ITEM B: THE FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE OF CRIME

Unlike other sociological perspectives such as Marxism, Functionalist sociologists have a positive view of crime and deviance, seeing it as a necessary and useful part of social life. Functionalist sociologists believe that crime performs a range of important social functions such as maintaining boundaries and promoting social change.

However, critics would argue that crime is simply a manifestation of an unequal society and therefore it is a sign of social dysfunction.

Applying material from Item B and your knowledge, evaluate the Functionalist perspective of crime and deviance. (30 marks)

Functionalist sociologists would argue that both crime and deviance have positive functions for society and that they are an inevitable part of social life. Without crime and deviance it would be difficult to establish norms and values and a shared system of beliefs as no member of society would ever deviate from normal social behaviour.

Functionalists such as Durkheim (1983) regard crime and deviance as a normal and in fact inevitable consequence of social life. This is the case because not everyone in society has had the same experience of socialisation (the process of learning the norms and values of society) and therefore their beliefs are always going to be slightly different to one another. As such, individual members of society will of course carry out different behaviours in social situations which, even if they are not considered criminal, may indeed be considered deviant. Durkheim also argued that in a modern society there has been a tendency towards anomie – a state of normlessness which means there is greater diversity in human behaviour and as such members of society naturally choose different behaviours or paths. According to Item B, however, these differences can have beneficial consequences for both the individual and society as crime and deviance perform “a range of important social functions such as maintaining boundaries and promoting social change”.

Durkheim elaborates on these ideas by arguing that criminal behaviour brings about a social reaction amongst members of society that amounts to a condemnation of their behaviour. However Durkheim believed that instead of forcing suffering or pain upon the offender, the purpose of punishment was to restore the boundaries accepted by wider society through making an example of members who
fail to adhere to the norms and values. Similarly he argued that in order for any social change to occur (positive or negative) it must start with an act that deviates from the norm, and therefore would be considered deviant or even criminal. A famous example of this would be the political activism of Nelson Mandela against Apartheid in South Africa, for which he was imprisoned. However, his behaviour and alternative views ultimately had a beneficial impact upon society as it resulted in a redistribution of wealth and power. This shows that Functionalist ideas about crime and deviance reveal the positive social functions performed by such behaviours and do not simply view them as a “sign of social dysfunction” (Item B).

Durkheim’s ideas have been further developed by other sociologists such as Kingsley Davis (1967) who described criminal/deviant behaviour as a safety valve for society. He commented specifically on the positive social function performed by prostitution, an act which typically would have been regarded as deviant at best, and most likely criminal, as it allows men sexual release without threatening the social institutions of marriage and family since men will not form emotional attachments to sex workers in the way they might if they had an affair. This again shows the ways in which Functionalist ideas can portray a positive view of crime and deviance. However, conflict theories such as Feminism would be critical of this notion – as it fails to recognise the high levels of exploitation and patriarchal control that exist in society and particularly within the sex trade.

However Cohen, another Functionalist, argues that one of the most obvious functions of crime and deviance is as a signifier of a deeper social malaise or that there is a problem in society that needs addressing. He offers examples such as truancy in schools indicating issues within social institutions such as education, and his views can be applied to current affairs in religion whereby terrorism could be regarded as a sign of political dissatisfaction. However Functionalists do generally recognise that crime and deviance is only functional to an extent and if it reaches epidemic levels then it actually undermines social stability entirely.

One of the key criticisms of Functionalist theories of crime and deviance is that although they offer a clear explanation of the positive functions performed by crime, they fail to consider the negative aspects, or indeed why crime and examples and there is further reference to Item B, this time in an evaluative context.

An introduction of alternative Functionalist sociologists who have developed the ideas of Durkheim.

Explicit evaluation of the points made with reference to conflict theories such as Feminism.

New concepts have been introduced and clearly explained.

Further analysis of Functionalist ideas illustrated by a new sociological study.

Some internal evaluation in the final sentences.

Explicit and developed evaluation of Functionalist ideas through a comparison to Strain Theory.
deviance exists in the first instance. Strain theories, for example, argue that one of the key reasons for criminality is that members of society have unequal access to achieve socially approved goals and as such they may go on to experience status frustration (Cohen) and develop criminal or deviant subcultures in which they can achieve success through illegitimate means (Cloward and Ohlin). An example of this could be a violent gang in which its members gain acceptance through a violent initiation act and then continue to climb the hierarchy based upon the levels of violence they are willing to carry out. These ideas are critical of Functionalist perspectives of crime and deviance because they would argue it paints too positive a picture of crime and deviance and also that it makes the assumption of a meritocratic society which many theories believe to be a myth.

