

Criminological Theories and Causes of Crime

INTRODUCTION

This briefing provides an overview of some of the key criminological theories that seek to explain the causes of crime – however, this is not a complete list as there are numerous theories out there. Each theory has its strengths, weaknesses and gaps and may only be relevant for specific crimes or types of crimes. There is no right or wrong theory but some have fallen out of favour over time as attitudes in society towards crimes and those who commit them have changed.

As we can see, there is no simple answer to the question ‘what is crime?’ as this changes over time and space. Different crimes are also committed for different reasons and cannot be blamed on one single cause. Please see the following SCCJR Reports for further information on specific crimes and why they might be committed:

- [What is crime?](#)
- [Violence Against Women and Girls](#)
- [Drug Crime](#)
- [Knife Crime](#)

RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

Closely related to the Classicist idea of free-will and self-determinism is Rational Choice Theory as it also sees individuals as rational actors capable of making their own decisions and choosing whether or not to commit crime.

Right realism emerged in the USA and the UK around the 1980s, in response to rising crime rates and a perceived failure of sociological approaches to adequately address the real causes of crime. Prominent right realists such as **James Q. Wilson** (1975) and **Charles Murray** (1990) come from political backgrounds and claim that criminological theory should inform criminal justice policy.

One of the key theories to emerge from this branch of criminology is rational choice theory, associated with the work of **Cornish and Clarke** (1986). According to this theory, individuals not only decide to commit crime, but decide when and where to commit crime.

As Walklate observes, this theory lends itself to the range of policy initiatives known as **SITUATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION** sometimes referred to as *designing out crime*. This is the umbrella term for a range of strategies that are used to reduce the opportunities to commit crime. This can also be linked to the ‘Broken Windows’ theory (Wilson and Kelling 1982) which states that visible signs of crime and disorder such as smashed windows or vandalism will encourage and invite even more crime. Another element of this is that the sight of criminal activity suggests the community/environment is not well policed and therefore detection in that area will be lower. Therefore, if these types of crimes are policed more then this will reduce overall offending. Read more about this theory and some criticisms of it [here](#).

Examples of designing out crime include:

- Increasing formal surveillance measures such as CCTV and alarms, and the Neighbourhood Watch scheme
- Increasing natural surveillance such as improving street lighting
- Concealing or removing 'targets' e.g. 'high value' goods such as mobile phones, cash and jewellery

In the 2014 Scottish Government report '[What works to reduce crime?](#)', Part 3 considers situational crime prevention and includes measures such as those as described above. However, it also includes 'approaches that extend beyond the "situation"' which involve restricting access to weapons and alcohol and investing in diversionary activities (such as engagement in sport) to encourage people to engage in pro social, rather than anti-social, activities (such as crime).

STRAIN THEORY

In Sociology, **STRAIN THEORIES** tend to believe that shared social norms help regulate and control social order. It is the deviance from these social norms and the reaction of society to it that helps to maintain order in society.

ANOMIE is a concept developed by one of the founding fathers of sociology – Emile Durkheim. Often associated with 'normlessness', it seeks to explain why societal norms used to regulate behaviour have broken down or blurred. This often happens during rapid social change where the breakdown of social norms often accompanies rapid change in society when people are confused or unsure what the values of society are. An example of rapid social change would be the Industrial Revolution. In 1938, Robert Merton built upon Durkheim's theory and stated that people commit crime due to stress and pressure from society. It is the gap between **CULTURAL GOALS** in society and having any legitimate **STRUCTURAL** means of achieving these e.g., sufficient education or employment. Those who feel they cannot obtain certain things (money, clothing, jewellery, status etc.) through legitimate means due to their position in society then resort to crime and deviance to attain them. Merton used the example of 'The American Dream' to illustrate this point – it privileges money and success but not everyone has the opportunities or means to achieve this through hard work alone, and can resort to crime instead.



This can be related to social class as it is more often people in lower classes without the wealth who feel strain and pressure to 'keep up with the Joneses' and own the same things as those in the upper classes. This can breed anger and frustration from those under strain which can then result in crime.

You can learn more about Merton's Strain Theory and responses to strain in society [here](#).

Durkheim and Merton are both known as **FUNCTIONAL THEORISTS** as their work accepts that all aspects of society (social norms, institutions, structures etc.) are essential for the normal functioning of society.

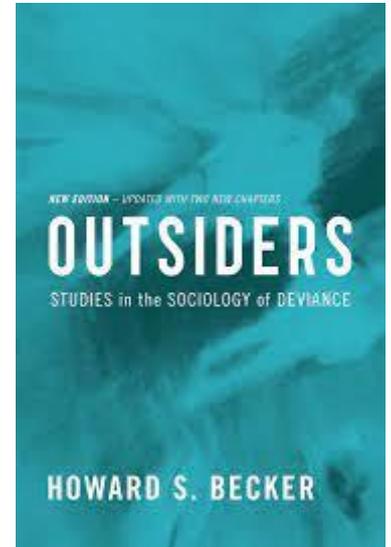
LABELLING THEORY

Labelling theory was first theorised by Howard Becker in 1963 and is related to **SOCIAL INTERACTIONISM**. Becker theorised that no act is inherently deviant until it is **LABELLED** as such by the powerful in society – also known as the agents of social control. Therefore, it is the powerless in society who tend to be judged and labelled by the powerful. It is the interaction between people that defines an act as deviant/criminal – not the act itself.

