

Theories of Crime and Criminology

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Crime has long been a focus of academic study, with theories about its causes and forms developing alongside society. Early views often stressed biological factors, suggesting that inherent traits made some people prone to crime, a view championed by Cesare Lombroso. Over time, psychological theories, which look at individual thought processes and behavior, have come into play. Simultaneously, sociological approaches have underscored the vital role of social structures, cultural norms, and environmental conditions in shaping criminal actions. The move from close-knit, family-based communities to impersonal cities has complicated our understanding of crime by changing social ties and community interactions, as noted by Jeffery. Today, criminology sees crime as a complex issue needing combined approaches that consider biological tendencies, psychological motivations, and social influences. Environmental elements, such as neighborhood qualities and daily social interactions, are key influences that can either encourage or discourage crime. Modern theories combine these aspects to fix the gaps in older models, aiming for better explanations across different types of crime. These theories have practical implications for policymaking, where strategies for law enforcement and prevention need to be based on detailed understandings of cause, not simple assumptions. Ongoing criminological research calls for increasingly detailed, interdisciplinary methods that merge the study of individual actions with societal forces to create real solutions for the lasting problems of crime (Portnoy, 2018).

Historical Views on Crime Theories:

The history of crime theories shows how views of criminal action have developed within broad social, biological, and psychological frameworks. Early criminology was heavily influenced by the classical school, which arose in the 18th century through the work of thinkers like Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham. This view stressed rational decision-making, freedom of choice, and deterrence, suggesting that people commit crimes after weighing the potential benefits against the chance of being punished. The classical approach set basic rules for legal systems focused on fair punishment, but it was criticized for oversimplifying human motivation and not considering social influences.

The positivist school came about in the 19th century as a response to classical ideas, aiming to understand crime through scientific methods. Cesare Lombroso's work is a prime example of this shift. He argued that criminals could be recognized by specific physical traits, a concept known as the "born criminal" theory. Though largely dismissed by the scientific world due to its simplifications and racial biases, Lombroso's theory

marked an important step toward using empirical methods in criminology (Craven, n.d.). The positivist field grew to include psychological accounts, which identified mental illness and personality issues as key causal factors.

During industrialization, sociological theories gained ground as rapid urbanization changed social structures. Emile Durkheim introduced ideas like anomie, a state of normlessness that arises during societal changes, to explain why people deviate from norms. Later sociologists, like Robert Merton, developed strain theory to explain how societal pressures lead to crime when individuals find legitimate routes to success blocked. These frameworks shifted focus from individual criminal problems to how environmental conditions and structural elements affect crime rates.

Throughout the 20th century, various efforts tried to combine biological, psychological, and sociological views into more complete models. Clarence Ray Jeffery pointed out this need by showing how modern societal evolution from close family groups to distant systems affects social unity and crime (Jeffery, n.d.). Criminology still faces critiques for being divided and failing to produce universal strategies or ideas.

Looking at historical views reveals a move from basic ideas of inherent criminality or free will to complex frameworks that see crime as a multifaceted issue shaped by personal traits and social contexts. The development of criminological theory underscores ongoing challenges in creating all-encompassing frameworks that can address different criminal actions across various cultures and historical periods.

Biological and Psychological Explanations:

Biological and psychological theories of crime have sought to identify specific inherent traits or mental disorders that supposedly make individuals more prone to criminal action. Early biological theories, such as those by Cesare Lombroso, proposed that criminals could be identified by physical abnormalities or atavistic traits, suggesting biological determinism (Craven, n.d.). While these deterministic views have been largely rejected due to methodological flaws and ethical problems, modern biological perspectives now include genetics, neurophysiology, and biochemical factors affecting behavior. Research explores the interaction between genetic predispositions and brain function, including prefrontal cortex abnormalities and neurotransmitter imbalances, to understand how these factors influence impulsivity, aggression, and decision-making processes linked to crime (Portnoy, 2018). Biosocial approaches emphasize that biological factors do not independently cause crime but interact with environmental influences.

Psychological explanations examine the complex mental and emotional mechanisms within individuals that may underlie criminal action. Personality disorders, psychopathy, and developmental issues like attachment problems are studied as potential contributors to antisocial behavior. Some psychological theories suggest that deficits in moral reasoning and impulse control increase the risk of offending. By incorporating psychological insights, experts understand that cognitive distortions, such as justifying harmful actions and not considering consequences, are key in how criminals make decisions (Jeffery, n.d.). Behavioral psychology explores how individuals acquire behaviors through conditioning and reinforcement, sustaining delinquent patterns over time.

