

# Sociological Theories of Crime

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Sociological theories give us a way to understand crime by looking at the social issues that lead to it. Unlike biological or psychological explanations, these theories show how things like social structures, cultural norms, and relationships affect whether people break the law (Craven, 2021). Crime isn't just seen as someone's personal failing, but as something that comes from bigger social problems like inequality and the kind of community they live in. This helps us look at how things like family, friends, and where you live can create situations where crime is more likely, according to Krohn. Sociology has a few main ideas about this, like strain theory, which looks at how wanting to achieve what society values can lead to crime if people don't have a fair way to get there. There's also social learning theory, which says people learn to be criminals from others, and labeling theory, which focuses on how society's reaction and judgment of people can affect them. Control theory also adds to this by looking at how strong social bonds can stop people from breaking rules. And cultural deviance theories look at subcultures that go against the main norms, which can cause crime in specific groups. Things like broken windows theory and defensible space are also important because they show how the environment can either encourage or discourage crime. When we put all these ideas together, sociological theories give us a broad understanding of why crime happens and what kind of social changes might help to reduce it (Zembroski, 2022).

Sociological theories try to explain crime by looking at the social situations and structures that affect people. These theories are different from psychological or biological ones because they focus on how things like social norms, relationships, and institutions all play a role in leading to crime. The main idea is that crime isn't just a personal problem, but a result of larger social forces (Craven, 2021). One basic idea is strain theory, which says that things like economic inequality can create a gap between what people want and what they can actually achieve, leading them to commit crimes as a way to get ahead. Social learning theory expands on this by saying that people pick up criminal behaviors from friends and others who act as examples and reward those behaviors. According to Massey (2021), groups and communication play a big role in passing on values that encourage crime. Labeling theory is another important idea, which looks at how society's reaction to certain behaviors can cause people to be labeled, which then makes them more likely to continue committing crimes. This shows how society's views can shape criminal identities, rather than seeing crime as just a built-in personal trait. Control theory focuses on how individuals are connected to society. It argues that strong ties to family, school, or community can prevent crime by making people want to fit in. When these social ties break down, people are more likely to commit crimes. Cultural deviance theories look at how unique subcultures can pop up in marginalized communities, where the usual social values clash with local rules that actually support illegal behavior (Skinner, 2020). When you look at these

sociological ideas together, they give you ways of understanding crime as something that comes from both personal choices and larger social issues.

Strain theory says that crime happens when people feel blocked from achieving what society tells them is important. This can cause them to feel stressed and frustrated, leading them to turn to crime as a way to reach their goals. This idea started with Robert K. Merton. He argued that social structures can limit opportunities for marginalized groups, which then makes them more likely to commit crimes (Craven, 2021). For example, if society values money and success, but some people can't achieve it through normal means because of things like poverty or discrimination, they might turn to theft or drug dealing instead. Merton talked about five ways people react to this kind of strain like conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. He argues that innovation is where crime is most likely because it means accepting society's goals but rejecting the regular ways of achieving them. This shows how inequality can lead to both personal frustration and widespread crime in disadvantaged communities. Since then, strain theory has gotten more complex. Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory says that more than just economic failure can cause strain. It also includes things like losing someone you love or experiencing abuse, which can lead to negative emotions like anger and frustration. According to Zembroski's (2022) study, this can make people see crime as a way to deal with painful feelings caused by tough social situations. Strain theory shows how social disadvantages and emotional reactions can work together to promote crime. It shifts the focus from individual mental problems to how society creates crime trends. Strain theory is a key idea because it looks at crime as part of a larger social problem.

Social learning theory says that people learn to commit crimes by watching and interacting with others. This theory is different from ones that focus on personal traits or economic issues because it highlights the importance of environment and social context in whether someone turns to crime. The main idea is that people develop views on whether breaking the law is okay through interactions with close groups like family, friends, and subcultures (Craven, 2021). They learn through imitating others and seeing what gets rewarded or punished. The different things that people experience helps explain why some become criminals while others follow the rules. Albert Bandura's research on observational learning is really important to social learning theory. Bandura showed that people can learn new behaviors just by watching others, without needing to be directly rewarded or punished. So, if someone sees their friends committing crimes and getting social approval or money, they might see those behaviors as acceptable. The differential association theory works with social learning theory by focusing on how things like the frequency, duration, priority, and intensity of social interactions affect the passing on of criminal values. According to Massey (2021). This theory helps explain why crime differs across different social environments. It finds that people see different views depending on where they are. People living where it's common might hear a lot that portrays breaking the law as a means to survive.

Labeling theory changed how crime is studied by shifting the focus from the criminal act to how society responds to it. The theory says that behaviors aren't inherently criminal, but rather become that way when society labels them as such. When someone gets labeled as a criminal (Craven, 2021), two processes start to affect individuals, stigmatization and social exclusion.

The process of labeling impacts people through what others think of them. Once labeled, it becomes harder to gain job opportunities, and more. What was once situational slowly becomes a serious criminal behavioral issue. It shows why formal penalties are there to reduce crime.

Labeling theory offers more theories that question a person's assumptions. It examines law agencies that issue uneven rules which result in discrimination among marginalized groups. With systemic inequalities taking place, the systems stay going because they continue to have discrepancies.

