

Introduction to Criminology

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Crime and Criminology

Crime and the fear of crime have permeated the fabric of American life.

-Warren E. Burger, Chief Justice, U.S. Supreme Court¹

Collective fear stimulates herd instinct, and tends to produce ferocity toward those who are not regarded as members of the herd.

-Bertrand Russell²

OBJECTIVES

- Define criminology, and understand how this field of study relates to other social science disciplines. Pg. 4
- Understand the meaning of scientific theory and its relationship to research and policy. Pg. 8
- Recognize how the media shape public perceptions of crime. Pg. 19
- Know the criteria for establishing causation, and identify the attributes of good research. Pg. 13
- Understand the politics of criminology and the importance of social context. Pg. 18
- Define criminal law, and understand the conflict and consensus perspectives on the law. Pg. 5
- Describe the various schools of criminological theory and the explanations that they provide. Pg. 9

Introduction

Crime is a social phenomenon that commands the attention and energy of the American public. When crime statistics are announced or a particular crime goes viral, the public demands that "something be done." American citizens are concerned about their own safety and that of their families and their possessions. For example, Gallup regularly polls Americans on whether they feel as though crime in the United States has gotten better or worse in the past year. In almost every poll since 1989, a majority of people felt that crime had increased.³ This was true even in years when actual crime rates declined substantially. Because

of the public's concern about the safety of their communities, crime is a perennial political issue that candidates for political office are compelled to address.

Dealing with crime commands a substantial portion of the country's tax dollars. Criminal justice system operations (police, courts, prisons) cost American taxpayers over \$270 billion annually. That equates to about \$900 per citizen.⁴ Much of this cost is due to the use of prisons and jails. Despite making up less than 5% of the global population, the United States now holds almost 25% of the world's inmates.⁵

As these statistics indicate, crime is an important social issue. Further, *how* policymakers deal with crime (via crime policy) can have enormous social and financial implications. Indeed, the high incarceration rates in America are rooted in policy changes made by states and the federal government throughout the 1980s and 1990s. A basic tenet of this text is that a combination of theory and research can help provide direction to crime policy. The chapters in this book attempt to organize ideas in order to explain criminal behavior. This includes the factors that contribute to crime and the social reactions to crime. In short, this book explores the discipline of criminology.

What Is Criminology?

Simply put, criminology is the scientific study of crime. More broadly, Edwin Sutherland described criminology as the study of lawmaking, law-breaking, and the response to law-breaking.6 Some scholars further distinguish criminal justice from criminology. Here, Sutherland's definition is subdivided into two related fields, where criminology focuses on law-breaking (i.e., the nature, extent, and causes of crime), and criminal justice focuses on the response (i.e., policing, courts, and corrections) to criminal behavior. Scholars interested in criminal justice, for example, may study the causes and consequences of prison crowding or the effectiveness of different policing models. Of course, there is a relationship between criminology and criminal justice. The response to crime depends largely on one's view of the causes of crime. For this reason, many criminologists work in both of these areas.

Another discipline related to criminology is the study of deviance. A "deviant" is anyone who violates social norms. Norms are guidelines that define for members of a society the types of behaviors that are appropriate or inappropriate in certain situations; they are classified as folkways, mores, and laws, based largely on the response to their violation.7 Folkways are norms against actions (e.g., nose picking) that may evoke a snicker or some teasing as a response. Violations of a society's *mores* (e.g., teen pregnancy) evoke a more serious response from others. Laws are norms that have been codified, and the response to violations comes from formal government agencies. Therefore, although some deviant behavior is criminal, deviance can also include acts (e.g., violating gender norms, cheating on an exam) that are not defined as crimes. Deviance scholars are often interested in how deviant behaviors come to be criminalized; that is, they focus on the "lawmaking" aspect of Sutherland's definition.



Norms often change over time. Not long ago, tattoos were considered a mark of deviance.

Criminology and Academics

Until recently, people with an academic interest in criminal behavior sought degrees in social science disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, economics, law, political science, ethics, and sociology; thus, a student might earn a degree in sociology with an emphasis on deviance and crime. Although some people still study crime through other disciplines, most universities now offer degrees in criminology or criminal justice. Moreover, many universities have separate criminology departments, divisions, or schools. In that sense, criminology has emerged as a distinct social science discipline.

This emergence has been partial, however, and a bit awkward. In part, this is because unlike other social science disciplines, criminology is organized around a class of behaviors (crime) rather than a particular way of understanding these behaviors. Social science disciplines tend to be organized around common assumptions, guiding insights, and specific research methodologies.⁸ For example, psychologists generally seek to understand the mental processes that explain human behavior, while sociologists emphasize the role of social institutions and processes. Within any social science discipline, "crime" is only one type of human behavior that attracts interest. A psychologist might also be interested in intelligence, a political scientist

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in voting behavior, and a sociologist in explaining social movements. One might expect, therefore, that criminology would be multidisciplinary in nature. This is indeed the case—many disciplines have made contributions to the scientific study of crime. Some of the earliest scientific theories of crime came from biologists and psychologists. Few would dispute the fact, though, that sociology has had the largest impact on the study of crime.

Throughout most of the 20th century, sociologists were prominent in social scientific discourse about criminal behavior. The roots of this contribution can be traced to members of the sociology department at the University of Chicago. Ernest W. Burgess, W. I. Thomas, and a host of other sociologists created a body of research methodology, research findings, and theory related to crime that came to be called simply the "Chicago School of Crime."9 During the 1930s, Edwin Sutherland, a student of the Chicago School sociologists, became the dominant advocate of criminology with his theories of differential association and white-collar crime. At about the same time, Robert K. Merton, a Columbia University sociologist, developed the sociological theory of anomie. This theory has been utilized to study different forms of crime, from street crime to organized crime.

Sociologists, and those with advanced degrees in criminal justice and criminology, continue to have a major influence on the study of crime. In the 21st century, however, criminology has also returned to its interdisciplinary roots. Geneticists, economists, political scientists, forensic psychologists, and a host of other scholars now contribute to the study of crime.

A Brief History of the Criminal Law

Because criminology is the scientific study of law violations, it is beneficial to have a basic understanding of the criminal law. The criminal law has a long history, dating back over 3,500 years. The first acknowledged set of laws (dated 1792 BCE), the Code of Hammurabi, established the precept that the punishment should fit the crime. This code was adopted from Babylonian and Hebrew laws that existed as early as 2000 BCE. The Mosaic Code of the Israelites (1200 BCE) developed the laws of the Old Testament, which include the Ten Commandments.¹⁰

The root of American law is English common law. Common law developed from English "circuit" courts, where judges traveled from community to community hearing cases. Judges kept written records of their court decisions and initially decided cases based on prevailing community standards. Over time, these judges began to unify and standardize the legal code across different communities. To accomplish this, they used past decisions as precedents (regardless of community) for new legal disputes. Eventually, this web of legal decisions evolved into a national unified set of codes, or common law.¹¹

The English colonies followed common law, and after the revolution, the new federal and state governments of the United States adopted many of these laws by passing specific legislation called statutes. For this reason, most of the U.S. criminal code is considered **statutory law**. Even here, judges must interpret laws and apply them to specific circumstances; this creates **case law**. Also, where laws do not cover a particular circumstance, U.S. courts still rely on common law. Finally, the federal government and each state have separate written constitutions that define the general organization and the powers (or limits of power) of the government. Constitutional law is expressed within these documents and is the supreme law of the land-the U.S. Constitution for the country and state constitutions for their respective states.¹²

Defining the Criminal Law

The substantive criminal law consists of prohibited behaviors and the possible sanctions for these behaviors. As noted previously, each state has its own criminal code, as does the federal government. Federal and state codes (as well as constitutions) are accessible on the Internet. The Legal Information Institute at Cornell Law School maintains a site that features links to all federal and state statutes.¹³

Crimes are defined by two components: the specific act (*actus reus*) and the criminal intent (*mens rea*). *Actus reus* includes the act and the circumstances under which the act occurs. For example, the common law crime of burglary includes the breaking and entering of another's dwelling, at night, without consent. *Mens rea* refers to a person's mental state. There are different levels of criminal intent, defined by the elements of purpose, knowledge, negligence, and recklessness:¹⁴

- A person *purposely* commits a criminal act when he or she desires to engage in criminal conduct to cause a particular criminal result.
- To *knowingly* commit a criminal act, a person must know, believe, or suspect that an action is criminal.

- Criminal *negligence* occurs when a person grossly deviates from a standard that a reasonable person would use under the same circumstances—the person is accused of taking a substantial and fore-seeable risk that resulted in harm.
- Criminal *recklessness* is the conscious disregard of a substantial risk—a person accused of recklessness is viewed as more blameworthy than someone accused of negligence.

Some offenses (e.g., traffic offenses) do not require criminal intent. These are considered strict liability offenses. In contrast, some offenses require specific intent. Burglary is defined as the breaking and entering of another's dwelling with the *intent* to commit another felony (usually theft). Criminal behavior carries a variety of formal punishments, including imprisonment, death, fine, or probation.

There are various ways to classify crimes within the criminal law. Among the oldest is the distinction between crimes that are *mala in se* and *mala prohibita*. *Mala in se* crimes, considered "evil in themselves," encompass the core of the criminal code, including acts such as homicide and robbery. *Mala prohibita* crimes are "wrong because they are prohibited." These crimes represent a particular society's attempt to regulate behavior, such as drug abuse, gambling, and prostitution, that offends their moral senses. *Mala prohibita* offenses are likely to vary over time and across jurisdictions. For example, casino gambling is legal in several states, and many states have state-sanctioned lotteries. Similarly, the use of alcohol has shifted from legal to illegal and back to legal over time in the United States.

Another common way to classify crimes is according to the seriousness of the offense. On a general level, jurisdictions distinguish between felonies and misdemeanors. Misdemeanor offenses carry a maximum sentence of 1 year in a local jail, while felony offenses can result in longer prison sentences. Criminal codes further categorize felonies according to degree (e.g., first, second, or third degree) of offense.

In addition to the substantive criminal law, **procedural law** dictates the rules that actors within the criminal justice system must follow. Procedural law specifies, for example, the conditions under which a police officer can detain a suspect or search a vehicle. In the judicial system, procedural laws govern issues like the admissibility of evidence during a criminal trial.

The criminal law can also be distinguished from civil law. Civil law includes (among other things) contract law, property law, and tort law.¹⁵ Among the various forms of civil law, tort law bears the strongest resemblance to the criminal law. In a tort case, an individual or group seeks compensation to redress some wrongdoing or harm. The spouse of a murder victim, for example, can bring a wrongful death suit to be compensated for tangible (e.g., lost wages) and intangible (e.g., pain and suffering) costs. Violations of the criminal law can result in both a criminal and tort trial. A person tried in criminal court for homicide can also be tried in civil court for wrongful death, regardless of how the criminal trial turns out.¹⁶

Laws are dynamic and greatly influenced by current events, politics, economics, and numerous other external factors. Criminal law continues to change as judges have to interpret situations associated with the emergence of new technology (e.g., the Internet) and new threats (e.g., terrorism). For example, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack in the United States had a substantial impact on the law. The USA Patriot Act was passed on October 24, 2001, just 6 weeks after the events of 9/11. Although the Patriot Act amended numerous laws, the primary intent of the act was to relax the procedural laws that restrict law enforcement investigation and surveillance powers.