Labelling can lead to a **SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY** where someone can be labelled as deviant without valid reason or evidence. The innocent person may then take on a deviant identity as a response to this unfair label and ultimately end up committing crime as a result. For example, if you are constantly labelled as a vandal, you might become one because it is what everyone already thinks and you are already being treated as a criminal anyway. An act can be seen as deviant when it deviates from **SOCIAL NORMS** which we have already seen are the unwritten rules of society that everyone is expected to conform to e.g. queueing, picking up dog litter. Breaking these identifies an individual as 'different', 'other', and 'deviant'.

Once this label is applied, that person takes on a new deviant identity and is judged by this. It is important to note that not all deviant acts are criminal, but all criminal acts are deviant.

Can you think of any examples of acts that are deviant but not criminal?



Becker's labelling theory influenced Stanley Cohen's (1972) work on **MORAL PANICS** – this is when society has a collective negative reaction to a phenomena in society where a certain group of people are perceived and identified as a threat – this is often based on over-exaggerated claims/evidence. This group is then blamed for problems in society and essentially used as scapegoats. Cohen used the example of Mods & Rockers, prior to this we can apply moral panics to the witch trials. Some modern-day examples of moral panics include hoodies, teen pregnancy and drill music. You can read more about moral panics [here](#).

SUBCULTURAL THEORY

Linked to **ANOMIE** and **STRAIN** are concepts of status frustration and differential opportunity, which North American subcultural theorists used to explain the delinquent activities of disadvantaged groups in the 1950s and 60s.

Status frustration is associated with the work of **Albert Cohen** (1955), who conducted research into group offending by young, lower-class men. Cohen argued that lower-class youths could not aspire to middle-class cultural goals and so, frustrated, they rejected them to create their own subcultural system of values. In school, for example, they gain status and respect by meeting the expectations of peers not teachers, engaging in delinquent activities such as smoking, truanting, and acting up in class.

Richard Cloward and **Lloyd Ohlin** (1960) built on these ideas, pointing to the differential opportunity structures available to lower-class young people in different neighbourhoods: criminal (making a living from crime), conflict (territorial violence and gang fighting) and retreatist (drugs and alcohol).

Researchers at the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research draw on some of these ideas in their research on young people and 'gangs'. See, for example, Susan Batchelor's research on [girls and violence](#), which emphasises the gendered meaning of respect in street-orientated youth groups, or Alistair Fraser's work on territorial gang identity amongst young men in Glasgow

[More information on North American subcultural theory](#)

LEFT REALISM/RELATIVE DEPRIVATION

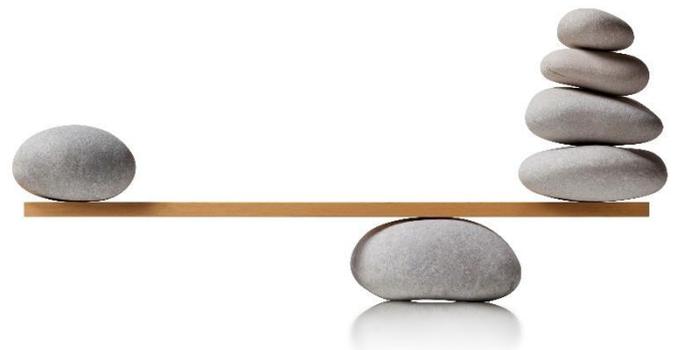
Another critical theory is Left Realism which emerged in the UK and US in the 1980's. This theory suggests that crime disproportionately impacts the lives of the poor and disadvantaged in society. Theorists linked to Left Realism are **Lea and Young** (1984) and **Elliot Currie** (1985).

One of the key concepts of left realism is **RELATIVE DEPRIVATION**. Closely associated with **ANOMIE** theory, relative deprivation suggests that crime happens when individuals or groups see themselves as being unfairly disadvantaged compared to other individuals or groups who they see as being similar to themselves. Since the disadvantage is perceived and determined by an individual, it is a subjective assessment.

Left realists also support two other key theories to explain crime:

Marginalisation: some groups experience marginalisation and at different levels (social, political and economic). These groups are on the periphery of society. Lacking political representation, these groups represent themselves and their ways of taking political action include the commission of crime and violence.

- **Sub-cultures:** marginalised individuals and groups may come into contact with others who share these experiences, and who then may form their own subcultures in which crime and violence may feature.



SOCIAL CONTROL THEORY

Strictly speaking control theory does not address the causes of crime, but rather focuses on why people obey the law. In other words, it explains **CONFORMITY** rather than deviance.

