

## CRIMINOLOGY: AN OVERVIEW

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### Summary

Criminology is a broad and diverse discipline. Criminologists examine a range of topics, with a focus on the characteristics of offenders and the crimes they commit; the causes

of crime; the efforts of the police, courts, and correctional agencies to control crime; and strategies for more effectively controlling crime. No one perspective dominates the discipline. A large number of theories are used to explain crime, with there being a major divide between “mainstream” theories, which dominate criminological research, and critical theories. Mainstream theories focus on legally-defined crimes and explain such crimes largely in terms of individual traits and features of the immediate social environment, particularly the family, school, peer, work, and neighborhood environments. Critical theories employ broader definitions of crime, devote much attention to corporate and state crimes, and explain such crimes in terms of features of the larger social environment, particularly conflict between more and less powerful groups in a society. Likewise, criminologists advocate several strategies for controlling crime, including deterrence (increasing the fear of crime through certain and severe sanctions), incapacitation (incarcerating offenders so they cannot commit crimes on the street), and rehabilitation and prevention (addressing the root causes of crime among offenders and potential offenders).

This chapter provides an overview of the major research and theories in criminology, focusing on the causes and control of crime. Many of the research examples are taken from the United States, the site of most crime research at present, but criminology is quite prominent in many other developed nations and is growing in many developing nations (Tonry and Doob 2004; Tonry and Farrington 2005).

## **1. A Historical Overview of Criminology**

The first modern explanation of crime is known as “classical theory” (Bernard et al. 2009; Cullen and Agnew 2011). Classical theory was developed in reaction to the corrupt, arbitrary, and harsh systems of criminal justice that existed in Europe during the 1700s. The laws were often vague; bribery of judges was common; punishments for the same crime varied widely; and punishments were sometimes quite harsh, involving torture and death. Classical theorists wanted to replace this system with one that was more effective and just. They argued that people are rational beings who pursue their own interests, attempting to maximize their pleasure and minimize their pain. People choose to engage in crime when they believe that it will bring more pleasure than pain. As such, the best way to control crime is to ensure that the pain of punishment outweighs the pleasure of crime. In particular, individuals will be deterred from crime if punishments are swift, certain, and appropriately severe. But for this system to work, the laws must be clearly stated and applied equally to all. Further, punishments should not be overly harsh; this is unnecessary and will breed resentment. Classical theory has had an enormous impact on the criminal justice systems of many nations; an impact that is evident today. Such systems are based on the assumption that criminals are rational beings who freely chose to engage in crime, state that the law applies equally to all, and attempt to deter crime through punishment. Classical theory is also the direct inspiration for rational choice theory and the crime control strategy of deterrence, which are discussed below.

Classical theory came under attack in the late 1800s, with the attack stimulated in part by Darwin’s theory of evolution. Cesare Lombroso and others challenged the idea that criminals are rational beings who freely choose to engage in crime (Bernard et al. 2009;

Cullen and Agnew 2011). Rather, they claimed that criminals are not as biologically evolved as other people, and their primitive or savage state leads them to engage in crime. Based on his physical examinations of criminals and non-criminals, Lombroso claimed that criminals could be identified by their gross biological features, such as hairiness, large jaw and cheekbones, and protruding lips. Lombroso's theory and others like it were carefully evaluated in the early-to- mid 1900s, with researchers comparing the physical features of criminals to those of carefully matched samples of non-criminals. None of the gross biological differences described by these theories emerged. This fact, along with concern about the policy implications of these theories (e.g., selective breeding and sterilization), led to the decline of biological theories for several decades. The work of Lombroso and others, however, contributed to the rise of the positivistic approach to crime; or the ideas that crime is due to forces beyond the individual's control and that theories of crime should be tested against observations of the larger world.

The biological theories of Lombroso and others were replaced with psychological and sociological theories of crime, with sociological theories coming to dominate the field of criminology in the mid 1900s. Three theories, in particular, came to be regarded as the leading explanations of crime. Merton's (1938) strain theory stated that crime is caused by the inability of lower-class individuals to achieve the cultural goal of monetary success through legitimate channels. Sutherland's (1947) differential association theory stated that individuals learn to engage in crime by associating with others who teach beliefs favorable to crime. And control theories stated that crime results when others fail to effectively socialize individuals, provide them with a "stake in conformity," and sanction them for crime (Hirschi 1969). These three theories still occupy a central place in criminology today, although they have been revised and expanded – as described below.