The U.S. Department of Justice hailed the Patriot Act as an effective tool for counterterrorism efforts.¹⁷ Critics contended that the law granted sweeping search and surveillance powers to domestic law enforcement without proper judicial oversight.¹⁸ One of the most controversial provisions of the law was the "sneak-and-peek" search warrant, which authorized law enforcement officers to enter private premises without the occupant's permission or knowledge and without informing the occupant that such a search was conducted.¹⁹ The act also expanded the government's ability to view records on an individual's activities that are held by third parties (e.g., phone companies, doctors, Internet service providers). In 2013, a contract worker named Edward Snowden copied and released classified information to the media. His revelation that the National Security Agency (NSA) was accumulating and storing online metadata from millions of Internet users sparked a political discussion about individual privacy and national security. In 2015, the USA Freedom Act extended some provisions in the original Patriot Act while scaling back others. For example, instead of collecting bulk phone data, the NSA now must petition a federal court in order to review phone data stored by telephone service providers.²⁰

Perspectives on the Criminal Law

Criminal law serves several functions in society. First, criminal law discourages revenge, because the government, rather than the victim, is responsible for

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punishing law violators. Second, the law serves to express public opinion and morality; this is especially apparent for *mala prohibita* offenses. Third, punishment meted out according to criminal law serves as a warning to other citizens who may be thinking of committing the same crime.²¹

Typically, criminal law attempts to make the punishment fit the crime. The aim is to match the severity of the punishment to the severity of the offense and the harm that it creates; thus, the punishment balances the damage caused by the crime. In practice, however, the punishment does not always fit the harm of the crime. For example, white-collar offenses often involve large sums of money and affect great numbers of people but typically result in shorter (if any) prison sentences than robbery or burglary. Another area to consider is illicit drugs relative to alcohol. By most measures, alcohol is more dangerous or harmful than marijuana. Despite this fact, marijuana remains illegal in most jurisdictions, while alcohol is legal. If criminal laws and the punishments for law violators do not directly reflect the harm caused to society, then what determines how a crime is punished? How do some acts come to be criminalized while others do not? How and why do behaviors get de-criminalized? Criminologists approach such questions within the framework of two general perspectives.

The **consensus perspective** illustrates the belief that laws are set in place to keep people from engaging in behaviors that the majority of society believes to be harmful to others and society as a whole. Consensus is defined as a general agreement, and thus, this perspective sees society as having classified specific behaviors as wrong or immoral. This consensus comes from a society's culture, which includes its beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors. From this perspective, criminologists would argue that laws are in place to be fair to all members of society. Therefore, biases in how the law is applied are unintentional and temporary.

In contrast to the consensus view, the **conflict perspective** portrays the law as the result of a continuous competition or "conflict" among members of society. Here, the law reflects the interests, values, and beliefs of whatever group has power. Power can come from a variety of sources, such as group size or wealth. For example, Karl Marx portrayed capitalist societies as riddled with constant competition that breeds continued conflict among its members. In Marx's analysis, conflict stems from a system of inequality that allows the wealthy elite to rule or control all other members of society. On a smaller scale, the conflict perspective sheds light on how political interest groups try to shape laws (e.g., gun control, abortion) in a way that is consistent with their beliefs and values. The preceding discussion of the controversy surrounding the USA Patriot Act also illustrates the conflict perspective in action.

These general perspectives on the law influence the research questions that criminologists ask and also help determine how they go about answering such questions. Following the consensus model generally leads criminologists to ask, "Why do some in society violate laws that exist to benefit all members of society?" The conflict perspective generally leads to questions regarding the content and enforcement of the law. Conflict theorists might question how marijuana came to be criminalized in the United States, whether the law is applied evenly, and why many states are now legalizing the use of marijuana for medical or recreational use. Each of these perspectives appears to have some credence within a specific realm of behavior. Laws against mala in se offenses, such as homicide and robbery, are backed by widespread consensus. Mala prohibita offenses, such as gambling, prostitution, and illicit drug use, are more relevant to the conflict perspective.

Because the criminal law is used to define criminology, we have reviewed it here to present the basic principles and terminology related to law. With the exception of critical theories, however, criminologists do not generally study the criminal law. Rather, they focus on the conditions that breed crime, and they examine what might be done to prevent or control criminal behavior. In other words, criminology is about theory, research, and policy.



A marijuana dispensary in Denver, Colorado. Marijuana use is a *mala prohibita* crime that is relevant to the conflict perspective. Used with the permission of Michelle Tuscan-Bowman.

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Criminological Theory

Theory represents the foundation on which all discussion of crime is built. Unfortunately, students of criminology often struggle to understand the various theories of crime or simply find them to be boring, useless, and confusing. The premise of this book is that when properly understood, theory can be exciting, thought provoking, and useful. This section covers basic information on theory that will allow students to understand and evaluate the discussions on crime that follow in later chapters.

Defining a Scientific Theory

There is no shortage of opinions regarding the roots of criminal behavior; social media sites, movie dialogue, politicians, relatives, and friends all offer opinions on the causes of crime. Often these sources point to a single factor, or "concept": drugs, violent video games, permissive parenting, or bad companions. Such theories are often based on speculation or "hunches." Scientific theories of crime include many of these commonsense explanations, yet unlike a hunch, a theory of crime must explain in a logical and clear manner how such factors relate to crime.

A theory is a set of principles or statements that attempts to explain how concepts are related. In the case of crime theory, these statements typically explain how one or more factors lead to criminal behavior. A scientific theory must also be testable, meaning that it must be stated in such a way that other scientists can go out into the real world, collect information, and test the theory's validity. If a theory is too vague or if the central concepts cannot be measured, it is essentially useless to science. Consider, for example, the following statement: "Little green creatures that live inside people's brains cause them to engage in crime." Furthermore, suppose that one argues that science is unable to detect little green creatures through brain scans or other technology and that people are generally unaware of their existence. How could one test this theory? Of course, the little green creature theory is rather absurd. However, what if the words "little green creatures" were changed to "a lack of conscience," and the theory becomes that a lack of conscience causes crime? Unless researchers devise a way to measure conscience, this will remain a theory with no scientific value, even though it may sound credible. As we shall see, most early attempts to explain crime were not scientific, because they used concepts like demonic possession or "God's will" that could not be measured or verified.

The Origins of Criminological Theory

When did humans first begin to devise theories to explain criminal behavior? The answer depends on whether one includes *nonscientific* theories of crime. **Table 1-1** illustrates the major schools of thought about the causes of crime. Throughout much of Western history, the "demonic perspective" dominated thinking about crime and punishment.²² Although the specifics differed according to the particular society and time, the gist of this perspective is that supernatural forces cause criminal behavior. Quite literally, people believed that the devil (or other demons) made people commit crimes. In primitive societies, crimes were viewed as acts against the gods, aided and abetted by evil spirits.²³ In that context, punishment was often designed to placate the gods.

Throughout the Middle Ages (1200–1600) in Europe, people who engaged in deviant, sinful, or criminal behavior (especially if they were women) were labeled "witches" and burned at the stake.²⁴ Brutal methods were often used to determine guilt

School of Thought	Cause of Crime	Implication for Criminals		
Demonic perspective	Demonic possession, God's will, or other supernatural forces cause crime.	Brutal corporal punishments designed to placate the gods, cleanse the community, and identify individuals as deviant.		
Classical school	Crime is the result of a rational decision based on a calculation of costs and benefits.	Swift, certain, severe punishment within the framework of a rational legal system will deter criminal behavior; punishment should fit the crime.		
Positivist school	Criminal behavior is determined by biological, social, or psychological factors outside of a person's control.	Crime can be reduced by identifying and changing the factors that cause crime. This can be accomplished through the rehabilitation of offenders or through social change; punishment is generally ineffective; the intervention (punishment) should fit the individual.		

Table 1-1 Major Schools of Thought in Criminology

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Prior to the classical school of crime, brutal corporal punishments were common. Here, two Colonial Americans have tarred and feathered a British customs officer.

Johnston, D. C. (1830). A New method of Macarony making as practised at Boston / copied on stone by D. C. Johnston from a print published in London. Boston Massachusetts United States, 1830. Boston: Pendleton. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2006691558/

or innocence. Trial by ordeal involved subjecting the accused to some form of painful torture—only God's intervention could demonstrate their innocence. For example, the accused would be tied up and thrown into a body of water. If God allowed the individual to float, he or she was innocent; if not, the unfortunate person was presumed guilty and allowed to drown.²⁵

Corporal punishments (e.g., gibbeting, ear clipping, drawing and quartering, dismembering, blinding, burning, and branding) were frequently used in Europe and America as late as 1700. Powerless members of society (e.g., slaves, women, and children) were often the targets of corporal punishment.²⁶ Mutilation and branding identified the offenders and sent a message to others. The punishments also were designed to purge the body of the offender of evil and restore the community to its proper relationship with God.²⁷ Again, the idea here is that crime was caused largely by demonic influence. Although the "devil made me do it" is certainly an explanation of criminal behavior, it is not a scientific theory. Supernatural forces cannot be observed, and the demonic perspective (like our "little green creature" example) is therefore not testable. Toward the end of the 1700s, the demonic perspective was challenged by a group of philosophers who came to be called classical school criminologists.

The Classical School of Crime

The Age of Enlightenment burned hot in Europe during much of the 18th century. Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau challenged the prevailing belief that God (or demons) directly determined human behavior. Rather, they believed that God instilled in humans the capacity to exercise free will and the ability to choose a course of behavior through reason. Scholars such as Cesare Beccaria used this general platform to argue for legal reform. In doing so, these penal reformers also articulated a scientific theory of criminal behavior.²⁸

To appreciate the importance of the legal reforms advocated by Beccaria, one first needs to understand the state of the legal system at the time in which he wrote. Laws were vague, and judges often interpreted them to suit their own interests. Those accused of crimes had few legal protections. The state provided neither legal assistance nor access to family and friends and commonly used torture to obtain confessions.

Witnesses testified against the accused in secret proceedings. Punishments for those found guilty included whipping, branding, mutilation, and death by various means.^{29,30}

Rebelling against the brutal and arbitrary nature of the legal system, Beccaria argued that the function of law was to promote justice.³¹ In his 1764 essay "On Crimes and Punishments," he formulated the following principles, which represented a dramatic departure from the way in which criminal law had previously been conceived:^{32,33}

- Prevention of crime is more important than punishment for the crime committed. Punishment is desirable only as it helps to prevent crime and does not conflict with the ends of justice.
- The purpose of punishment is to deter persons from the commission of crime, not to give society an opportunity for revenge.
- Desirable criminal procedure calls for the open publication of all laws, speedy trials, humane treatment of the accused, and the abolishment of secret accusations and torture. Moreover, the accused must have every right and facility to bring forward evidence.
- The criminal code should be written with all offenses and punishments defined in advance.
- The criminal law should be restricted in its scope because it can result in the curtailment of freedoms.
- The presumption of innocence should be the guiding principle at all stages of the justice process; individual rights must be protected.

