

Who Commits Crimes?

Theories about the causes of crime are as plentiful as criminal behaviour itself. Different explanations have focused on different aspects of human existence: physiology, biology, psychology, sociology, politics, economics. Both the perspective of individual theorists and the intellectual fashions of the era are reflected in different explanations. Some theories now seem silly. For example, in the late 19th century, Cesare Lombroso tried to relate certain physical characteristics, such as jaw size, to criminal behaviour. Other theories now seem better founded, although no single approach has proven universally valid.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, two streams of theory emerged. One linked criminality to underlying social and economic factors, while the other linked it to individual psychology. The first was typified by a group of theorists known as the Chicago School, which argued that social and environmental factors were important in examining deviant behaviour. The other was best expressed by Sigmund Freud, who believed that all humans have criminal tendencies, but that these are modified through inner controls learned during childhood. Freud believed that faulty identification by the child with the parent was the most common factor contributing to criminal behaviour.

As the 20th century progressed, criminologists looked for more complex explanations, particularly given the fact that crime continued to grow even though individuals were generally better off and protected by a more elaborate social safety net. The following excerpt discussing the causes of crime is taken from a report published by the National Council of Welfare in 2000 entitled *Justice and the Poor*.

Until the 1960s, it was widely assumed that poverty bred crime and that most crimes were committed by young men with lower-class backgrounds. This assumption was based on statistics showing that the majority of those arrested, convicted, and imprisoned were then, as they are now, males under the age of 25 from families in which the parents had little education and low incomes and held inferior jobs or no jobs at all. To account for this, criminologists developed many explanations. One was the social disorganization theory, which said that specific neighbourhood conditions, such as poverty, high mobility, and multi-ethnicity, caused a breakdown of traditional values which led to crime. Another was the opportunity theory, according to which lower-class people were more likely to engage in crime because they were blocked from achieving financial success by legal means.

Everyone was therefore surprised in the 1960s when US researchers discovered that criminal behaviour was not linked exclusively to lower-status people and poor neighbourhoods. Using self-report studies, which asked (mostly young) participants to reveal, in total confidence and without

fear of punishment, what illegal actions they had committed, researchers made two shocking discoveries.

First of all, the vast majority of all male participants reported having committed illegal acts that could have landed them before youth courts. Girls were much less likely to engage in illegal behaviour. When Canadian criminologist Marc LeBlanc questioned 3000 young Montrealers, he found that more than 90 percent had committed delinquent acts in the previous year and that more than 80 percent had contravened the *Criminal Code*. The most common offences were shoplifting, vandalism, driving a car under the influence of alcohol, or taking mild drugs, especially marijuana. Nine percent had committed more serious crimes such as robbery.

The second surprise was that the children of parents with professional jobs were as likely to report having committed illegal acts as the children of poorer parents with low-status jobs. Contrary to the strong link between crime and social class of origin that had been taken for granted until then, it seemed that they were not related at all. This finding caused huge controversies in criminology circles that continue to this day. It also inspired dozens of other self-report studies, which produced contradictory and inconsistent results and therefore failed to establish that young people from low-status or poverty backgrounds were more likely to get involved in crime or to commit more serious crimes. ...

Most experts now agree that the social status and income of the parents have little or no *direct* effect on the likelihood that children will turn to delinquency, although they may in some cases have *indirect* effects by amplifying life problems that can lead to crime. ...

Research has found that children most at risk of becoming delinquents and criminals face the following circumstances:

- (1) they receive little love, affection, or warmth, and are physically or emotionally rejected and/or abandoned by their parents;
- (2) they are inadequately supervised by parents who fail to teach them right from wrong, and who do not monitor their whereabouts, friends, or activities, and who discipline them erratically and harshly; and
- (3) they grow up in homes with considerable conflict, marital discord, and perhaps even violence. Families at greatest risk of delinquency are those suffering from limited coping resources, social isolation, and (among parents) poor parenting skills.

Given the lack of resources and greater vulnerability of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, it is a tribute to their parents that the differences in criminal behaviour between youths from low-income and more affluent families are not evident. ...