These theories, however, were challenged during the 1960s and 1970s. The protest movements that emerged in many states, along with the concern over race/ethnic, gender, and colonial oppression, led many criminologists to focus on the role of the state in producing crime. Critical theorists, drawing on the work of Marx, argued that capitalism was the primary cause of crime (Bernard et al. 2009; Cullen and Agnew 2011; Quinney 1974; Taylor et al. 1973). In particular, the poverty and inequality associated with capitalism were said to lead to crime through the alienation and desperation they engendered. Further, the pursuit of profit was said to lead members of the capitalist class to harm others through acts such as the production of unsafe products, the creation of unsafe working conditions, and environmental pollution. Labeling theorists focused on the *reaction* to crime by the state (Cullen and Agnew 2011). They argued that powerless individuals were more likely to be labeled as criminals, and that this label and the harsh treatment that it evoked increased the likelihood of further crime. Somewhat later, feminist theorists – stimulated by the Women's Movement – pointed to the key role that the "organization of gender" played in crime. In particular, gender differences in socialization, social control, and social position were said to be critical in explaining the higher rate of male crime and the causes of female crime (Cullen and Agnew 2011; Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988).

Criminologists also came to devote increased attention to the criminal justice system

during the 1960s and 1970s. This increased attention was due to several factors, including theoretically-driven critiques of the system, with labeling and critical theorists arguing that the police, courts, and correctional agencies discriminated against the poor and minorities and did little to reduce crime. Also, the increasing crime rate during the 1960s and 1970s in the United States caused many to question the effectiveness of crime control efforts and to look for alternatives. Further, certain governments began to provide much funding for applied criminological research and the instruction of criminal justice professionals. This funding contributed to the growth of criminology programs in colleges and universities – with many of these programs breaking away from the sociology departments in which they originated. The growth in criminology programs was matched by the development of scores of new criminology journals and by the increased prominence of professional organizations devoted to criminology – such as the American Society of Criminology (Akers 1992; Vaughn et al. 2004).

Since the 1970s there has been continued theoretical development in the field and an explosion in quantitative research. These developments were stimulated, in part, by the increased use of surveys and self-report measures of crime, which greatly expanded the ability of criminologists to test and evaluate theories. As a consequence, there was a massive increase in quantitative studies of crime using increasingly sophisticated statistical methods; although many excellent qualitative studies of crime continued to be produced. Existing theories of crime were revised and extended. There were several major efforts to develop integrated or general theories of crime. There were efforts to address additional questions regarding the causes of crime, beyond the traditional questions of why some individuals and groups are more likely to engage in crime than others. Most notably, criminologists tried to explain patterns of offending over the life-course of given individuals and why crime is more likely in some situations than others (see below). There was a resurgence of interest in biological and psychological theories of crime. And critical criminologies continued to expand, although the gulf between “mainstream” and critical criminologists remained.

Also, criminologists continued to devote much attention to the criminal justice system and strategies for better controlling crime. Criminologists, often funded by government agencies such as the United States Department of Justice, had much impact on crime control initiatives, including initiatives involving the police, court, and corrections. Certain of these initiatives involved efforts to better deter and incapacitate criminals; while others focused on the rehabilitation of criminals and the prevention of crime. Many countries, however, became increasingly punitive in their crime control efforts. This was particularly true of the United States, where rates of incarceration increased five-fold from the 1970s to 2010. The earlier emphasis on rehabilitation in the United States was replaced with an emphasis on deterrence and incapacitation. Many criminologists have been critical of this shift and have argued for a renewed emphasis on rehabilitation, a focus on prevention, a shift to restorative approaches, and – in the case of critical criminologists – a focus on efforts to address those larger social forces that produce crime – such as poverty and inequality.

In sum, contemporary criminology is quite diverse; addressing a range of questions, drawing on many theoretical approaches, and advancing a variety of crime-control initiatives. This diversity is reflected in the discussion below.

## 2. The Origin of Criminal Laws

Most criminologists examine behaviors defined as crimes by the state. But why are some behaviors defined as crimes and not others? People often take the criminal law for granted, but comparative and historical studies indicate that certain behaviors are defined as crimes in some places or at some points in time, but not in others. As a consequence, criminologists have examined the origin of criminal laws (Chambliss and Zatz 1993).

Advocates of the consensus perspective state that criminal laws reflect a general social consensus about what behaviors are harmful and should be punished. Reflecting this fact, the laws are said to benefit most people in a society. Advocates of the pluralist perspective state that the laws arise out of conflict between interest groups in a society. These groups compete with one another to get their views translated into law. That group or coalition of groups with the most power wins out, and the laws frequently benefit some segments of society and hurt others. The elitist or Marxist version of the conflict perspective states that the capitalist class has a monopoly on power, while the pluralist version states that no one group has a monopoly on power. Rather, different groups tend to win out in the struggles to get their views translated into law.