Beccaria deserves much credit for "pulling together many of the most powerful 18th-century ideas of democratic liberalism" and connecting them to issues of criminal justice.³⁴ His ideas directly influenced the American Bill of Rights as well as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, the precursor to the French Constitution of 1791.³⁵ The linchpin that holds together all of Beccaria's legal reforms was the argument that a properly designed legal system had the potential to prevent or deter criminal behavior. Beccaria believed that because humans were rational, they would consider the consequences of their behavior before acting. Swift, certain, and sufficiently harsh punishment should therefore deter a rational actor from engaging in crime. Beccaria argued that punishment should only be severe enough to deter crime and denounced the use of the death penalty.³⁶

Another influential classical school scholar and reformer was Jeremy Bentham. Bentham embraced and contributed to Beccaria's deterrence theory. Specifically, he described human decision making as a **hedonistic calculus**. In other words, people will act in ways that maximize positive outcomes and minimize negative ones. Naturally, a person commits a crime because of the perception that the benefits of the act are greater than the costs of punishment. The corollary to this is that punishment should be painful enough to outweigh the pleasure of the criminal act.

Like Beccaria, Bentham believed that the purpose of punishment should be crime prevention and that punishment must be proportional to the severity of the crime to have a deterrent effect. Moreover, the severity of punishment should be directly proportionate to the number of persons injured by the crime. Although some of their ideas are taken for granted today, classical theorists were liberal reformers who sought to restate the definitions of crime and to reformulate punishments. Their proposed legal reforms were revolutionary—a complete break with customary practices. As a theory of crime, the classical



A man being tortured on the rack, a device that dislocated and separated joints. Among other reforms, classical school theorists argued for an end of the use of torture to gain confessions. school idea of deterrence is relatively simple: People will refrain from crime if punishment is swift, certain, and sufficiently severe. Because empirical tests of this proposition are possible, it represented a dramatic departure from the demonic perspective. Classical school theory dominated criminological thought into the late 1800s, until it was challenged by a new group of theorists.

The Positivist School of Crime

The influence of the classical school of criminology began to wane in the late 1800s. One reason for this decline was that changes in the legal system based on classical theory failed to reduce crime (i.e., crime rates continued to increase).³⁷ More importantly, the underlying assumption of the classical school-that behavior was the result of rational calculation-was criticized for being too simplistic. Throughout the 1700s, scientists such as Galileo and Newton made great discoveries about the workings of the physical world. These demonstrations of cause-and-effect relationships were made through careful observation and analysis of natural events. It was not long before scholars applied this scientific method beyond the physical world to the social world. The use of the scientific method to study the causes of human behavior is known as **positivism**.³⁸

The history of scientific inquiry into criminal behavior is uneven—several pioneers in scientific criminology predate Auguste Comte's positivism. For example, Benjamin Rush (United States) and Philippe Pinel (France), writing in the late 1700s, argued that serious, repeat criminal behavior was caused by "moral insanity," a mental disease.³⁹ Despite these early efforts to scientifically study crime, positivism did not gain wide acceptance until the mid-1800s. During this time, for example, Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) outlined the theory of evolution.

Influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution, the first widely acknowledged positivist theories of crime focused on biology. For example, phrenologists like Franz Joseph Gall studied the pattern of bumps on the skull and attempted to correlate them to criminal behavior. Cesare Lombroso, building off Darwin's theory of evolution, argued that some criminals were evolutionary throwbacks to a more primitive species. Over time, biology gave way to a psychology/ psychiatry focus on "feeble-mindedness" and mental disease. During the 20th century, sociological positivism dominated criminology and found causes of crime in social factors such as learning experience and poverty. Regardless of the particular discipline or historical period, positivist theories share a commonality—the view that crime is *caused*, or determined, rather than chosen. Positivists are committed to the use of the scientific method to study these causes of crime. They emphasize methodological issues such as proper data collection, statistical sampling, and the validity and reliability of measurement.⁴⁰ Criminologist C. Ray Jeffery outlined several other precepts of positivist criminology and contrasted them with the classical school. According to Jeffery, the positivist school advocates the following:⁴¹

- A rejection of punishment and its replacement with treatment based on rehabilitation.
- A rejection of free will and its replacement with scientific determinism.
- A rejection of the study of criminal law and its replacement with a study of the individual offender and his or her medical, psychological, and social characteristics.

The positivist school of crime, like the classical school, had a great deal of influence on the operation of the criminal justice system. In the United States, rehabilitation emerged as a primary goal of the justice system during the early 1900s. The underlying assumption of the rehabilitative model is that the factors that cause crime can be identified, and treatment plans can be formulated and administered to correct law violators. In this model, the offender is viewed as a person in need of intervention or treatment rather than an evildoer to be punished. The "rehabilitative ideal" involved isolating and correcting, within each individual, the specific deficits that led to the individual's criminal behavior. In that sense, the punishment must fit the offender, rather than the offense.⁴² Additionally, efforts to affect crime through broader social change are also rooted in the positivist school. For example, antipoverty programs created in the 1960s were justified, in part based on sociological theories of crime.

Although rehabilitation remained the dominant goal of corrections throughout much of the 1900s, the rehabilitative model was never fully realized. The seriousness of the crime (and not the nature of the criminal), for example, remained the primary determinant of the punishment. In other words, the punishment still tended to "fit the offense." Still, the rise of rehabilitation produced a number of innovations that remain part of the current criminal justice system. For example, many states embraced indeterminate sentencing, where offenders were incarcerated without a firm release date (e.g., 20 years to life). Parole boards emerged as a way to judge when offenders, based on their treatment progress, should be released.

The Classical and Positivist Schools—Where Do We Stand Now?

The positivist school of criminology has dominated theorizing since it replaced the classical school. Almost all of the theories discussed in the following chapters fall under the category of positivism. Although the language has changed from rehabilitation to "correctional intervention," most jurisdictions still make some effort to alter those factors that theories identify as causes of crime. Classical school theorizing, however, was revitalized in the 1970s. A number of theories derived from the classical school (called neoclassical theories) now compete with positivist theories for acceptance. The classical school still serves as the basis for the legal system, and new research on deterrence theory has led to innovations in policing and corrections.

Evaluating Theories of Crime

There are dozens of scientific theories related to crime. An important issue is how to judge each theory. A number of useful criteria are presented here for evaluating theories. An important fact to keep in mind, however, is that not all criteria are equally important. **Figure 1-1** illustrates how different criteria

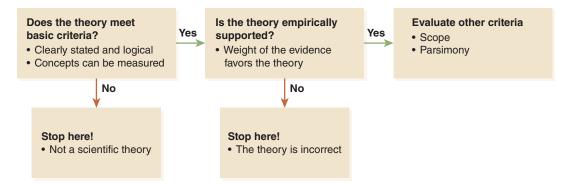


Figure 1-1 Evaluating theories of crime.

relate to one another. Assuming a theory meets the minimum standards to be considered "scientific," additional criteria include empirical support, scope, and parsimony.

Definitional Criteria

A scientific theory must be stated in a logical manner, using concepts that are clearly defined and measurable. As noted earlier, a concept such as "conscience" would be difficult to measure. A theory may also be impossible to test if it is based on circular reasoning. Scientists refer to this kind of reasoning as *tautological*. Literally, a tautological theory of crime would argue that "crime causes crime." Of course, most tautological statements are usually not as obvious as that and, therefore, can be more difficult to detect. Let us stick with the example of "a lack of conscience" as the cause of crime and think about how one might test that theory. One could argue that people who do bad things must not have a conscience. In doing so, however, one is engaging in circular reasoning: arguing that people who do bad things engage in criminal behavior (bad things) is like arguing that crime causes crime.

Therefore, in order for a theory to be useful, one must be able to subject it to empirical tests. Assuming that a theory meets this minimal standard (and most do), what next? What makes one scientific theory better than another?

Empirical Support

After a theory is determined to be testable, the next step in the evaluation process is establishing whether those tests support the theory. In other words, when this theory is applied to the real world, does it work? Does the research support this theory? The importance of this criterion cannot be overstated; if tests fail to support a theory, then that theory is incorrect. It makes little sense to look at other aspects of the theory if it fails to work in the real world.

Unfortunately, most theories of crime are never completely supported or refuted. Some empirical tests may support the theory, others might offer partial support, and still others may refute the theory. Given this reality, what is the best way to judge the empirical support of a theory? Criminologists evaluate the "weight of the evidence" by examining several factors:⁴³

- The number of studies that empirically support or refute a theory
- The strength of the relationships between theoretical concepts and crime
- The quality of the empirical studies

The final point suggests that not all empirical tests are the same. The weight put on an individual study depends on how confident the researcher is in the research design. Some research designs are better than others at demonstrating cause-and-effect relationships. One well-designed experiment might therefore outweigh (or counter) evidence from weaker research designs. Research design is explored in more detail later under the heading Criminology Research.

Scope and Parsimony

Assuming that a theory has generated sufficient empirical support, other criteria can be applied to identify "good" theories. The related concepts of parsimony and scope are two such criteria.44 A theory that uses only a few concepts to explain crime is better than a theory that uses many concepts. This is the principle of parsimony: the more concise explanation is preferable. Scope refers to what a particular theory can explain. A theory that explains "criminal behavior" is better than a theory that explains only "burglary committed by youth gangs." This is the principle of scope. Grand theories (wide scope) strive to explain all types of criminal behaviors. For example, Gottfredson and Hirschi argue that low self-control explains all forms of criminal behavior, in addition to similar behaviors (adultery, cigarette smoking) that are noncriminal. Combining scope and parsimony, a good theory is one that explains a lot (scope) with very few concepts (parsimony).

Organizing Theories of Crime

A student's first exposure to scientific theories of crime is often less than pleasant. Some of this frustration stems from the sense that there is evidence both for and against most theories. As seen, however, not all research studies are equal. When discussing theory, those studies with strong research designs are highlighted to give a sense of where the "weight of the evidence" lies. Another maddening aspect of theory is the sheer number of theories and authors. To help students cope with this issue, the following sections outline several ways to classify theories into meaningful categories.

Theories of Lawmaking, Law-Breaking, and Reaction to Law-Breaking

As noted earlier, Edwin Sutherland identified criminology as the study of lawmaking, law-breaking, and the response to law-breaking.⁴⁵ This definition of criminology is also a useful way to categorize the theories covered in this text. Theories of law-breaking are the most common and obvious. These theories seek to answer questions such as, "Why do people commit crimes?" or "What makes some countries more prone to crime than others?" Theories of lawmaking attempt to explain why some acts are outlawed whereas others are not or why legal acts become illegal over time. Theories of the response to law violations concern the criminal justice system's reaction to crime. Many "critical" theories focus on these latter two issues. Such theories might question why police arrest certain offenders and not others or why certain laws are enforced more stringently than others.

Macro- and Micro-Level Explanations

Theories can also be classified by their level of analysis. Some theories operate at the individual, or micro, level. A micro-level theory explains why some individuals engage in crime and others do not. In contrast, a macro-level theory attempts to explain differences in groups. For example, a macro-level theory might offer an explanation for why some neighborhoods have higher crime rates than others or why some countries have higher crime rates than others. A simple trick to identify whether a theory is macro or micro level is to look at what the theory predicts. If crime is expressed in "rates," then it is a macro-level theory (only a group has a rate). Most theories of crime (especially those in biology and psychology) operate at the micro level, focusing on the individual offender.

