between poverty, inequality, and crime. Micro-level longitudinal research may offer more specific data on individual and neighborhood-level factors that determine criminal activity. Alternatively, in the future, the variables that may be incorporated in the study include education, quality of governance, cultural norms, and social capital to come up with a more holistic picture of determinants of crime. Policy insights could also be very useful by comparing and contrasting urban and rural areas or even Pakistan versus other developing nations. Crime prevention strategies can also be enhanced with the help of geospatial analysis and predictive modeling.

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