There is empirical support for both the consensus and conflict perspectives. Surveys that ask respondents to rate the seriousness of various crimes find that most individuals and groups give similar ratings to a range of property and violent crimes, although there is less consensus regarding the ratings of “victimless” and white-collar crimes (Stylianou 2003). Case studies examining the origin of particular criminal laws suggest that these laws usually arose out of group conflict, with the consensus regarding the laws emerging later. These case studies, however, focus primarily on drug laws and selected other offenses (Chambliss and Zatz 1993). Many criminologists advocate a compromise position, suggesting that many or most laws arose out of conflict, but a consensus has emerged around particular laws – especially those involving property and violent crimes.

## 3. The Extent of and Trends in Crime

Criminologists also seek to estimate the extent of and trends in crime, with the large share of studies focusing on interpersonal aggression, the theft and destruction of property, and drug offenses (Agnew and Brezina 2012; Mosher et al. 2011; Thornberry and Krohn 2000). Most such estimates are based “official statistics” collected from the police and, to a lesser extent, from courts and correctional agencies. The main source of official statistics in the United States is the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, which focuses on “crimes known to the police” and arrest data from the large majority of police departments. The Uniform Crime Reports, however, greatly underestimate the extent of crime.

Among other things, the police seldom come across crimes on their own, most crime victims do not report their victimizations to the police, only about 20% of the crimes that do become known to the police are cleared by arrest, and not all arrests or crimes known to the police are reported to the FBI. The Uniform Crime Reports may also

provide misleading information on trends in crime. For example, the number of crimes known to the police will increase if victims become more likely to report crimes to the police – perhaps because they have become more likely to obtain property insurance (which requires the filing of police reports).

As a consequence of these problems, criminologists have developed two alternative ways of measuring crime. The first involves the collection of data from crime victims. Each year the United States Census Bureau administers the National Crime Victimization Survey, in which respondents aged 12 and over from a representative sample of households in the United States are asked to report on their experiences as crime victims. This survey only focuses on a few property and violent crimes, but suggests that most such crimes are more common than indicated by police data.

Criminologists also measure crime by asking individuals to report on the extent of their crime, regardless of whether it has been detected by the police. These self-report surveys are typically administered to samples of adolescents. Data suggest that most respondents are reasonably honest in their answers. Self-report surveys indicate that crime is far more extensive than police and victimizations data suggest, with 90% or more of all adolescents in the United States having committed delinquent acts. While these three data sources present very different estimates of the extent of crime and, occasionally, trends in crime, all indicate that minor crimes are far more common than serious crimes and that property crimes are more common than violent crimes. Police and victimization data also suggest that the crime rate in the United States declined sharply from the mid 1990s through 2010. There is reason to believe that this decline may be due to factors such as increasing rates of incarceration, the strong economy in the 1990s, the decline in crack use and turf disputes between crack dealers, the changing nature of urban areas, and perhaps increased immigration (Barker 2010).

Police, victimization, and self-report data are also available cross-nationally, particularly for developed countries (Lynch and Pridemore 2011; Mosher et al. 2011; van Wilsem 2004). Data sources include the International Crime Victims Survey, the International Self-Report Delinquency study; police data as reported by Interpol (ending in 2005); police, court, and corrections data in the European Sourcebook on Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics; homicide data from the World Health Organization; and police, court, and corrections data in the United Nations Surveys on Crime Trends. Caution must be exercised in using such data, however. Among other things, different countries may employ different definitions of crime; crimes are more likely to be reported to the police in some countries than others; certain of the data are from small, unrepresentative samples within countries; countries differ in how they record casualties from war and civil/political conflicts; and these data focus on individual acts of violence and theft – ignoring white-collar and state crimes.

Nevertheless, there are some general conclusions we can draw about comparative rates of crime. The United States has a higher rate of serious violence than other developed nations, but certain developing nations have higher rates of serious violence. Rates of less serious violent and property crime in the United States are not that different from rates in other developed nations (Lynch and Pridemore 2011). Nevertheless, the United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the world.