Theoretical Traditions in Criminology

In some disciplines (particularly sociology), theories develop as a tradition. The basic thrust of the theory remains the same, but different authors update, revise, and change the particulars of a theory. For example, the work of Robert Merton spawned several related "strain" theories that revised or changed some of his original ideas but maintained the same core theme. These theoretical traditions are another important tool for organizing theories of crime—where relevant, how these traditions unfold is highlighted. Of course, the academic disciplines themselves, such as psychology and biology, offer a useful way to classify theories. Chapters 4 and 5 are organized around these specific disciplines.

Criminology Research

As social scientists, criminologists use scientific methods to study both criminal behavior and the criminal justice system. As noted already, research findings are the primary basis on which theories of crime are judged. Researchers gather information about the nature and extent of crime, and they also study programs designed to reduce crime in order to see whether they work as intended. Because empirical evidence is so central to criminology, it is worthwhile to review the basics of criminological research.

Cause and Effect in Social Science

A number of methods are available to those who do research on criminal behavior. Because most theories predict cause-and-effect relationships (e.g., poverty causes crime), empirical tests often attempt to establish that certain factors have a causal relationship with crime. To clarify this point, an example may be useful. Start with a simple theory: Hanging around with criminal friends causes criminal behavior. To establish causation in the social sciences, a test needs to demonstrate three things:

- 1. Having criminal friends is related to criminal behavior.
- 2. Having criminal friends happens before engaging in criminal behavior.
- 3. The relationship between criminal friends and criminal behavior is not spurious.

The first point would be rather easy to demonstrate. Ask a group of people to report how many of their closest friends have been arrested for a crime. Also ask them to report their own criminal behavior. If those with criminal friends are more likely to engage in crime themselves, a relationship was established (mathematically, this is called a correlation). The second point, called time ordering, is a little more difficult to verify. The researcher must demonstrate that these individuals had criminal friends before they engaged in crime (i.e., the factor that does the causing must happen before the effect). Demonstrating this timing is important because the relationship between criminal friends and criminal behavior might be the result of criminals wanting to hang out together. In other words, engaging in criminal behavior might cause people to seek out other criminals. One way to demonstrate time ordering is to conduct a longitudinal study. The researcher could measure criminal friends at one point in time and then measure criminal

behavior 6 months later and then further on in time. Assuming that the researcher can establish time ordering, he or she can move to the third point.

A relationship is considered spurious when, even though two things are related, one does not cause the other. For example, suppose that a survey of residents in a city revealed that "time spent in the past week riding a bicycle" was correlated (related) to engaging in vandalism. People who reported riding a bicycle were more likely to have also engaged in vandalism. Does this mean that the act of riding a bicycle caused people to vandalize property? A more plausible explanation is that younger people were more likely to ride bikes (because they do not yet have a driver's license) and vandalize property. Isolating causes of crime (and excluding spuriousness) is the most difficult challenge of doing research in criminology. How spuriousness is dealt with depends largely on research methods.

Experimental Designs

Experimental research designs are the most efficient way to establish cause-and-effect relationships and exclude spuriousness. Although there are many variations, the basic experimental design is illustrated in **Figure 1-2**. The key to the experimental method is the random assignment of subjects to control and experimental groups. If the sample is large enough, random assignment leads to groups that are equivalent on all factors, measured or not. For example, one would expect roughly the same number of males, overweight individuals, people with high IQs, and so forth in each group. The experimental group receives some form of treatment, whereas the other group, known as the control, does not.

In pharmaceutical studies, participants in the control group are often given a placebo (typically a sugar pill) to exclude the possibility that subjects would report improvement simply because they received some treatment. The power of the experimental design is that the only thing that could cause differences between the two groups is the experimental treatment. Thus, if a pill designed to reduce headaches does so in the experimental group, and there is no improvement in the control group, this is persuasive evidence that the pill is effective. Unfortunately, many of the factors of interest to criminologists cannot be assessed through experiments. A criminologist cannot, for example, randomly assign children to "poverty" and "no poverty" conditions and assess their criminality.

Nevertheless, some criminologists do use experimental methods to study crime. The most common subjects in criminal justice experiments are individuals convicted of crimes and placed under some kind of correctional supervision like probation or parole. Figure 1-2 depicts a hypothetical experiment for probationers with substance abuse problems. Researchers could randomly assign offenders to either "probation with drug treatment" or to "probation as usual" (e.g., no treatment). Outcome measures for this study might include failed drug tests, new arrests, or convictions for a new offense. These measures of future criminal behavior are called **recidivism**. In addition to treatment programs, criminologists have manipulated policing practices, using random assignment to dictate how police respond to a domestic violence dispute or how they patrol cities.

Results from criminal justice experiments provide evidence about both the intervention itself and the theory used to create the program. This is true because criminological theories identify "targets" for criminal justice programs. Efforts to increase police patrols, for example, are based on the deterrence theory proposition that the certainty of being caught will

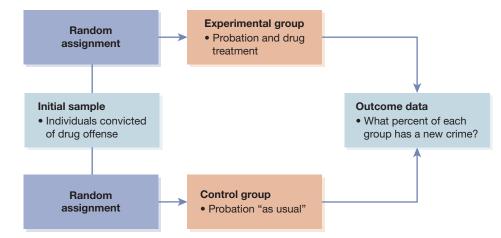


Figure 1-2 The experimental design.

reduce crime. Evidence that such a program worked would therefore support deterrence theory.

Empirical evidence in criminology is often based on quasi-experimental research designs. Here, one or more elements of the experimental design is missing. Criminal justice personnel, for example, are reluctant to randomly assign people to intervention programs. Without random assignment, researchers are forced to use more advanced statistical techniques to ensure that the groups equivalent. Alternatively, researchers sometimes capitalize on natural experiments, where conditions in the environment partially mimic an experimental design. A death penalty study conducted by John Cochran and Mitch Chamlin is a good example. The researchers examined the weekly homicide rates before and after the execution of Robert Alton Harris in the gas chamber at San Quentin prison in California. Harris's execution generated wide media attention because it marked California's reintroduction of the death penalty after a 25-year moratorium. While deterrence theory would predict a decrease in homicides following such a highly publicized execution, the evidence was more complicated. The researchers found a decline in some non-stranger murders but an increase in argument-based murders of strangers.⁴⁶

Nonexperimental Designs

Despite the many examples of experimental research in criminology, most research on theories of crime continues to involve nonexperimental methods. Typically, a sample of individuals are surveyed and asked questions relevant to a particular theory. For example, they may be asked to report on their attitudes, behaviors (including criminal behavior), and/or social circumstances. Sometimes researchers also have people complete tasks to measure such constructs as "impulsivity" or IQ. Criminologists also use information collected by government agencies, such as arrest records or census data. Regardless of how the information is obtained, nonexperimental methods share a common problem: although they are useful in establishing whether two things are related (correlation), they are not very efficient at excluding spuriousness.

To demonstrate cause-and-effect relationships in a nonexperimental design, the researcher must (1) identify and measure those factors that might render a relationship spurious and then (2) control for those factors in a mathematical model. For example, recall the hypothetical relationship between bicycling and vandalism. A criminologist could statistically control the effects of age. If the relationship between vandalism and bicycling disappears after this control, the relationship is spurious. The major limitation of this approach is that the researcher must identify, measure, and control for many factors that might make a relationship spurious. This limitation often leaves an empirical study open for criticism because someone can point to an important factor that was statistically controlled.

However, nonexperimental research is still worthy of consideration. Indeed, as pointed out earlier, many theoretical concepts simply cannot be studied experimentally. Furthermore, to the extent that many empirical studies (controlling each for different factors) find nonspurious relationships, one can gain confidence that the studies have identified a true cause-and-effect relationship. Finally, many research studies are not intended to isolate causeand-effect relationships. Rather, they remain valuable to criminology for other reasons. Ethnographic research, for example, involves the observation of subjects in their own environment, typically over an extended time. Ethnographers provide rich, detailed descriptions of the social environment of subjects based on direct observation and interviews. For example, in the book Gang Leader for a Day, sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh describes his experiences in one of Chicago's most notorious housing projects. Venkatesh, an Indian-born graduate student, entered the Robert Taylor Homes intending to recruit subjects to fill out a multiple-choice survey. Instead, he embedded himself in the community for almost a decade, learning about the gang structure, culture, and black markets that prevailed in the community.47 Many of the most well-regarded theories of crime emerged from this kind of ethnographic research.⁴⁸

Replication and Generalization in Science

An important principle in science is replication. Scientific studies are based on limited data from a unique sample. Because all statistical analyses of a given sample reflect probabilities, there is always the chance that a study reaches erroneous conclusions. In other words, what was found in the sample or experiment may not truly exist in the general population. The possibility also exists that the conclusions based on a single study, even if correct, do not apply to other individuals, places, or contexts. For these reasons, scientists are supposed to replicate findings across different samples, under different conditions. Unfortunately, this policy is often ignored—scientists and journals are more interested in publishing new findings than replicating the old. Over the past decade, scientist from areas as diverse as psychology, medicine, and life sciences have attempted and failed to replicate important studies from the past. This failure is pervasive enough that scholars have called it a "replication crisis."⁴⁹

Criminology has not been immune to the replication crisis. One outcome of the failure to replicate is the problem of **overgeneralization**.⁵⁰ Scientists, policymakers, and the public overgeneralize when they reach sweeping policy conclusions from a single study. Examples of overgeneralization in criminology include the research on felony probation and police response to intimate partner violence.

Studies of Felony Probation

One example of overgeneralization is the response to a study by Rand Corporation researchers of felony probation in California.⁵¹ They reached the widely publicized conclusion that these offenders represented a threat to public safety. Rand reported that 65% of offenders who were placed on probation for a felony-level offense were rearrested within 2 years of their release. What the media neglected to report was that the sample that was under study came from the two most populous counties in California. As such, the sample was not even representative of California's overall felony offender population. Moreover, the California results could not reflect felony probation recidivism rates across the nation. Indeed, replications of this study reported much lower recidivism rates, ranging from 22 to 43%.52-57 Replication of research can determine whether findings and their policy implications are stable over time and place. Unfortunately, prior to these replications, policymakers had already used the Rand study to declare that because probation was failing, more money should be devoted to prisons.

Experiments on the Impact of Mandatory Arrest in Domestic Violence Cases

Another example of overgeneralization occurred with research on police response to domestic violence. Lawrence Sherman has conducted several studies with his colleagues on the impact of arrest in domestic violence cases. In the first study, suspects in Minneapolis were randomly assigned to one of three potential responses by the police: (1) arrest, (2) threat of arrest (with the suspect leaving the home), and (3) a "talking to" by the police (with the suspect left at the scene).⁵⁸ The results supported the use of arrest in domestic violence cases as a way to protect the victim. The suspects who were arrested had the lowest rate of recidivism.^{59,60}

Sherman's Minneapolis study had a dramatic impact on policing in domestic violence cases. Although the authors were careful to recommend against the passage of mandatory arrest laws until further research was conducted, the results of the Minneapolis experiment contributed to the passage of such laws in 15 states by 1991.⁶¹ The study was later replicated in Omaha, ⁶² Charlotte, ⁶³ and Milwaukee^{64,65} with dissimilar results. Arresting domestic violence suspects in both Omaha and Charlotte was no more effective than other methods of handling the case (e.g., citation or advisement).

