

The History of Criminology

By Patrick Nelson PhD

Criminology came about as ideas from law, sociology, psychology, and biology bounced off each other. Its history shows how views on crime and criminal behavior changed, influenced by what was happening in society, science, and technology. Early ideas about crime came from moral and religious beliefs, where punishment was about getting even or stopping others. Then, in the 1700s, the classical school came along, saying people choose to commit crimes. This set the stage for more organized studies of criminal behavior. In the late 1800s, Cesare Lombroso put forward the idea of biological determinism. His theories, though controversial, suggested some physical traits made people more likely to commit crimes. Even though people criticized his oversimplified ideas, they sparked research into how biology and society affect criminal behavior, according to Portnoy's 2023 study. Later, sociological thinking looked at crime within bigger social structures and inequalities. By the mid-1900s, criminology was its own field, using methods from different areas, including psychology. Tech advancements changed criminal investigations and data analysis. Current research focuses on really understanding crime using critical thinking and solid data. Looking back at this history shows how early theories still shape current talks about justice and what to do about crime. Studying how criminological theory developed is really important for understanding both old beliefs and the new stuff societies deal with as they try to fight crime well.

The first ideas about crime and punishment came from moral, religious, and philosophical systems. They tried to explain criminal acts as signs of evil or divine will. In many old societies, people saw criminal acts as going against gods or social rules. This led to harsh punishments as a way to get even. You can see this in the ancient Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, where the idea was an eye for an eye to keep things balanced. In medieval Europe, legal systems mixed religious ideas, treating sin and crime as linked. This meant punishment was supposed to fix things both on Earth and spiritually. early views didn't really understand human behavior, but they did connect crime with moral wrongdoing.

Then, in the 1700s, things changed. The Enlightenment brought the Classical School of criminology. Cesare Beccaria and others said people can choose what they do and think things through before committing crimes. Beccaria's book *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764) said punishment should fit the crime and be quick and certain to discourage criminal behavior. It shouldn't be about cruelty or superstitions. This way of thinking said crime could be stopped by changing laws to protect human rights and benefit society, not just following religious rules.

In the late 1800s, the first biological explanations tried to find traits that made people more likely to commit crimes. These ideas weren't fully scientific yet. Before Lombroso's biological determinism, criminology mostly focused on moral and philosophical questions instead of scientific research. These early theories set up important ideas: crime is a social problem that needs organized solutions, and it's also a personal choice. These ideas were key to criminology's progress.

Cesare Lombroso's work started the idea of biological determinism in criminology. That's why he's called the father of modern criminology. His theory was that some people are born with criminal tendencies. You can spot them through physical traits he called atavistic stigmata. Lombroso said criminals were like evolutionary throwbacks with features like uneven faces, big jaws, and certain skull shapes that made them different from regular people. This was a big change from earlier theories that focused on free will and rational choice. Lombroso thought biological factors determined if someone would commit crimes. Lombroso's basic work created the positivist school of criminology, which tried to use scientific methods to study why people commit crimes instead of just using philosophical or moral reasoning.

Lombroso's ideas about biological determinism fit in with some 19th-century scientific trends. He used Darwin's theory of evolution and new fields like phrenology and physiognomy. He argued that crime came not just from social factors but also from inherited traits and physical problems. His method was to categorize criminals by looking at them directly instead of using legal definitions of crime. But people criticized his approach because his ideas were too fixed. He didn't consider social factors or psychological issues. People doubted if you could really identify criminals just by looking at their physical traits. There were problems with his methods, and it raised ethical concerns about labeling certain groups.

Even with the criticisms, Lombroso's focus on studying things empirically helped criminology become a scientific field separate from philosophy and theology. His work led other scientists to study biological drivers of behavior using advanced methods like genetics and neurophysiology. You can still see this research tradition in modern biosocial criminology. Today, people recognize the problems with strict biological determinism. Current views support multiple explanations that combine genetic tendencies with what's around you. Lombroso's theories are now old-fashioned in criminology, but they're still important because they introduced the idea of biological explanations for criminal behavior.