#### **4. The Types of Criminal Offenders**

Criminologists have attempted to classify offenders into types. Initially, it was thought that different offenders focus on different offenses; for example, some engage primarily in theft and others in drug crime. While there is some evidence of specialization, especially among adult offenders, most offenders are fairly versatile - committing a range of crimes. The most recent attempts to classify offenders focus on the frequency of offending, when offending begins and ends, and the seriousness of offending. At least two offender types emerge in most studies (Agnew and Brezina 2012; Moffitt 1993, 2006). The first is a small group of offenders, sometimes referred to as “life-course persistent” offenders, who offend at high rates over much of their lives. While only about 5% of the population, these offenders account for a large amount of crime, including most serious crime. The largest group of offenders, sometimes referred to as “adolescence-limited” offenders, offend primarily during the adolescent years – committing mainly minor crimes. The causes of life-course persistent offending appear to differ from those of adolescence-limited offending (Moffitt 2006). It should be noted, however, that research in this area focuses on what are sometimes called “street crimes,” such as acts of interpersonal violence and theft. Corporate, environmental, state and other crimes are not considered.

#### **5. The Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Criminal Offenders**

Criminologists have devoted much attention to identifying the socio-demographic characteristics of criminals, particularly those who engage in street crimes such as homicide, burglary, robbery, rape, and larceny. The conclusions they draw partly depend on whether they use arrest, victimization, or self-report data (Agnew and Brezina 2012). There is little doubt that males are much more likely to engage in most crimes than females, particularly serious crimes. Further, males are much more likely to be life-course persistent offenders. The gender gap in arrests in the United States has been decreasing in recent decades, however. There is some debate over whether this decrease reflects real changes in the amounts of crime committed or an increased tendency for the police and others to formally process female offenders. There is also little doubt that adolescents and young adults are disproportionately involved in most street crimes. Criminologists have devoted much attention in recent years to explaining these gender and age differences in offending (see below).

Data on the relationship between social class, race/ethnicity, and crime are more complex. The more recent and best research from the United States suggests that lower-class individuals, African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans have higher rates of serious offending and may be more likely to be life-course persistent offenders. Class and race, however, are only weakly related or unrelated to minor crime, at least among adolescents. Further, limited data suggest that the relationship between race and crime may be due to race-related differences in individual and community-level social class. In particular, the higher rate of serious crime among African Americans may be due to the fact that African Americans are more likely than whites to be poor and to live in communities with a high percentage of poor residents (Agnew and Brezina 2012; Sampson et al. 2005).

## 6. The Characteristics of the Major Types of Crime

Criminologists also study the characteristics of the major types of crime, with there being fairly sizeable literatures on violent crimes, particularly homicide, sexual violence, family/intimate partner violence, and robbery; street-variety property crimes such as burglary and shoplifting; drug offenses; prostitution; gang crimes; organized crime; occupational crime (crimes committed by workers during the course of their occupations for personal gain); corporate crimes (crimes committed by workers with organizational support, at least in part for the benefit of the organization); political or state crimes; and, increasingly, terrorism (e.g., Green and Ward 2004; Meier and Geis 2006; Miethe et al. 2006; Miller 2009; Passas and Goodwin 2004; Thio 2009).

Such crime-specific research focuses on a range of topics, including the characteristics of offenders, the causes of the crimes, the decision-making processes involved in the crimes (e.g., the extent to which various costs and benefits are considered, how targets are selected), the circumstances surrounding the crimes (e.g., the setting, the steps leading up to the crime), the impact of the crimes on immediate victims and the larger society, and how to control the crimes.

It is not possible to describe the rich findings that have emerged from such studies, but it should be noted that such findings often challenge popular views. For example, many individuals view homicide as a crime that typically involves the murder of a stranger in a “cold-blooded” manner. In fact, most homicides occur between acquaintances, friends and family members; they take place while participants are engaged in leisure activities, most often on weekend nights; and they are precipitated by seemingly minor disputes (Luckenbill 1977). To give another example, many people believe that street crimes like homicide, aggravated assault, and burglary cause far more harm than corporate crimes. Data, however, suggest that corporate crimes are common, the financial damage they cause is far greater than that of street crimes, and they kill and injure more people than street crimes (Reiman and Leighton 2010).

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method of measuring crime, including its advantages and potential disadvantages.]

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Zahn, M. A. (2009). *The Delinquent Girl*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. [Reviews research on the extent, nature, causes, and control of female delinquency.]

### Biographical Sketch

**Robert Agnew** is Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Sociology at Emory University. His research focuses on the causes of crime and delinquency, particularly his general strain theory of delinquency. He most recent works include *Toward a Unified Criminology: Integrating Assumptions about Crime, People, and Society* (New York University Press, 2012); *Criminological Theory: Past to Present* (Oxford, 2011); *Juvenile Delinquency: Causes and Control* (Oxford, 2012); *Pressured into Crime: An Overview of General Strain Theory* (Oxford, 2006); and *Why Do Criminals Offend: A General Theory of Crime and Delinquency* (Oxford, 2005). He is a Fellow of the American Society of Criminology and serves on the editorial boards of several criminology journals.