In Milwaukee, Sherman and his colleagues specifically examined the impact of arrest on domestic violence cases in poverty-stricken inner-city areas. The authors concluded that short-term arrest might actually cause harm by increasing anger at society without increasing the fear of rearrest.⁶⁶

Sherman and Berk have been severely criticized for the impact of their studies on public policy in domestic violence cases. Critics have chastised the researchers for failing to acknowledge that the use of arrest in domestic violence cases failed to achieve the desired result upon replication. They also note that the Minneapolis study resulted in a "dramatic change in public policy with potentially substantial negative effects on many people and an unwarranted large expenditure of public monies."⁶⁷ Sherman⁶⁸ and Berk⁶⁹ countered these objections by noting that three of the six experiments provided some evidence of deterrence and that they always fully listed the policy limitations of the findings of the studies.

As these examples suggest, criminological studies must be interpreted with caution. Sound policy should only follow accurate research. Research should be replicated in other locations to be certain that results generated in one area apply to others. The value of replication is underscored by Sherman and Harris's 23-year follow-up of the Milwaukee domestic violence experiment. They found that arrested suspects in the experiment were almost three times more likely to have died as the result of homicide than the suspects originally assigned to a warning. There was no evidence that these suspects died at the hands of their former victims, but the findings illustrate that long-term replications of such policies may be in order.70 For these reasons, criminologists are often reluctant to reach definite conclusions based on their studies.

Crime Policy

As the preceding examples make clear, theory and research are intimately related to policy. To be sure, criminology is an "applied" social science. In other words, criminologists investigate crime in order to generate practical solutions to the problem. Theory and research on the causes of crime and criminal behavior can provide information that can be used either to prevent crime from occurring or to lessen its impact on society.

The applied nature of criminology is illustrated by the research questions that are addressed in criminological research. Gibbs identified four major questions that criminologists traditionally attempt to answer:⁷¹

- 1. Why does the crime rate vary?
- 2. Why do certain individuals and not others commit crimes?
- 3. Why is there variation in reactions to alleged criminality?
- 4. What are the possible means of controlling criminality?

The fourth question specifically deals with crime policy. Note, though, that the answer to the fourth question depends largely on responses to the first two questions. In other words, if one knows what causes crime, one is better able to develop effective policies.

Similarly, Canton and Yates contend that criminology can inform criminal justice policy and practice by answering three key questions:⁷²

- 1. What is to be done with offenders?
- 2. What is to be done about crime?
- 3. What is to be done for (or on behalf of) victims of crime?

Theory, coupled with sound research, should help guide policymaking throughout the criminal justice system. Empirically supported theory can provide clues for the passage of legislation and the sound operation of social programs. To proceed without theoretical guidance is to take a shot in the dark-there is no logical basis to assume that a particular program will work. Policy prescriptions based on theories that are not supported empirically are also unlikely to work. Unfortunately, crime policy often violates these principles; programs with little theoretical guidance emerge time and again. Thus, students need to be prepared with a firm grounding in theoretical criminology and an understanding of how these theories can be applied to policy and practice in criminal justice.⁷³ To illustrate the importance of science-driven policy,

we consider the cases of two programs—intensive supervision probation and multisystemic therapy.

Uninformed Policy—The Case of Intensive Supervision

To illustrate the need to link theory with policy, consider the highly praised intensive supervision programs (ISPs). These programs reflect the belief that probation/parole officers can do a better job of monitoring and supervising high-risk offenders if the officers' caseloads are smaller. ISPs emerged in the 1980s as a potential solution to the crowding problem in U.S. jails and prisons. One attractive feature of intensive supervision is that it pleases people with conflicting views. ISPs promise to increase surveillance (protect society), provide more treatment, and reduce the size of jail and prison populations. Most ISPs followed a "get-tough" approach that emphasized techniques like drug testing and electronic monitoring. Unfortunately, the emergence of intensive supervision took place in "the absence of any true theory that more supervision will lead to lower recidivism rates."74

Research on intensive supervision initially found that it led to higher rates of probation revocation and had little influence on recidivism.⁷⁵ In fact, had ISP supporters reviewed research from the 1960s, they would have discovered that lowering probation caseloads did not reduce recidivism.⁷⁶ Although research on ISPs was largely negative, it did provide information that suggested conditions under which these programs might be more successful. In particular, the rehabilitative aspects of the program (providing better services and referrals) have proven effective.⁷⁷ ISPs that implemented the suggested changes achieved reductions in recidivism rates.^{78,79}

Informed Policy: The Case of Multisystemic Therapy

In contrast to ISPs, multisystemic therapy (MST) is based explicitly on well-known and empirically supported theories of crime. Developed by psychologist Scott Henggeler and his associates, MST is a community-based treatment program that targets many known causes of delinquency and crime. The targets of MST are drawn from several empirically supported theories of crime, including social learning theory, social control theory, and cognitive theory. Examples of treatment targets include parental supervision and discipline, antisocial attitudes, association with delinquent peers, and the mix of rewards and punishments for antisocial behavior.⁸⁰ MST has accumulated a track record of success, reducing crime

substantially among serious/chronic offenders, including inner-city juvenile delinquents, adolescent sex offenders, and abusive parents. This track record has led some scholars to conclude that MST is perhaps the best treatment option available to reduce recidivism.⁸¹

How has MST achieved this success? Part of the answer lies in the structure of the program: MST therapists receive extensive training and support and are held accountable for the progress (or lack thereof) of offenders. Also, treatment plans are individualized to the needs/problems of each offender, and each treatment has multiple targets for change. A central reason for success, however, is that MST identifies known (from theory and research) causes of delinquency and targets these factors for change. For example, parental discipline is a key factor in several theories of crime, and empirical research consistently demonstrates that lax supervision and harsh/inconsistent punishment promote delinquency. Therefore, theory dictates that improving the disciplining skills of the parents of delinquents should lead to a reduction in recidivism.

Criminology in Context

In a completely rational, emotionless, scientific world, theory and research would inform the public about the nature and causes of crime. Research evidence would drive political debate over crime and lead to effective crime policy. In reality, there often exists a disconnect between the science of criminology and the policy created by legislators. There is also a gap between the basic scientific knowledge about crime and public beliefs about criminal behavior. In other words, criminology does not unfold within a "science vacuum." Rather, theory, research, and policy take place within the messy real world, where social context, mass media, and ideology shape perceptions of and reactions to criminal behavior. It is crucial to recognize that both the public and the academic community of criminologists are influenced by this social context. For example, empirical evidence sometimes matters less than whether a theory "makes sense" to criminologists living through a particular era. Similarly, crime policies often appeal to a segment of the public (and students) because they speak to a certain political ideology. We explore three elements of social context: ideology, mass media, and politics.

Political Ideology

Ideology is a set of relatively unquestioned assumptions about how the world works. A person's ideology is resistant to change and charged with emotion. In America, conservative and liberal ideologies are the most dominant. Conservatives tend to value social order and stability. They view life outcomes, both good and bad, as the result of individual choices. People become wealthy, for example, when they choose to work hard in pursuit of education and employment. Conservatives view crime as a "bad choice" made freely by an offender. Therefore, they view the criminal as directly responsible for his or her own behavior. This emphasis on free will makes conservative ideology consistent with the classical school of crime.

Traditional conservative values include discipline and respect for authority. Conservatives see the following as the most important causes of crime:⁸²

- Excessive leniency toward lawbreakers
- Emphasis on the welfare and rights of lawbreakers at the expense of the welfare and rights of victims, law enforcement officials, and law-abiding citizens
- Erosion of discipline and respect for authority
- Excessive permissiveness in society

In contrast to conservatives, liberals tend to view life outcomes as limited or constrained by factors outside of a person's control. A person living in extreme poverty, for example, cannot simply choose to attend a better school. Therefore, liberals advocate for social justice so that members of society have an equal chance to achieve success. Core values of liberalism include the protection of individual rights and the humane treatment of less-advantaged people. Liberals emphasize dysfunctional elements of the criminal justice system such as inequalities based on race, sex, and wealth. They tend to be more skeptical about the utility of punishments such as prison.⁸³ Liberals view crime not as simply a bad choice but as the end result of many causal forces. This perspective is consistent with the positivist school of crime and the use of rehabilitation.

Ideology serves as a prism through which we see many social issues. Consider the Black Lives Matter movement. The movement started with the use of #BlackLivesMatter on social media after the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of African American teen Trayvon Martin. Black Lives Matter has since gained national attention by organizing street demonstrations after highly publicized police shootings of African Americans. The movement, the street protests, and the resulting media coverage provoked strong emotional reactions from the public. Recall that core values of conservatism include order and respect for authority, while the central values of liberalism are individual rights and social justice. It should not be surprising that a survey of Americans revealed that conservatives were over 250% more likely to oppose Black Lives Matter than moderates or liberals.⁸⁴ By 2014, a more conservative countermovement called Blue Lives Matter formed after the killing of New York City police officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu.⁸⁵

The schism between left (liberal) and right (conservative) is reflected not only among politicians and the public but among criminologists as well. On the right, the neoclassical school has a common interest in dealing with predatory crimes and substantially less interest in the "root causes" of crime that have entertained the more liberal social determinists for so long. The neoconservatives are concerned more with dealing with the symptoms and intermediate correlates of social problems than in affecting major changes in the social fabric of society.⁸⁶

The neoclassical school has influenced criminal justice policy in several areas, particularly with respect to career criminal laws and incapacitation. One leading advocate of this point of view is James Q. Wilson. In the provocative book *Thinking About Crime*, Wilson argues that the typical causal analysis used by sociologists is not useful to policymakers:⁸⁷

Causal analysis attempts to find the source of human activity in those factors which themselves are not caused, which are, in the language of sociologists, "independent variables." Ultimate causes cannot be the object of policy efforts precisely because, being ultimate, they cannot be changed.

In contrast, **policy analysis** considers only the condition that the government wishes to create. Its focus is on current circumstances, and its purpose is identifying the forces the government can marshal to bring the desired state into being.

In fact, Wilson declares that there is no reason for criminologists to be policy analysts.⁸⁸ He believes the policy analyst should ignore the study of the causes of crime and instead focus on the manipulation of objective conditions because "the only instruments society has by which to alter behavior in the short run require it to assume that people act in response to the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action."⁸⁹ Thus, Wilson advocates **law and order** policies such as the incapacitation of career criminals, a return to foot patrols by police, and the continued criminalization of drugs.

Left-leaning criminologists identify with the positivist school of crime and seek the root causes of criminal behavior. Liberal criminologists also attempt to debunk the assumptions that inform the conservative ideology in the United States.^{90–92} A leading critic of conservative criminology is Elliot Currie. He considers crime a symptom of such social problems as child poverty and abuse/neglect, inadequate public services, and economic inequality. As a result, Currie calls for the following reforms:⁹³

- We should move to reduce inequality and poverty.
- We should move toward crime prevention rather than incapacitation. Prevention priorities include preventing child abuse, enhancing children's intellectual and social development, and providing support to vulnerable adolescents.
- We should work toward a genuinely supportive national family policy.
- We should begin assuming greater responsibility for the economic and social stability of local communities.
- We need to learn more about how to create comprehensive strategies for high-risk communities and understand why some societies have lower crime rates than others.^{94–96}

Crime and the Media

The media include a variety of channels of mass communication including print, radio and television broadcasting, cable television, and Internet-based platforms. Regardless of the specific medium, content can be organized into the categories of advertising, news, entertainment, and infotainment.⁹⁷ Table 1-2 provides examples of crime-related content. The media are central to understanding the context of criminology. In part, this is because of America's love-hate relationship with crime. On the one hand, Americans abhor crime and fear for their safety and that of their loved ones. On the other hand, we are obsessed with crime and cannot get enough crime-related media content.98 Because of this public interest, crime maintains a heavy presence in the media. Criminal events serve as a primary source of raw material for television and print news content-during some news cycles, up to 50% of news coverage is devoted to crime.⁹⁹ Crime and criminal justice are also featured in the entertainment and infotainment genres-documentaries and other movies, "reality" programming, police dramas, interactive video games, and podcasts all draw attention to the issue of crime. Theory in Action: The Reality of "Reality Policing" Television explores Cops and other police-related infotainment in more depth.