Marxism, for example, would continue to criticise the Functionalist view of crime as they would argue that members of the working classes are far more likely to be forced into criminal behaviour than the middle classes simply to be able to survive in an unequal society and that this is even more pronounced at a time of global recession. Marxists also focus on the view that capitalism as an economic system is criminogenic and causes crime as it is based upon exploitation of the working classes and this exploitation that can ultimately cause crime as people may feel the pressure to consume to the levels shown in the globalised mass media, or may experience a sense of frustration or alienation around their lives which can result in crimes against people or property. This shows that there are many aspects of crime and deviance which have not been accounted for by Functionalist theory.

Similarly, Marxists would also argue that the laws, norms and values of society that we are forced to conform to by agents of socialisation and social control do not truly benefit us as they are not reflective of the interests of the whole of society, rather of the powerful ruling elite. Law enforcement focuses largely on the petty crimes of the working classes without focusing enough on the crimes committed by organisations, the state or environmental crime if they conflict with the interests of capitalism. This shows that Functionalism again ignores some important issues regarding the functions of crime and again paints a one-sided picture.
Functionalism also fails to consider other social causes of crime and deviance such as biological differences and the impact of socialisation (Right Realism) or relative deprivation and marginalisation (Left Realism). It also fails to comment upon the differences between men and women in terms of their opportunity to commit crime (Feminism) or the links between the levels of crime and media representations. This shows that although Functionalism provides a useful basis for our understanding of crime and deviance there is still much to be considered in terms of explaining the origins of criminality.

To conclude, Functionalist theories can be credited in terms of their focus on the positive social functions performed by crime and deviance but their views could be considered too simplistic as they do not give great enough attention to the root causes of crime and the social systems of inequality that bring them about.

[1231 words]

Examiner style comments: **Mark band 25–30**

This is a top mark band essay. It uses Item B well and clearly outlines the key aspects of Functionalist theories of crime and deviance. It uses sociological theories, studies, concepts and examples appropriately and these are well developed in the majority of the essay. There is clear evidence of analysis and evaluation although this could be more consistent throughout, and the brief reference to Realism/Feminism towards the end suggested the candidate had more to say but was confined by time. To improve further, therefore, the earlier outlining of Functionalism could be more concise or evaluative points could be embedded after each of the positive functions.
ITEM B: CRIME PREVENTION

There are a range of sociological approaches which argue that they offer the most effective solution to crime prevention. Sociologists argue on the one hand that situational crime prevention (reducing opportunities for crime) is the most effective method, whereas others suggest environmental crime prevention has a bigger impact (changing the environment to prevent crime from occurring). A further approach that has been suggested by sociologists is social or community crime prevention which suggests stronger bonds and social controls could play the biggest part.

However, more traditional approaches to preventing crime focus on the impact of punishment and the different punitive measures that can be implemented to prevent crime.

Applying material from Item B and your knowledge, evaluate the view that punishments are the best way to prevent crime. (30 marks)

According to Item B some sociologists would agree that punishment is the best way to stop individuals from committing crime in society. They would focus on the “impact of punishment and the different punitive measures that can be implemented to prevent crime”. However, other sociologists would argue that other approaches might be more effective in reducing criminality such as the situational approach, the environmental approach or the social or community approach (Item B).

Sociologists that advocate punishment as the most effective form of crime prevention would argue that there are a range of ways in which it can help to reduce criminality. The first of these is through deterrence and this corresponds to the Functionalist ideas about crime and deviance, as they too suggest that there is a need for punishments to reinforce the norms and values of a society by imposing sanctions on those who fail to conform. There is a belief that making an example of offenders can result in them being less likely to commit crimes in the future so they themselves are deterred, but also our knowledge of the sanctions they receive and the subsequent impact this has on their life chances makes the rest of society less likely to engage in criminal activity. This approach was well documented as part of the Thatcher government which believed in short stints in young offenders institutes as a way of sending a clear message to youth offenders that their behaviour would not be tolerated.