[T]here has been an increasing awareness in the last few decades that official crime statistics immensely underestimate white-collar and corporate crimes. These include a huge range of offences, including tax fraud

corporate stock and securities fraud and antitrust violations at the other end, as well as numerous types of criminal negligence causing occupational injury or death. In her book about corporate crime in Canada, Laureen Snider writes that:

Although corporate crime receives much less publicity than the assaults, thefts and rapes most people think of when they hear the word "crime," it actually does more harm, costs more money, and ruins more lives than any of these. Corporate crime is a major killer, causing more deaths in a month than all the mass murderers combined do in a decade. Canadians are killed on the job by unsafe (and illegal) working conditions; injured by dangerous products offered for sale before their safety is demonstrated; incapacitated by industrial wastes released into the air or dumped into lakes and rivers; and robbed by illegal conspiracies that raise prices and eliminate consumer choice. ... Canadians are 28 times more likely to be injured at work than by assault. ... People are 10 times more likely to be killed by conditions at their workplace than to be victims of homicide

What are we to conclude from all this about the people who commit crimes in Canada? The answer appears to be that almost all Canadians break the law at some point in their lives, but that most of these illegal acts are not serious and are usually committed in adolescence. Among older youths and adults, those who commit most criminal offences are men who are at the extremes of the social spectrum. At one end are criminals who were not necessarily from poor families, but who are now without legitimate employment and sometimes destitute. They are most feared by the public and are responsible for a large share of common or street crimes. At the other end are higher-class, white-collar criminals, who are responsible for more deaths and steal much more money than the poor, but are seldom called criminals and are seldom condemned by a society in which many people believe that "greed is good."

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. Briefly describe a biological, a sociological, and a psychological theory used to explain criminal behaviour.
2. Choose at least one finding in the National Council of Welfare's report *Justice and the Poor* that surprised you. Explain your choice.
3. What characteristics are shared by children who are most at risk of becoming delinquents? What could society do to alter these circumstances?
4. Suggest reasons why official statistics have immensely underestimated white-collar and corporate crimes.

What is Critical Race Theory?

The Theory.

Critical Race Theory was developed out of legal scholarship. It provides a critical analysis of race and racism from a legal point of view. Since its inception within legal scholarship CRT has spread to many disciplines. CRT has basic tenets that guide its framework. These tenets are interdisciplinary and can be approached from different branches of learning.

CRT recognizes that racism is engrained in the fabric and system of society. The individual racist need not exist to note that institutional racism is pervasive in the dominant culture. This is the analytical lens that CRT uses in examining existing power structures. CRT identifies that these power structures are based on white privilege and white supremacy, which perpetuates the marginalization of people of color. CRT also rejects the traditions of liberalism and meritocracy. Legal discourse says that the law is neutral and colorblind, however, CRT challenges this legal "truth" by examining liberalism and meritocracy as a vehicle for self-interest, power, and privilege. CRT also recognizes that liberalism and meritocracy are often stories heard from those with wealth, power, and privilege. These stories paint a false picture of meritocracy; everyone who works hard can attain wealth, power, and privilege while ignoring the systemic inequalities that institutional racism provides.

Intersectionality within CRT points to the multidimensionality of oppressions and recognizes that race alone cannot account for disempowerment. "Intersectionality means the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings." [1] This is an important tenet in pointing out that CRT is critical of the many oppressions facing people of color and does not allow for a one-dimensional approach of the complexities of our world.

Narratives or counterstories, as mentioned before, contribute to the centrality of the experiences of people of color. These stories challenge the story of white supremacy and continue to give a voice to those that have been silenced by white supremacy. [2] Counterstories take their cue from larger cultural traditions of oral histories, *cuentos*, family histories and parables. [3] This is very important in preserving the history of marginalized groups whose experiences have never been legitimized within the master narrative. It challenges the notion of liberalism and meritocracy as colorblind or "value-neutral" within society while exposing racism as a main thread in the fabric of the American foundation.

Another component to CRT is the commitment to Social justice and active role scholars take in working toward "eliminating racial oppression as a broad goal of ending all forms of oppression". [4] This is the eventual goal of CRT and the work that most CRT scholars pursue as academics and activists.