For most in the public, mass media—and the news media in particular—serve as the primary source

Media Type	Explanation	Examples
News	Factual information about significant events in society; includes newspapers, local and national broadcast television news, and 24-hour cable television news.	<i>New York Times, Wall Street Journal</i> , CNN, Fox News
Entertainment	Escapist content designed to provide pleasurable experience to an audience; includes crime "thriller" novels, movies, video games, and television dramas.	James Patterson's Alex Cross series (novels), <i>Criminal Minds, Law and Order,</i> <i>The Wolf of Wall Street</i> (movie), <i>Grand</i> <i>Theft Auto</i> (video game)
Infotainment	Information on real events produced using editing and other techniques from entertainment media; includes documentaries, "reality" programming, and true crime podcasts or web content.	Dateline NBC, The First 48, Cops, Live PD, Court TV, Serial (podcast), Making a Murderer (documentary)

Table 1-2 Crime and Criminal Justice in the Media

of information about crime.100 This raises the question of how accurately the media reflect the reality of crime and criminal justice. More than other content, scholars have analyzed coverage of crime in newspapers and on televised newscasts, and have reached a number of conclusions. First, news organizations rely heavily on crime to fill the daily "news hole." Depending on the day, 10 to 30% of newspaper content is crime related.¹⁰¹ Typically, coverage includes crime events and the police response to those events (e.g., investigations, arrests). News coverage of criminal events is biased toward violent crime (especially murder) over property crime. As the saying goes, "If it bleeds, it leads." Crimes perpetrated "randomly" by strangers also generate more coverage. Thus, mass public shootings generate an enormous amount of media attention.¹⁰²

A similar pattern emerges from the entertainment media. Consider the last crime-related movie, novel, television drama, or podcast that you consumed. Whether it was a detective thriller novel, an episode of Criminal Minds, or a true crime podcast, odds are that the central crime was homicide. Taken together then, the media often leave the public with the impression that criminal violence is common and that crime is continually getting worse. Indeed, as Figure 1-3 illustrates, American perceptions of crime diverge quite a bit from the reality of crime. Gallup polls routinely ask the public whether they believe crime got worse in the past year. Since 2001, the vast majority of Americans have reported each year that crime was worse. As the graphs show, this happened even in years where crime declined substantially.



THEORY IN ACTION

The Reality of "Reality Policing" Television

Infotainment is a type of media content that folds information on real events into an entertainment package. Crime and criminal justice have always been a natural fit for this type of programming. At the close of the 20th century, however, crime-related infotainment exploded onto the television scene. During this period, technological advances such as handheld video cameras, satellites, and the Internet made possible the instant broadcast of events regardless of where they occurred. The advent of 24-hour cable television programming also created a demand for inexpensive content. By the early 1990s, "reality" programs like *Court TV, America's Most Wanted*, and *American Detective* appeared on network and cable television in order to meet that demand.

Among the most popular forms of crime-based reality programs are policing shows. *Cops*, originally broadcast by Fox Television, has been on television for over 30 years and aired over 1,000 episodes, making it one of America's longest running television shows. The "Bad Boys" theme song that starts each episode is ingrained in popular culture. Part of the appeal of programs like *Cops* is their claim to authenticity—to be an unfiltered look at police and criminals. Indeed, research indicates that the public tends to see these shows more as news than entertainment. Yet, how "real" are these programs?

Criminologist Ray Surette points out that "reality television" programs are often crafted to portray the reality that people wish for as opposed to the reality that exists. "The feel with infotainment media is that you are learning the real facts about the world; the reality is that you are getting a highly stylized rendition of a narrow, edited slice of the world." Indeed, one reason that police departments allow their officers to be filmed is because the program casts them in a positive light. Because police departments that allow filming have the final say on what footage gets aired, officers are invariably seen as competent and effective and never foul-mouthed, careless, or incompetent.

In the production of *Cops*, hours of footage get shaved down into three action-packed "segments" that make up an episode. Normal police duties like paperwork and crowd control are skipped in favor of drug busts and scenes of police chasing suspects. During the editing process, timelines are "smoothed," and sounds, graphics, and imagery are added.

Scholars and journalists who have subjected *Cops* episodes to content analyses find a number of ways that episodes depart from the reality of crime and justice. Across different seasons of *Cops*, for example, police made arrests on 75 to 95% of their interactions with suspects. In contrast, the actual percentage of crime cleared through arrest is much lower—about 15% for property crime and 45% for violent crime. Episodes also overrepresented drug and violent crime and (especially in earlier seasons) suspects who were non-White.

In his podcast, *Running from Cops*, producer Dan Taberski examines many of these issues. He compares raw footage to the final edited product, and interviews individuals who appeared on *Cops* episodes. Among the questions he tackles is why people sign the release forms that allow *Cops* to show their faces on television. Suspects who he interviewed report being pressured or coerced to sign the forms by show producers and police officers. Another ethical issue raised in the podcast (and by criminologists) is whether police officers feel pressure to make good television rather than good police decisions. One police officer reported that, under the direction of a producer, he retrieved a suspect from the back of a police car and interviewed him so that the crew could get enough footage for the segment. In another case, a police officer performed multiple "field tests" of the same substance before concluding that the substance was not cocaine.

Aside from ethical concerns, criminologists are critical of programs like *Cops* because they present very specific (and often misleading) constructions of reality. In this world, the police are always good, and their intuitions about suspects are always correct. Criminals are "deviant others"—the bad guys from whom the police shield the public.

Some communities that have routinely hosted reality-policing programs have become more skeptical of these relationships. For example, police departments in Bridgeport, Connecticut; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Streetsboro, Ohio, decided not to renew their contracts because of the perception that a focus on crime overshadowed the positive aspects of their communities.

Critics of reality programming, however, appear to be fighting an uphill battle. *Live PD*, launched in 2016 by A&E, has been dubbed "*Cops* on steroids." The program consistently leads the cable television ratings, drawing over 1 million viewers during episodes that air on Friday and Saturday nights. In this program, live feeds (with some "tape delay") from several police agencies are beamed to a studio where hosts provide color commentary for police-citizen interactions. Older segments, similar to episodes from *Cops*, are replayed to fill in time gaps. The show capitalizes on the interactive and instant nature of social media—*Live PD*'s Twitter account averages about 100,000 interactions per episode. Followers typically add their own commentary and jokes but have also provided tips to police that appeared to influence the outcome of an interaction. For example, viewers of one episode noted that a suspect had thrown something out of a car window. Notified by producers, police went back and retrieved the evidence.

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The media landscape has changed rather dramatically in the past decade. The Internet, social media sites, and on-demand programming have made media more instant and interactive. While older television operated by broadcasting to a wide audience, the "new media" utilizes narrowcasting. That is, media is tailored to small, homogenous audiences that have a special interest in particular content. Social media feeds use complicated algorithms to recommend content based on what users consume. Political ideology plays a role here, as people naturally seek out content that confirms their ideological stance. A growing concern among media scholars is that citizens may create their own "echo chamber." Blogs, cable news, and social media sites often do not provide broad-based views of crime and justice. Instead, they promote hard-line positions and distorted views of crime.¹⁰³

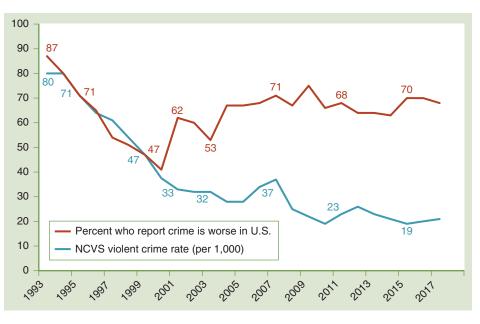


Figure 1-3 Perception of crime in the United States versus actual crime rates. Perception of crime based on Gallup poll question, "Is there more crime in the U.S. than there was a year ago, or less?" Data available at https://news.gallup.com/poll/1603/crime.aspx. Violent crime rate based on NCVS data, available at https://www.bjs.gov/

The Politics of Crime

Ideology and the media often play important roles within the political arena. In the United States, liberal politicians typically align with the Democratic party and conservatives with the Republican party. Regardless of party, politicians routinely attempt to use the media to win elections and further a political agenda. Nationally, crime has been a major campaign issue in almost every presidential election since 1964, and most victors have made criminal justice policy a theme in their administrations. For example, consistent with his aim of creating a "Great Society" through civil rights legislation and a war on poverty, President Lyndon Johnson made fighting crime an integral part of his campaign.

In contrast to this liberal tradition, Republicans such as Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush generally took the more conservative law and order stance against crime, emphasizing individual responsibility, deterrence, and retribution.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, from the 1970s until the 2000s, crime control was a main pillar in the Republicans' "Southern strategy" designed to attract white, working class voters who had traditionally leaned Democrat. They advocated "wars," first on crime, and later on illicit drugs, that were to be won through arrest and incarceration rather than rehabilitation. An example of this political strategy in action occurred during the 1988 presidential campaign. President George H. W. Bush derailed Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis's bid for the presidency with his infamous Willie Horton ads that painted Dukakis as a liberal who was more concerned with the rights of criminals than their victims. Horton was a convicted murderer who committed a violent rape and murder while on furlough from a Massachusetts (where Dukakis was governor) prison. The news media played a role in this process by repeatedly showing the ads as part of their campaign coverage.¹⁰⁵

Once in office, presidents usually direct crime policies in ways that reflect their own political ideology.¹⁰⁶ Democrats Lyndon Johnson, and later Jimmy Carter, were guided by the promise of distributive justice: that increased economic opportunity is the best defense against crime. In accord with his populist views, Carter also stepped up federal efforts to apprehend and prosecute white-collar criminals. As part of his campaign to promote a new federalism, Nixon cut the strings attached to the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration funds, allowing state and local governments to decide their own spending priorities. Ford established career criminal prosecution programs. Reagan denounced liberal spending programs as destructive to individual values and made the fight against violent crime a priority of his administration. During his presidency, George H. W. Bush continued the Reagan administration's war on drugs. After the September 11, 2001, tragedies,

President George W. Bush made terrorism his crime priority through the creation of the Department of Homeland Security.