The practical use has shown policy changes. Changes like less punitive punishment or restorative programs in order to keep from labeling one early. Through research and actions, collective responses from society has also been recorded.

Control theory states people become criminals if their societal connections are weak which leads to how social relationships can deter criminal behavior. There should be four social bonds according to Hirschi; commitment, attachment, involvement, and lastly, belief. Attachment means developing love for family and friends in order to promote conformity through respect. The concept for commitment is doing school or engaging in career which establishes a belief in society norms. After the commitment is involvement which mean being active in social groups that lowers free time for crimes. Belief of course means living and agreeing because it makes standards for one to live.

That bonds work by reducing the odds of one going into that road because it will influence what actions happen later. Deterioration then lessens your views of criminal and raises the odd of doing so. This then shifts to reasons on what protects one from committing the crimes.

Many actions follow this because of a person's school life or with weak family relationships. Community rules along with neighbors are also great due to a role of collective efficiency.

While it does great in the social integration, it lacks some on how social issues or lower social groups can weaken bonds. Functions that provide protection continue to have affect and shape due to better preventative measure.

Basically, cultural deviance theory says people get into crime because they buy into the values of a subculture that's against what society considers normal. These groups come up with their own rules, attitudes, and actions that either support or turn a blind eye to breaking the law. These subcultures pop up as a response to tough situations, especially in areas where people don't have the same chances to succeed as everyone else. People in these groups start to believe that acting out is okay if it helps them get respect, figure out who they are, or make money (Craven, 2021). The idea is that crime is something that happens because of shared experiences and beliefs, not just because someone is messed up in the head.

Some early studies by Albert Cohen, Richard Cloward, and Lloyd Ohlin found that these bad subcultures give young people another route to earn respect when society shuts them out. In

poor areas where doing well in school and getting a legit job seems impossible, different rules emerge. These new rules might glorify being tough, defying authority, or even violence. This network of values makes it seem like breaking the law is understandable and even acceptable within the group, according to Krohn. Your friends play a big part, because people tend to copy the actions of those they look up to.

Cultural deviance theory looks at why crime rates differ between communities by looking at how local culture shapes things. It goes against the idea that crime is just about personal failings, and instead puts it in a bigger picture of inequality and segregation. Some people worry that this approach paints entire communities as naturally bad, without considering things like poverty and prejudice. Looking at crime through this lens shows that we need to understand how different values cause people to act the way they do and keep up criminal behavior over time (Zembroski, 2022).

A lot of things in someone's surroundings can influence whether they commit crimes. This happens by changing their options, who they hang out with, and what kind of behavior they see as normal. Things like the neighborhood, resources, and even how things are laid out can either help stop or encourage crime. The broken windows theory says that if an area looks run-down, with things like graffiti and trash, it signals that no one is in control. That leads to even worse crimes (Krohn). When things are falling apart, it weakens the community's ability to keep things in order, which lets crime take hold.

Also, being in a poor neighborhood is a big factor in higher crime rates. Areas with a lot of poverty, unemployment, unstable housing, and poor access to education create a breeding ground for crime. These tough conditions can make people feel stressed and frustrated, leading them to find illegal ways to get ahead or just survive, according to Craven's (2021) study. In places like this, people don't trust each other as much or share the same values, which weakens the ability to stop bad behavior.

Environmental criminology also looks at how everyday activities in certain places can lead to criminal opportunities. Routine activities theory says that crime happens when there's someone who wants to commit a crime, something to target, and no one around to stop it (Krohn). For , busy areas that don't have enough security or police become hotspots for things like theft and assault. Defensible space theory looks at how building design affects crime rates. Public areas that are poorly designed, with no clear boundaries or easy surveillance, are more likely to see crime because criminals don't feel as much risk.

Also, what your friends are doing in your environment matters a lot. In areas where there are a lot of people involved in crime because of money problems or feeling disconnected from society (Zembroski), people pick up pro-crime attitudes through their daily interactions. So, the environment isn't just a backdrop – it actively shapes criminal behavior by influencing who you hang out with and what opportunities are available.

All these different crime theories from sociology give us a way to look at the complex reasons why people turn to crime. Strain theory examines the pressures people face when they don't

have fair access to success, pushing them towards bad behavior. Social learning theory looks at how people learn criminal behavior from others, specifically from friends. Labeling theory focuses on how society treats people and says that being labeled as a criminal can trap someone in that identity. Control theory focuses on social bonds that include attachments, commitments, involvements and beliefs which can prevent crime, while weak relationships can make people more likely to commit crime. Cultural deviance theory looks at how different groups develop values that clash with mainstream society, leading to criminal behavior being seen as normal or even good. And how the environment that includes things like neighborhood and money problems, creates opportunities for crime. All these ideas together show that crime isn't just about personal problems. It's important to look at the bigger picture. To cut down on crime, need to fix inequality, strengthen communities, and address how people learn and internalize bad behaviors, as well as try to avoid stigmatizing/labeling people. These sociological theories help us see how society influences criminal behavior and guide us towards social reform to prevent it from happening in the first place, instead of just punishing people after the fact.

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