

Explaining Crime

Theories of Crime

- Rational Choice/Deterrence
- Social Control
- Self Control
- Social Disorganization
- Labeling
- Strain
- Social Learning

Rational Choice / Deterrence Theory

- Crime involves a calculated decision in which the would-be offender weighs the potential costs and benefits of violating the law
- People will commit crime when the rewards/benefits outweigh the risks/consequences

Rational Choice / Deterrence Theory

- If crime is a function of choice, it is possible that the choice to engage in crime can be controlled/deterred
 - If breaking the law is perceived as dangerous or potentially jeopardizing to one's freedom, crime may be inhibited or constrained
 - Greater punishment severity, certainty, and celerity → greater deterrence
- Two types of deterrence
 - General deterrence
 - Specific deterrence

Rational Choice / Deterrence Theory

- General deterrence
 - An approach intended to dissuade potential criminals from engaging in crime by publicizing the consequences of the crime
- Specific deterrence
 - An approach in which known offenders are punished severely enough that they will not be tempted to repeat their original offense

Social Control Theory

- We are all capable of criminal behavior
- The criminal impulses of most people are controlled by their bonds to society
 - Attachment to parents/family
 - Commitment to school/work
 - Involvement in prosocial activities
 - Belief in conventional values
- Crime occurs when these bonds to society are weakened or broken

Self Control Theory

- Crime is a direct result of one's level of self-control
 - Self-control is established through parental supervision and discipline
- Low self-control is characterized by...
 - Impulsivity
 - A preference for immediate over delayed rewards
 - A preference for risky activity
 - High activity levels
 - Little ambition/motivation
- Individuals with low levels of self-control are more likely to engage in crime

Social Disorganization Theory

- Structural factors foster an atmosphere conducive to criminal behavior
 - Racial/ethnic heterogeneity
 - Residential mobility
 - High unemployment
 - Low educational attainment
 - Low income

- These factors produce socially disorganized spaces in which residents have few alternatives to crime

Labeling Theory

- Labels are influential in determining how an individual sees his or her self
- We are or become what we think others think we are.
 - Viewing or labeling an individual as criminal or deviant increases the chances that the individual will view themselves as criminal or deviant
- Crime does not describe the act a person commits. Instead, crime is a consequence of the application of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'.
 - Primary deviance → secondary deviance

Strain Theory

- The "American Dream" engenders specific goals and expectations
 - Wealth, status, power, etc.
- Strain occurs when there is a disconnect between our goals/expectations and the legitimate means through we can achieve those goals/expectations
 - Strain leads to anger
- Crime is a function of the anger that is fostered by strain

Social Learning

- Behavior is learned through our interactions and associations with those we are closest to and most intimate with.
 - Frequency
 - Duration
 - Priority
 - Intensity
- Just as prosocial behavior is learned, criminal behavior can be learned as well.
- Crime is the result of an excess of definitions favorable to law violation over definitions unfavorable to law violation