It is primarily associated with the work of **Travis Hirschi** (1969), an American social scientist who proposed that people generally conform to social norms due to strong social bonds. Conversely, they engage in delinquent acts when these bonds are broken or weak. The key components of social bonds are:

- **Attachment:** How strong or weak is an individual's relationship with others? Do these others expect certain kinds of behaviour (such as obeying the law) from this individual? The stronger the attachment and the stronger the expectations, the more likely it is that the individual will conform.
- **Commitment:** The more an individual commits his/herself to a particular lifestyle (for example, being married, being a parent, having a job), the more he/she has to lose if he/she becomes involved in crime (and so deviate from the lifestyle).
- **Involvement:** This component comes down to time – the more time the individual spends engaging in law abiding behaviour, the less time he/she has to engage in law breaking behaviour.
- **Belief:** this relates to upbringing. If an individual has been brought up to be law abiding, they are less likely to become involved in crime.

THE CHICAGO SCHOOL/SOCIAL DISORGANISATION THEORY

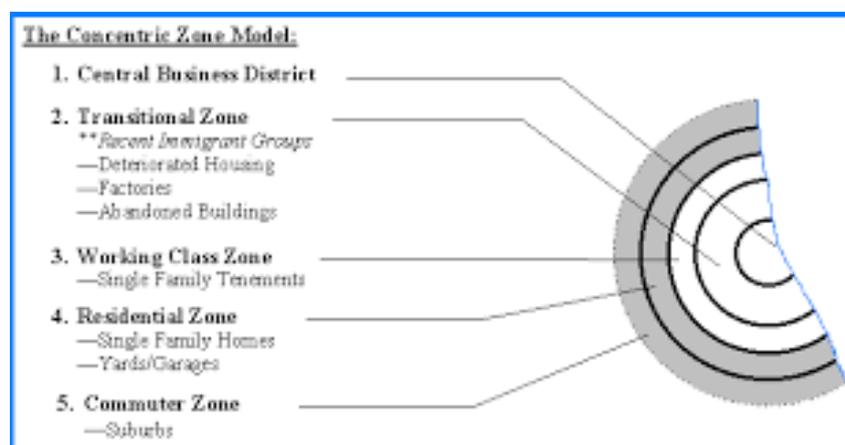
SOCIAL DISORGANISATION theory is an ecological theory (which looks at crime in relation to environmental factors) grew out of research conducted by sociologists at the University of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s. Its key proponents were **Clifford R. Shaw and Henry D. McKay** (1942), who used spatial mapping to examine the residential locations of juveniles referred to court. **Shaw and McKay** found that patterns of delinquency were higher in areas characterised by poor housing, poor health, socio-economic disadvantage and transient populations. This led them to suggest that crime was a function of neighbourhood dynamics and not due to individual actors and their actions.

Shaw and McKay explained these patterns by reference to the problems that accompanied immigration to Chicago at this time. They claimed that areas settled by newly arrived immigrants experienced a breakdown of social norms due to ethnic diversity and competing cultural traditions. Conventional institutions of social control were therefore weakened and unable to regulate the behaviour of local youths. However, this theory has come under criticism for having classist and racist undertones.

Contemporary theories of crime, place and space include:

- *defensible space theory*, which examines how the design of physical space is related to crime;
- *broken windows theory*, which looks the relationship between low level disorder and crime; and
- *routine activities theory*, which considers how opportunities to commit crime are shaped by between people's everyday movements through space and time.

[More information on the Chicago School/Social Disorganisation Theory](#)



FURTHER READING

Summary of different criminological theories:

https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/97953_book_item_97953.pdf

More on Rational Choice Theory:

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/rational-choice-theory>

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314837382_Rational_Choice_Theory

More on Strain theories:

https://studysites.sagepub.com/haganintrocrim8e/study/chapter/handbooks/42347_7.1.pdf

<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396607/obo-9780195396607-0005.xml>

More on Labelling theory:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226795096_Labeling_Theory

More on Subcultural theories:

<https://simplysociology.com/subcultural-theories-crime-deviance.html>

https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/978-3-319-78440-3_19.pdf

More on Left Realism and crime:

<https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/sociology/crime-and-deviance/left-realism-and-crime/>

https://study.sagepub.com/system/files/Left_Realism_Criminology.pdf

More on Social Control theories:

https://study.sagepub.com/system/files/Hirschi%2C_Travis_-_Social_Control_Theory.pdf

More on ecological theories and the Chicago School:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321007066_The_Chicago_School_and_Criminology

Photo sources:

<https://www.economist.com/united-states/2013/09/21/the-american-dream-rip>

https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.amazon.co.uk%2FOutsiders-Howard-S-Becker%2Fdp%2F1982106220&psig=AOvVaw2Tm34_vlPVD7VcixTpXf7N&ust=1675522731368000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAsQjRxqFwoTCLDvkNzO-fwCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAF

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<http://www.umsl.edu/~keelr/200/socdisor.html>