Yet ideology and political party do not always produce predictable outcomes. President Bill Clinton emphasized community policing-an approach that attempts to foster closer relationships between police and citizens. Working with a Republican legislature, however, he also signed into law the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. Considered hallmark legislation in the "tough on crime" era, the law expanded death penalty-eligible offenses and provided \$9.7 billion for prison construction. President Trump campaigned using law and order rhetoric on the issues of illegal immigration and street crime.¹⁰⁷ In 2018, however, he signed into law the First Step Act, a bipartisan bill that included federal prison reforms traditionally supported by liberals. For example, the act created "earned time credits" that allow inmates to reduce their sentence when they participate in vocational or treatment programs.¹⁰⁸

How Context Matters: The "Martinson Report" and the Demise of Rehabilitation

The importance of social context can be illustrated by reviewing an important event in criminology. What came to be called the "Martinson Report" was actually an article written by sociologist Robert Martinson and published in the magazine The Public Interest in 1974. Titled "What Works? Questions and Answers About Prison Reform," the article distilled findings from a larger study that he had conducted with coauthors Douglas Lipton and Judith Wilks. This study examined reports published between 1945 and 1967 on the effectiveness of correctional treatment. Studies were included if they met the following methodological criteria: "[They] had to employ an independent measure of the improvement secured by that method, and [they] had to use some control group, some untreated individuals with whom the treated ones could be compared."109 Reviewing over 20 years of research, the scholars found only 231 studies that met this minimum standard of research.

Based on this information, Martinson reached his now-famous conclusion: "With few and isolated exceptions, the rehabilitative efforts that have been reported so far have had no appreciable effect upon recidivism."¹¹⁰ While he acknowledged that better funded and executed treatment programs might be successful, he was pessimistic that this would happen. Martinson observed that there may be "a more radical flaw in our present strategies—that education at its best, or that psychotherapy at its best, cannot overcome, or even appreciably reduce, the powerful tendency for offenders to continue in criminal behavior."¹¹¹

Many credit this report with ending an era of rehabilitation and ushering in decades of conservative, get-tough crime policies. Indeed, rarely if ever had a research article generated as much interest among lawmakers, criminologists, or the general public. Martinson was interviewed for People magazine and appeared on a 60 Minutes segment titled "It Doesn't Work."112 In a very short time, his conclusions about rehabilitation were reduced to a simple slogan: "Nothing works!" Moreover, this doctrine was widely and uncritically embraced by academic criminology. Politically, the report was also used by lawmakers to advocate for a more punitive response to crime. Is this a case where scientific findings made a direct impact on crime policy? Did Martinson, through a scientific review of the literature, persuade lawmakers and scholars to abandon rehabilitation? A careful analysis suggests a more complicated picture.

Importantly, Martinson was not the first scholar to review the rehabilitation literature and conclude that rehabilitation programs were ineffective. Between 1950 and 1966, several scholars reached equally pessimistic conclusions. Criminologists responded with a call to find better programs, conduct better research, and enhance funding for rehabilitation. Conversely, when Martinson recanted his original statements a few years after his famous report, nobody paid attention.¹¹³⁻¹¹⁵ If his original report led to the demise of rehabilitation, then why didn't his recantation have a similar influence? Finally, reviews of the scientific studies on treatment programs published in the 1980s and 1990s, which showed promising results, were met with skepticism by criminologists and policymakers.116

Why did the Martinson Report generate such interest, and why did it appear to be the death knell for rehabilitation? The answer lies largely in the social context of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This was a period of great social change in America. Events such as the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, civil rights protests, the Kent State University shootings, and the Attica prison riot shaped the political environment. For liberals, government responses to civil rights marchers and the Watergate scandal signified that the government could not be trusted with any task. By the time the Martinson Report was published, most criminologists were already deeply skeptical of the rehabilitation model. In particular, they believed that the discretion given to judges and parole boards led to class-biased and racist outcomes.

To conservatives who value tradition and social order, the "hippie movement" of the 1960s was traumatic. In a short period of time, "living together," premarital sex, and divorce became normative. Civil disobedience over the Vietnam War and racial discrimination, along with rising crime rates, were evidence to conservatives of a growing social disorder.¹¹⁷ Conservative politicians and scholars had always been wary of rehabilitation because it appeared to "coddle" offenders. Instead, they proposed greater use of jails and prisons, along with a return to traditional values, as the solution to crime.

Thus, by the time the Martinson Report appeared, criminologists and policymakers across the ideology spectrum had already concluded that rehabilitation was a failed endeavor.¹¹⁸ Both liberals and conservatives could waive the report in the air and exclaim, "I told you so!" Ultimately, conservative politicians at both the state and national levels were able to capitalize on the fall of rehabilitation. Over the following decades, they enacted policies that emphasized punishment over treatment.

The Martinson story demonstrates that research on crime does not operate in a completely objective, value-neutral environment. Clearly, ideology and social context cannot be divorced from science. Ideas from the left and the right will always shape criminology research, theories of crime, and crime policy. The value of science, however, is that theories of crime from both the left and the right are subject to the same empirical scrutiny.¹¹⁹ In the decades that followed the Martinson Report, scholars have continued to publish reports on correctional treatment programs, many of which proved to be effective. Subsequent reviews of this rehabilitation literature, using new meta-analytic techniques, showed that successful treatment of offenders is possible. Criminologists now ask, "what works, how well, and with whom?"120-122 The "what works" literature shows that correctional research can be used to implement change and improve programs while holding offenders accountable for performance.¹²³ Indeed, there has been a shift in criminal justice, and specifically within corrections, to demand that new programs are "evidence based."

Academic Criminology in Context

Academics often have a reputation for being locked in their "ivory tower" and disconnected from the messy world of ideology and politics. As criminologist James Austin notes, when Congress and state legislatures consider crime legislation, their first question is not: "What do the criminologists think?"124 In part, this is because criminologists willing to offer firm policy advice are in short supply. As the Martinson Report saga makes clear, however, criminologists do sometimes "go public." Thus there is tension between two views of how those who study crime should interact with the larger community. Some believe in criminologists as activists, while others believe that scientists should remain objective and neutral-let the findings speak for themselves.¹²⁵ Activism risks ideological bias, while reluctance to speak out could render criminology irrelevant.

The aversion to activism within criminology relates to the sociological roots of this field of study. One norm of sociological research, established primarily by German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), is that the research and its results should be **value free**. Weber contended that if researchers seek definite conclusions, their work could be biased by their desire to achieve certain results. The primary aim of sociological research is therefore to generate accurate, unbiased, and objective data—not to draw conclusions. As a result, some criminologists remain reluctant to discuss policy recommendations on crime.

Academics are also acutely aware of the limits of scientific studies and the need to replicate research. Those who advocate bold policy changes based on new research or theory risk being incorrect. Mary Tuck describes this sentiment:¹²⁶

Many argue that criminological theories have changed so wildly over the years that criminologists have often provided "the wrong" advice about policies now claimed to be "right." They have argued for rehabilitative custody and against it, for longer sentences and against them; criminology both created the treatment model and destroyed it. As for "the causes of crime"—you are as aware as I am that "you pay your money and you take your choice." Even on supposedly narrow practical questions . . . criminologists speak with no single voice. Tuck suggests that policies cannot proceed directly from any one criminological theory. They emerge from debate—"the gradual working out of disagreement and contradiction."¹²⁷

When social scientists do attempt to shape policy, there is no guarantee that policymakers will heed their advice. As in the case of other disciplines, Michael Tonry¹²⁸ notes, "research evidence seldom influences policy or practice directly." When it does, the adoption of research evidence into policy is due to "windows of opportunity."129 These windows of opportunity are dependent upon (1) the filter of prevailing paradigms and ways of thinking, (2) prevailing ideology, (3) short-term political considerations, and (4) shortterm bureaucratic considerations and inertia.¹³⁰ Thus, the overdose death of basketball player Len Bias led to the implementation of harsh penalties for cocaine violations, and the murders of Megan Kanka and Polly Klaas led to crackdowns on sex offenders and career criminals.

Similarly, L. Edward Wells worries that research and policy seem to "control the development of limited theories chosen to suit practical contingencies."¹³¹ New models that promote deterrence and incapacitation have not been supported by research, but they are still favored because they "are closer to political sensibilities and more consistent with what people feel should be true."¹³²

Of course, many people believe that criminology must abandon the pretense of value-free research and state how findings can be best applied in real-world situations. Gibbs declares that criminologists must take up the question of crime control and prevention.¹³³

No scientific enterprise will be supported indefinitely unless it benefits someone other than the scientists, and perhaps much of criminology's support stems from a concern with crime prevention. There is simply no justification for the indifference of theorists to attempt to prevent criminality, including delinquency.

In other words, criminology must return to its roots as an applied social science. The complex nature of the crime problem demands that policy implications be developed through criminology. There is a rich tradition to draw from in this regard. From Beccaria and Bentham, to Shaw and McKay, to Cloward and Ohlin, criminologists have developed theories to meet the problems of the day and have sought to apply them.

As James Gilsinan has aptly noted, "criminological theory has never been confined to the ivory



Criminologist (center) at a meeting with an opioid response team in Duluth, Minnesota. Used with the permission of Nathan Maahs.

tower."134 Indeed, many scholars conduct research "in the field" by working with criminal justice agencies such as police or probation departments. Joan Petersilia's scholarship exemplifies this type of research. Petersilia has spent much of her career working with probation and parole agencies to test programs and improve policies. As academics, she argues, criminologists have lost touch as they pursue theories rather than deal with day-to-day realities of criminal justice. As a result, they often lose sight of the value of practical applications. Petersilia asserts that research can be an unimpeachable guide to policy. She argues that criminologists should strive for "research [that] is more likely to influence the way policymakers think about problems than to provide solutions 'off the shelf."¹³⁵ Furthermore, she urges criminologists to make clear the policy implications of their research findings. As noted throughout this text, this is not an easy task, but it is certainly essential if criminology is to stay relevant.

Criminology Students in Context: "Streetwise" Criminology

Criminology students typically enter their coursework with preconceived ideas about the nature of crime, criminals, and the criminal justice system. For many students, perceptions about crime are based almost entirely on media depictions of crime and criminal justice. Other students bring to the classroom beliefs based on job experience within the criminal justice system. Students are often frustrated by the failure of criminology to provide certain and clear-cut answers to the crime problem. This frustration also promotes the view that academic criminology, and especially theory, is impractical. Jeffery has accurately portrayed this attitude:¹³⁶

Theoretical courses are characterized as useless. "I want some course material that is relevant," is the usual student response to the curriculum. When one asks, "What is relevance?" it turns out to be vocational training in being a police [officer] or a corrections officer.

Clearly, these students are saying that "street smarts" are more valuable than "book knowledge" of criminal behavior. One exemplar of this type of thinking is the student who has worked or is working in the criminal justice system and who believes that the only legitimate source of knowledge is experience. Carter summarizes this argument:¹³⁷

Nothing personal, but most professors don't know what they are talking about. They sit on campus putting out all this good shit about rehabilitation and causes of crime. Most of them haven't ever been on the street and if you want to know what's happening, you have to be on the street. Instead of telling us about crime, we ought to be telling them. If they would spend a couple of days with us, they might find out what's happening. No, they don't want to do that. It might upset all their theories.

Indeed, this belief is not limited to students. In academia, one of its most vocal and visible adherents is George Kirkham. His experience as "the professor who became a cop" led him to first gently admonish his colleagues to observe firsthand the problems of police officers before criticizing them.¹³⁸ He later bluntly stated that a "criminologist would not know a criminal if one bit him on the ass."¹³⁹

Another source of the street-smarts bias stems from what Carter called the Dick Tracy mentality. A more contemporary name might be the *CSI* or *Criminal Minds* mentality. This mindset is characterized by several beliefs:¹⁴⁰

- The crime fighter is no mere mortal but, rather, a super crime fighter.
- The criminal is distinctive, unique, readily identifiable, and different from a "normal" person.
- There are two kinds of people in society—good guys and bad guys.