Modern criminology acknowledges that purely biological or psychological models have limitations in explaining crime. These views often fail to account for the social environments and structural factors that shape behavior. A complete understanding of criminality now requires recognizing the interactions between an individual's biological or psychological traits and their environmental influences (Craven, n.d.). This biosocial framework encourages interdisciplinary research merging genetics, neuroscience, psychology, and sociology for a more complete understanding of crime causes, avoiding simplistic conclusions. Policies resulting from these explanations often promote early intervention for at-risk youth, providing mental health services and social support to reduce environmental risk factors (Portnoy, 2018).

Sociological Approaches to Criminal Behavior:

Sociological perspectives on criminal behavior focus on how social frameworks, relationships, and environmental factors shape an individual's likelihood of committing crimes. Unlike biological and psychological explanations that concentrate on inherent or personal traits, sociological theories see crime as a result of external social influences, including economic disparities, cultural norms, peer group interactions, and community disorganization. These perspectives share the idea that crime often arises when social institutions and networks break down or experience strains.

Durkheim's concept of anomie is a foundational sociological theory, defining a state of normlessness that emerges during rapid social change or instability. Anomie disrupts societal regulation and integration, leading to a rise in deviant and criminal behaviors. Robert Merton's strain theory examines how structural barriers, such as poverty and discrimination, prevent individuals from achieving culturally prescribed goals through legitimate means, resulting in crime. The gap between desired goals and available resources compels some to adopt unlawful techniques.

Social disorganization theory examines how neighborhood conditions, including poverty, residential mobility, and family disruption, weaken community bonds and informal social controls that normally prevent crime. Regions where social connections are weak often show increased delinquency rates. Theories such as differential association and social learning theory add to this perspective by proposing that individuals learn criminal behavior through interactions with others who support deviant values.

Among modern theoretical constructs is the Broken Windows Theory, which states that visible signs of disorder, such as vandalism, communicate neglect and create conditions conducive to serious crime. Routine Activities Theory investigates how daily behaviors create criminal opportunities by bringing motivated offenders together with vulnerable targets when protective guardians are absent.

Sociological approaches emphasize the need to investigate societal forces rather than focusing solely on individual issues when explaining crime (Craven). Examining these perspectives is crucial for understanding how systemic inequalities and community environments influence crime patterns among various groups.

The Role of Environment in Crime:

The setting for individual growth and social interaction lies in environmental factors, which create the context for the development of criminal behavior. The interplay between physical surroundings and social conditions affects both criminal opportunities and the likelihood of individuals engaging in crime. Criminological theories, including the Broken Windows Theory, argue that visible signs of disorder and neglect, such as vandalism, broken windows, and graffiti, promote serious crime by indicating a lack of informal social control (Craven, n.d.). Environmental cues serve dual roles by indicating crime conditions and actively contributing to the increase of crime within neighborhoods.

Defensible Space Theory emphasizes the role of urban design and spatial arrangements in shaping crime patterns through their effects on surveillance and territoriality. Environments with poor design, such as insufficient lighting, isolated areas, and unclear boundaries, become places where crime risk increases because these spaces reduce surveillance and offer offenders anonymity. In contrast, environments that promote community engagement and watchfulness help prevent crime by building a shared sense of responsibility among residents. Routine Activities Theory builds on these principles, asserting that criminal acts occur when motivated offenders find suitable yet unprotected targets during their daily activities without capable guardians present. Environmental patterns, including increased foot traffic and improved public spaces, can change these dynamics.

Social environments, shaped by socioeconomic status, peer influences, family structure, and community cohesion, shape the development of criminal tendencies.

Neighborhoods facing socioeconomic challenges often experience higher crime rates due to concentrated poverty, limited resource access, social disorganization, and weakened informal controls (Jeffery). These conditions can create emotional states like alienation and stress, driving people to illegal methods for achieving goals. The presence of delinquent peers enables the learning of criminal behaviors through socialization mechanisms outlined in Social Learning Theory.

Examining environmental contexts is important for understanding crime causation, as these contexts interact with individual factors and broader societal forces. strategies need to incorporate spatial design, neighborhood conditions, social networks, and routine activities to understand their combined effect on offending patterns (Craven, n.d.). Addressing environmental risk factors remains crucial in strategies designed to prevent crime and promote community safety.

Modern Criminological Theories:

Modern criminological theories have developed from previous models by incorporating diverse academic views to better understand crime. Biosocial criminology is an advance, integrating biological and sociological factors to stress that neither genes nor environment alone can explain criminal action. This approach examines the interactions between genetic predispositions and environmental factors like family dynamics, peer influences, and socioeconomic conditions to determine individual tendencies toward crime (Beaver et al., 2023). This marks a shift from deterministic models by recognizing the dynamic interaction between inherent traits and environment.