Looking at criminal behavior from a sociological perspective is different from previous biological and individual explanations. It sees crime as a social issue shaped by structural and cultural things. In the early to mid-20th century, these sociological viewpoints became popular. They looked at how social environments, institutions, and interactions contributed to criminal behavior. Biological determinism says criminal behavior comes from physical and psychological traits inside people. Sociological theories look at outside factors like poverty, inequality, social disorganization, and cultural norms that affect what people do.

Strain theory is an important sociological idea that Robert K. Merton came up with. Back in the 1930s, Merton said that societies pressure people to achieve goals like wealth and status. But they don't give everyone the same chances to reach these goals. This difference between goals and opportunities causes stress and frustration. This pushes some people to commit crimes as a way to succeed. Strain theory connects criminal behavior with inequalities in the system instead of blaming it on personal flaws.

Social learning theory is influential. It says people learn criminal behavior from others who support bad values and actions. Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory explains how people start to think illegal activities are okay. This happens because they're constantly exposed to attitudes that favor crime in their peer groups and communities. This view emphasizes how important social context is in determining what people see as acceptable behavior.

Labeling theory challenges conventional ideas. It focuses on how society reacts to deviant behavior instead of just looking at the traits of offenders. When people are labeled as criminals, it strengthens their identity as a deviant. It also encourages them to continue committing crimes because they face stigma and exclusion from mainstream opportunities.

These sociological views work together to broaden criminology's focus. They look beyond individual problems and see crime within bigger social patterns and power dynamics. The policy people have changed direction, targeting basic issues like economic inequality and community breakdown instead of just punishing people. Critical criminology has expanded this analysis by looking at how legal systems might benefit dominant groups while pushing vulnerable people to the side. Studying crime through sociological lenses still gives important insights. It sees criminal behavior as deeply connected to complex social contexts instead of just seeing it as separate actions by people who are naturally deviant.

From the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, modern criminology became a separate scientific field. It focused on studying crime, criminal actions, and how society reacts in a systematic way. Around this time, there was a shift away from traditional philosophical and moral ideas. People started using empirical research combined with interdisciplinary study. The rise of modern criminology as its own field is often linked to the growth of academic institutions and research methods. These aimed to study criminal behavior beyond legal definitions and punishment. Methods of studying crime got better because people realized you could look at it from social, psychological, and biological angles. This allowed for an approach that pulled from sociology, psychology, law, and medicine. Criminology focused on identifying offenders, handling offenders through penology, and explaining criminal behavior through criminogenesis. Studying criminology became both an applied science focused on law enforcement and a theoretical field to understand what causes deviant behavior.

The foundation of criminology as a field got even stronger because of scholars who introduced methods for collecting and analyzing data. Researchers used statistics to find patterns in crime rates among different groups of people and places. This shift to numbers let them make judgments that were more objective than before. They had used stories and philosophical talk. On top of focusing on empirical validation, modern criminologists prioritized testing ideas about what causes crime against evidence. They used evidence instead of theories and assumptions. The scientific way modern criminology worked made it different from past ways. It helped people build knowledge over time.

During this time, modern criminological thinking was influenced by new social theory. Studying how people interact with their social surroundings became important to understanding criminal behavior. The study of social disorganization theory showed neighborhood things could lead to more crime by weakening social controls. The study area broadened to include societal influences on behavior instead of just looking at individual problems or moral issues.

The development of modern criminology signaled a big change. Criminal activity became something people studied through research methods backed by many different fields. This work set the stage for theories that would later explore how biology, psychology, society, and legal systems all connect in the criminal justice field.