Another aspect of punishment is the view that it can actually be used to rehabilitate offenders. By providing education and guidance to offenders and making this compulsory as part of...
their sanctions they are better equipped for the future and are therefore less likely to engage in criminal behaviour in the future.

The third aspect of punishment that can cause a reduction in crime is incapacitation. By placing an individual in jail in response to their crimes or even stronger sanctions such as execution or chemical castration, law enforcement agencies are sending a clear and direct message that a failure to conform to the laws of a society will not be tolerated and the strength of sanctions imposed will correspond to the severity of the crime that has been committed and the negative impact it has on society. By physically removing the most serious offenders from society we are inevitably seeing a reduction in crime as these individuals are far more likely to reoffend if allowed to remain free.

The final aspect of punishment that serves to reduce crime in society is retribution. For many, there is a real sense that crimes committed must in some way be paid for and although this will of course prevent future crimes, it is also based on the assumption that past violations against the law must be paid for in some way. By expressing social outrage towards the perpetrator of a crime it significantly reduces their chances of reoffending and once again asserts to dominant norms and values of a society.

Based on the evidenced presented so far it would appear that punishment alone is a very effective measure of crime prevention. However, other sociologists would be critical and would argue that it does not address the reasons why crime occurs in the first place and the social conditions which bring it about. Situational crime prevention is described by Clarke (1992) as a means to pre-empt crime and is based largely on reducing the opportunities to commit it. Basic measures such as locking doors or using surveillance such as CCTV, for example, have a dramatic impact upon the number of crimes that are possible. This is because situational crime prevention is based on an underlying rational choice theory whereby the criminal weighs up their chances of being caught for an offence and if enough obstacles have been placed in their way, they are much less likely to engage in criminal activity. Similarly, there is an additional element to situational crime prevention called displacement. This involves the movement of crime from one place to another which can actually have an impact on crime levels rather than simply moving them on as...
again it makes it more difficult to commit a crime. An example of this could be dispersal orders which make it difficult for young offenders to congregate in large groups to commit crime – instead moving them on to other areas which may prove more difficult to commit crime in. This suggests, therefore, that punishment is not the only effective measure of controlling crime.

Another aspect of crime prevention is environmental crime prevention which focuses on the physical environment and has found that by managing it effectively, law enforcement agencies can have a significant impact upon the crime rate. Wilson and Kelling (1982) famously published a study on ‘broken windows’ which suggested that if areas that showed signs of social disorder such as broken windows, graffiti, litter, dog fouling, etc. were allowed to remain in this state, it actually had the impact of encouraging further criminal behaviour as members of society felt the clear signs of previous criminal activity meant they themselves were less likely to be caught for it in the future. This is because areas with ‘broken windows’ also lacked forms of social control (no formal police presence and no informal community policing) which meant individuals were free to violate laws without fear of repercussions. Wilson and Kelling therefore proposed a zero-tolerance approach to policing and immediate restoration of any signs of social disorder to prevent this from happening in the future. This is further evidence to suggest that punishment is not necessarily the most effective strategy for controlling crime.

A final element of crime prevention comes from social and community policing and crime prevention. This approach places the emphasis in the context of offending and aims to remove the social issues that cause crime in the first place. This could mean tackling social inequality and unemployment levels or reducing the opportunities to commit crimes amongst some social groups, e.g. young males. It could also focus on the methods used in policing to ensure that they are more effective and less discriminatory towards social groups.

Based on the evidence, sociologists would argue that although punishment is a fundamental part of crime prevention, it needs to be conducted alongside situation, environmental and social methods to control crime in order to be most effective. There needs to be a more holistic approach which focuses on the needs of society and the issues of discrimination that are
faced by social groups and which is active in overcoming these to create a more meritocratic society where individuals and social groups are more able to achieve using legitimate opportunity structure (Cloward and Ohlin) to prevent future crime.

[1122 words]

Examiner style comments: *Mark band 25–30*

This essay falls within the top mark band and has a good range of perspectives considered. These are well supported with sociological evidence and form an evaluative argument which has strong levels of analysis throughout. Key concepts have been used effectively, as have sociological studies, and there is explicit reference to Item B. The conclusion is clear, there are links back to the question throughout and intelligent issues are raised based on the content of the essay.