A corollary view holds that theoretical statements represent attempts to provide a defense for criminals. The

reality, however, is that criminological theory attempts to explain—rather than excuse—criminal behavior.

Still another version of this mentality can be bluntly called the "asshole theory" of crime, by which police officers guide their actions in specific situations. "Assholes" commit crimes that are motiveless, completely senseless, or otherwise irrational. Carter relates this statement by a police officer/student:¹⁴¹

I've heard all the theories of crime. Let me tell you, crime is caused by assholes. That's the asshole theory. If you want to check that, come out on the street. See it like it is.

Readers of this text, however, will discover that theory does not always clash with street knowledge or even media portrayals of criminal justice. Rather, theory is often verified by experience. In fact, studies of how police view crime causation demonstrate that officers' perceptions often mirror criminological theory. For example, Wesley's examination of police opinions found that they tended to view offenders as (1) victims of their deprived environment, (2) morally weak or deficient, (3) biologically deficient, or (4) shrewd and intelligent operatives.¹⁴² Similarly, a study of college police officers reported that they tended to view campus crime as the result of a combination of an environment that presents attractive criminal opportunities and an absence of social control among the students.¹⁴³ Thus, the library attracts thieves because students fail to protect their laptops and other property when in that location.¹⁴⁴ Students engage in substance abuse and underage drinking because they want to have fun and have escaped the control of their parents.¹⁴⁵ In this case, the officers' observations are a reflection of theories of rational choice and social control. These theories are presented in Chapters 3 and 7.

Crime as a Normal Phenomenon

A common belief is that crime is something that can and must be eliminated from society. President Lyndon Johnson's War on Crime in the 1960s and President George H. W. Bush's War on Drugs suggest that "victory" over crime is possible. These much-trumpeted campaigns notwithstanding, one needs to consider what French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) wrote about crime through the course of history:¹⁴⁶

Crime is present not only in most societies of one particular species but in societies of all types. There is no society that is not confronted with the problem of criminality. What is normal is the existence of crime. Crime is normal because a society exempt from it is utterly impossible. Even a community of saints will create sinners.

Clearly, Durkheim did not mean that it was desirable or even acceptable to kill one's neighbor. Rather, he was pointing out that wherever there is conformity, there is also deviance—and some deviance will inevitably be deemed criminal.

Durkheim also noted that deviance is a prerequisite for social change. Without deviance, a society stagnates. Cohen followed up on this observation by outlining seven ways the deviant may make positive contributions to the success and vitality of societies:¹⁴⁷

- 1. *Deviance cuts through red tape*. The deviant rebels against the categorical and stereotypical nature of rules, often violating the rules to accomplish organizational tasks.
- 2. Deviance acts as a safety valve for societal pressures. The deviant prevents the excessive accumulation of discontent and reduces strain on the legitimate order.
- 3. *Deviance clarifies the rules.* The deviant enables other members of society to learn what deviance is and how far one may safely venture.
- 4. *Deviance unites the group against the deviant.* The deviant provides society with a common enemy.
- 5. *Deviance unites the group for the deviant.* The deviant gives society an opportunity to save and reclaim or rehabilitate the deviant.
- 6. *Deviance accents conformity.* The deviant serves as a reference point against which conformity can be measured and gives others a feeling of selfsatisfaction for adhering to the rules.
- 7. *Deviance acts as a warning signal.* The deviant alerts others to the defects in an organization or society.

Of course, there is a point at which crime becomes dysfunctional. If a high level of crime becomes "normalized" or is considered inevitable, the consequences can be devastating for a community,¹⁴⁸ yet crime and deviance are not always threatening. Although Durkheim and Cohen were writing about deviant behaviors such as political protest and not murder, the message is that the elimination of crime cannot be accomplished.

How to Study Crime

Knowledge about crime stems from several sources, including personal experience, exposure to news and entertainment media, and academic research.

Each source, however, has its own problems and limitations. Commonsense observations about crime may be limited to an individual's own experience and may not reflect broader trends. Such a limited perspective impedes one's ability to understand the nature of crime. Media coverage of crime, with an emphasis on violent, predatory offenses and hypereffective police agencies, often distorts reality. As noted previously, scientific studies may have problems with generalizability, and interpretations of findings are always subject to the influence of social context. However, the construction of theory, the development of **hypotheses**, and empirical testing provide the best promise of understanding the crime problem. Such careful study both generates and organizes data in a meaningful way.

Where do these limitations leave the student? This text offers several suggestions on how the reader should approach criminology. First, keep an open mind. Students often find some theories appealing and other theories boring or irksome. This is likely ideology at work. Keep in mind, however, that the reader's task is to learn the components of each theory no matter what his or her personal feelings may be. Only then can the student compare and contrast theories, see how they interact, and synthesize them. Remember, too, that each theory is a product of and is influenced by its social, intellectual, and historical context.¹⁴⁹

Second, students are cautioned against discounting a theory based on an exceptional case. Students often cite the one instance, example, or individual that the theory fails to explain. There are always exceptions to the rule, but they are just that—exceptions beyond the average. For example, many people know a person who smoked cigarettes for his or her whole life and did not die of cancer. Does this mean that cigarettes do not cause cancer? Try to examine the strengths and weaknesses of each theory in its own context. In other words, apply another of Max Weber's sociological concepts, *verstehen*, or empathetic understanding. To examine a theory properly, the student must understand it on its own terms.

Third, learn not to expect easy answers, and do not accept them without reservation. Finckenauer cautions against settling for simple solutions to the delinquency problem, but his words apply to any aspect of criminology:¹⁵⁰

The highway of delinquency prevention history is paved with punctured **panaceas** [emphasis added]. First, a certain approach is posed as a cure-all or becomes viewed and promoted as a cure-all—as an intervention that will have universal efficacy and thus be appropriate for nearly all kids. Unfortunately, the approach, no matter what it is, almost always fails to deliver; fails to live up to the frequently unrealistic or unsound expectations raised by the sales pitch.

If easy answers were readily available, criminologists would have delivered them long ago, and the crime problem would not exist today.

Criminological theory often cannot provide literal answers to the crime problem. Nevertheless, when studying a social problem like crime, researchers are trying to explain it and figure out its causes. Explanations do more than describe what has happened. They give reasons for what has occurred—the "how" and the "why." To be of practical value, explanations should improve the ability to predict events more accurately than through the use of common sense alone. As noted, each criminological theory provides a set of causes.

Good theory should be linked to reality through research: The empirical testing of theory confers relevance—and criminological theory is no exception. This text presents the latest research on the various theories and reviews the policy implications of this research, but it will become clear that the "doctors don't always have the cure." In other words, physicians can often find the causes of an illness (e.g., AIDS), but they cannot develop a cure. This is also frequently the case in criminology. Knowledge of the nature of the problem is no guarantee that a solution will be found. Unfortunately, such knowledge is no consolation to the victims of crime. Approaches to the crime problem, however, should have a firm foundation—one provided by both theory and research, not guesswork.

Conclusion

Crime should be viewed not as a single phenomenon but as one in which many kinds of behaviors occur in different situations and under different conditions. No single theory can provide all the explanations for—let alone answers to—the crime problem. Again, criminological theory attempts to explain the causes of criminal behavior, not to excuse crimes or the people who commit them.

The next several chapters discuss theories of crime across several disciplines, including biology, psychology, and sociology. The reader is encouraged to organize them in some meaningful way as they are encountered. This chapter provided a number of ways to accomplish this task. Theories can focus on law-breaking (crime) or the criminal justice system's response to crime. They can operate at the micro or macro levels; they are generally part of an academic discipline, and they are often part of a specific theoretical tradition within a discipline. Although virtually all of the theories encountered are positivistic, a few theories are grounded firmly in the classical school of crime.

WRAP-UP

Chapter Spotlight

- Edwin Sutherland defined criminology as the study of lawmaking, law-breaking, and the response to law-breaking. Modern scholars often distinguish criminology (the study of law-breaking) from criminal justice (the study of responses to law-breaking). The study of deviance also overlaps with criminology.
- Within academia, criminology is currently in a state of flux. Some consider criminology as an independent discipline, while others view it as a general field open to all social science disciplines. Historically, sociology has had the largest

impact on the study of crime, and sociologists tend to view criminology as a subdiscipline of sociology.

- The substantive criminal law is a codification of prohibited behaviors and the possible sanctions for these behaviors. The definition of a criminal act has two components: the *mens rea* (criminal mind) and the *actus reas* (criminal act).
- Criminal laws can be classified in a number of ways. *Mala in se* (evil in themselves) crimes, including homicide, robbery, rape, and burglary, make up the core of the legal code. *Mala prohibita*

(wrong because they are prohibited) crimes, such as gambling and illicit drug use, tend to vary across societies and over time.

- Two general perspectives on the law exist. The consensus perspective views the law as the result of widespread societal agreement about what acts should be illegal. The conflict perspective suggests that the legal code is the end result of a power struggle among competing interest groups.
- A scientific theory is a set of principles or statements that attempt to explain how concepts are related. In the case of crime theory, these statements typically explain how one or more factors lead to criminal behavior. A scientific theory must also be testable, meaning that it must be stated in such a way that other scientists can go out into the real world, collect information, and test the theory's validity.
- A "good" theory of crime is supported by empirical tests. In other words, it appears to "work" in the real world. Aside from empirical support, a good theory is also parsimonious (concise) and wide in scope (explains a wide range of phenomena).
- Historically, the first explanations of criminal behavior invoked spirits and gods to explain crime. The scientific study of crime is dated to the classical school of crime. Classical school

Putting It All Together

- 1. What is criminology? How does criminology relate to other social science disciplines?
- 2. What is a scientific theory? How can you tell whether or not a theory is good?
- 3. What is the substantive criminal law? Describe the two main perspectives on the criminal law, and give an example of a crime that is consistent with each perspective.

theorists argued that humans were rational, hedonistic beings—they choose criminal actions because of the benefits of crime. Accordingly, humans could be deterred from crime if the legal system was properly structured. The positivist school of crime suggests that criminal behavior is determined by factors that are partially or completely outside the control of individuals. Different social science disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, biology) highlight different factors that cause criminal behavior.

- Criminology is an applied science. Theory, coupled with sound research, should help guide policymaking throughout the criminal justice system. To proceed without theoretical guidance is to take a shot in the dark—there is no logical basis to assume that a particular program will work. Intensive supervision programs (ISPs) are an example of a policy implemented with little theoretical guidance, while multisystemic therapy (MST) is theoretically grounded.
- Although science generally strives to be "value free," criminology is influenced by social context, including political ideology. Liberal (left) criminologists tend to associate with the positivist school of crime and to focus on social causes of crime. Conservative (right) criminologists lean toward the classical school of crime and tend to focus on deterrence.
- 4. How do the media and social context impact the study of crime?
- 5. Discuss the linkage between theory and policy. What role does social contest play?
- 6. What does it mean to be a "liberal" or a "conservative" criminologist? How does ideology impact the study of crime?

Key Terms

case law conflict perspective consensus perspective constitutional law distributive justice ethnographic research grand theories hedonistic calculus hypotheses intensive supervision law and order mala in se mala prohibita natural experiments norms overgeneralization

panaceas policy analysis positivism procedural law quasi-experimental recidivism statutory law value free

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