Studying crime through psychological methods has been a big thing in criminology. It focuses on how individual thoughts and behaviors are major factors in criminal activity. Looking at psychological theories is different from biological determinism. It looks at how we think, personality traits, and life experiences, which might make people more likely to commit crimes. It does this instead of just concentrating on physical traits. Early psychological views used a lot of psychoanalytic theory, including Sigmund Freud's ideas. He said bad behavior could come from unconscious issues and bad defense mechanisms. This view emphasized internal psychological problems as major factors instead of just outside social things.

In the mid-twentieth century, behavioral theories came about. They were based on how we learn. These theories say people learn bad behaviors through what happens around them. People can be rewarded or punished. This is why Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory says people learn bad values and methods through a tight group of people. Studying cognitive theories gave more insight into criminal behavior by looking at how offenders process information differently. Studying cognitive distortions shows how wrong or biased thinking can be used to justify criminal behavior.

Explanations from personality theory became popular too. Studies identified things like impulsivity, hostility, and low self-control as signs of who might commit crimes. Researchers could systematically measure these traits. Today, modern psychological criminology

uses many views in a biopsychosocial framework. It understands how your genes, brain, environment, and thinking all are connected. Using this perspective has led to doing a better job of figuring out who offenders are and fixing them.

Advances in brain imaging and psychophysiological measurements have shown a link between brain problems—like reduced prefrontal cortex activity—and bad behavior. The research makes it clear that we need to start intervention programs early. These programs should focus on teaching cognitive-behavioral skills to lower rates. The field of criminology has been able to explain more because psychology has looked at complex mental processes that shape criminal behavior beyond just what the law says and social situations.

Technology has changed criminology a lot. It's changed how we find crimes and how we think about criminal behavior. By using technology, criminology has expanded to have better information, do better data collection and analysis, and stop crime in better ways. Revolutionary changes emerge by advancements like DNA profiling, digital forensics, and biometric identification. Together, these make criminalistics more effective at detecting and who break the law. Digital tools make the connection between suspects and crimes more accurate. It also lowers wrongful convictions by giving scientific evidence. Big data analytics and AI help criminologists study data sets. These sets include crime patterns, social stuff, and offender profiles. Models can forecast criminals' activities by looking at data with background elements.

On top of improving detective work, technology has helped advance criminological theory in other ways. It's made it easier for people in computer science, psychology, sociology, and biology to work together. Neuroimaging technology shows connections between brain structures and antisocial actions challenging earlier views and highlighting biological tendencies and environment. New criminal cybercrimes have emerged as technology has gone up. This requires criminology to develop new frameworks. To study cybercrime you must look at structures and sociological factors.

In addition, tech helps law enforcement bodies work together well using databases like CODIS and Interpol. The system has become essential if you want to improve work transnationally and tackle crime.

Relying on technology gives ethical debates over risk assessments or recommendations.

Technology impacts criminology and strengthens empirical studies at the same time. The progression of technological systems says it will continue to serve as a crime-tool.

To deeply understand criminal behavior, crime study now joins ideas from biology, psychology, sociology, and technology. Right now, biosocial criminology is back. It looks at how genes, brain development, and surroundings affect crime. Modern biosocial research uses things like neuroimaging and tests to study biology and social and focuses on factor

Criminology has become another step further by adding new systems with data. The advances are able to catch crime quickly and predict.tech helps.

Critical criminology continues is in discussions by what crimes are and what crimes are controlled

Adopting restorative justice practices can help. The latest research focuses on how a community works to help an offender who went off path. By checking relations it can help solve an individual.

Criminology has developed through changes, science, and different ideas to understand what made people behave the way they did. The start was based on morals, where retribution and protection were important Then there was criticism. The sociological perspective has said that there are things like poverty and inequality in determining criminal patterns. Criminology combines studies with theories and has more understanding on why crime has happened. Technology improvements also play a good important role for people and investigations. The trends are making better change by understanding all of what has happened and making sure control is in store. Modern changes require an evolution that can bring people to effective prevention and justice.