Rational Choice Theory is another key theoretical framework, asserting that offenders make deliberate decisions, weighing potential rewards against possible risks before engaging in crime. Rooted in classical criminology's focus on free will and rational decision-making, modern interpretations acknowledge that offenders' choices can be constrained by emotions and incomplete information (Portnoy, 2018). This framework has informed policies aimed at deterring crime by increasing the likelihood and severity of punishment.

Social learning theory remains influential, showing that individuals develop criminal behaviors through interactions with others who exhibit deviant actions. This emphasizes how social environments either support or deter crime over time, functioning as an adjunct to strain theory and control theory by explaining how social bonds affect conformity or deviance.

Integrated theories connect psychological, biological, and sociological explanations, developing models that consider various causal pathways. Clarence Ray Jeffery's contributions highlight this trend, promoting approaches that integrate legal crime definitions with behavioral motivations within societal contexts. Integrative efforts in criminology respond to critiques of fragmented knowledge by seeking understandings that can guide effective strategies.

Contemporary criminological theories demonstrate that crime is a complex, dimensioned phenomenon. The explores beyond simplistic explanations to models that integrate individual agency within social frameworks, strengthening theoretical rigor and increasing relevance for addressing behaviors.

Policy of Crime Theories:

Examining crime theories yields essential policy implications that inform effective criminal justice strategies and prevention programs. Differing criminological theories propose unique methods of crime control, based on their beliefs about what drives individuals to commit crimes. Classical theories, including Rational Choice Theory, focus on deterrence through punishment, based on the concept that offenders deliberately choose to engage in crime. policies now emphasize severe sentencing, mandatory minimums, and three-strikes laws to increase the perceived costs of criminal behavior. The effectiveness of these has been questioned due to their limited impact and neglect of emotional and situational influences on criminal behavior (Portnoy, 2018).

Biological and biosocial frameworks suggest that genetic and neurophysiological factors interact with environmental influences to develop criminal tendencies. Policies inspired by these perspectives advocate for early intervention programs that assist at-risk populations by providing education, mental health services, and family support, designed to counteract biological vulnerabilities (Craven). These methods aim for a dual purpose, including both punitive and rehabilitative efforts, along with preventive strategies.

An examination of sociological theories reveals how social structures—poverty, inequality, and community disorganization—and cultural norms contribute to crime. Policy responses based on sociological understandings focus on advancing social conditions through investments in community development and education, while also strengthening families and promoting pro-social peer networks. Policing strategies shaped by the Broken Windows Theory support maintaining public order by focusing on minor offenses to prevent major crime. Community policing models, which enhance informal social control in neighborhoods, face questions due to potential over-policing and effects on marginalized populations.

Integrated or contemporary criminological perspectives support policy development that recognizes how individual characteristics interact with environmental contexts (Jeffery). Holistic frameworks that address crime promote joint efforts among social services, law enforcement, education, and public health sectors, rather than relying only on punitive measures. Understanding theoretical foundations in crime provides policymakers with insights for selecting interventions that suit specific offending behaviors, while pursuing societal justice and public safety.

Conclusion:

An examination of crime and criminology uncovers understanding of criminal action from various theoretical perspectives. Historical views provide foundations, showing how initial crime ideas were linked with moral and religious interpretations before transforming into scientific methods. Biological and psychological explores how individual predispositions emerge, focusing on genetic, neurological, and cognitive factors that may contribute to criminal behavior. These perspectives are insufficient unless analyzed within the social context. Sociological approaches examine how social structures, cultural norms, and group dynamics shape deviant behavior, emphasizing the impact of inequality and socialization on crime rates. This perspective broadens through environmental examination, considering how physical surroundings, community conditions, and situational factors either create opportunities for crime or deter it. Integrating these dimensions within contemporary criminological theories results in models that account for the complexity and variability of offending patterns in diverse populations. The nature of these theories provides policy implications, as understanding crime's causes enables targeted interventions, including rehabilitation programs and community-based prevention strategies. An approach to policymaking demands that legislators assess personal characteristics and societal factors to develop strategies that address criminal behavior by tackling both its visible manifestations and its root causes. Integrating biological, psychological, sociological, and environmental viewpoints into criminological study creates more discourse that encourages detail instead of basic interpretations. This method promotes research and strengthens initiatives designed to decrease criminal activity and build safer communities through policies based on data.

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