

Criminological Theory Summaries

Theory	Main Points	Theorists/Researchers
Classical	Crime occurs when the benefits outweigh the costs—when people pursue self-interest in the absence of effective punishments. Crime is a free-willed choice. See also deterrence, rational choice.	Beccaria
Positivist	Crime is caused or determined. Lombroso placed more emphasis on biological deficiencies, whereas later scholars would emphasize psychological and sociological factors. Use science to determine the factors associated with crime.	Lombroso Guerry Quetelet
Individual Trait	Criminals differ from noncriminals on a number of biological and psychological traits. These traits cause crime in interaction with the social environment.	Glueck & Glueck Mednick Caspi Moffitt
Social Disorganization	Disorganized communities cause crime because informal social controls break down and criminal cultures emerge. They lack collective efficacy to fight crime and disorder.	Shaw & McKay Sampson Bursik & Grasmick
Differential Association Social Learning Subcultural	Crime is learned through associations with criminal definitions. These definitions might be generally approving of criminal conduct or be neutralizations that justify crime only under certain circumstances. Interacting with antisocial peers is a major cause of crime. Criminal behavior will be repeated and become chronic if reinforced. When criminal subcultures exist, then many individuals can learn to commit crime in one location and crime rates—including violence—may become very high.	Sutherland & Cressey Sykes & Matza Akers Wolfgang & Ferracuti Anderson
Anomie Institutional-Anomie	The gap between the American Dream's goal of economic success and the opportunity to obtain this goal creates structural strain. Norms weaken and 'anomie' ensues, thus creating high crime rates. When other social institutions (such as the family) are weak to begin with or also weakened by the American Dream, the economic institution is dominant. When such an institutional imbalance exists—as in the United States—then crime rates are very high.	Merton Messner & Rosenfeld

<p>Strain General Strain</p>	<p>When individuals cannot obtain success goals (money, status in school), they experience strain or pressure. Under certain conditions, they are likely to respond to this strain through crime. The strains leading to crime, however, may not only be linked to goal blockage (or deprivation of valued stimuli) but also to the presentation of noxious stimuli and the taking away of valued stimuli. Crime is a more likely response to strain when it results in negative affect (anger and frustration).</p>	<p>Cohen Cloward & Ohlin Agnew</p>
<p>Control General Theory of Crime Control Balance Power Control</p>	<p>Asks the question, “Why don’t people commit crime?” They assume that criminal motivation is widespread. The key factor in crime causation is thus the presence or absence of control. These controls or containment might be rooted in relationships (e.g., social bonds) or be internal (e.g., self-control). Exposure to control also might differ by social location and by the historical period, such as the changing level and type of control given to males and females.</p>	<p>Hirschi Reckless Gottfredson Hagan</p>
<p>Rational Choice Deterrence</p>	<p>Building on classical theory, crime is seen as a choice that is influenced by its costs and benefits—that is, by its “rationality.” Crime will be more likely to be deterred if its costs are raised (e.g., more effort required, more punishment applied), especially if the costs are certain and immediate. Information about the costs and benefits of crime can be obtained by direct experiences with punishment and punishment avoidance, and indirectly by observing whether others who offend are punished or avoid punishment.</p>	<p>Stafford & Warr Patternoster Cornish & Clarke Matsueda</p>
<p>Routine Activities</p>	<p>Crime occurs when there is an intersection in time and space of a motivated offender, an attractive target, and a lack of capable guardianship. People’s daily routine activities affect the likelihood they will be an attractive target who encounters an offender in a situation where no effective guardianship is present. Changes in routine activities in society (e.g., women working) can affect crime rates.</p>	<p>Cohen & Felson</p>

Labeling Reintegrative Shaming	People become stabilized in criminal roles when they are labeled as criminal, are stigmatized, develop criminal identities, are sent to prison, and are excluded from conventional roles. Reintegrative responses are less likely to create defiance and a commitment to crime.	Lemert Matsueda Braithwaite Sherman
Critical	Inequality in power and material well-being create conditions that lead to street crime and corporate crime. Capitalism and its market economy are especially criminogenic because they create vast inequality that impoverishes many and provides opportunities for exploitation for the powerful.	Bonger Quinney Greenberg Currie Colvin
Peacemaking	Crime is caused by suffering, which is linked to injustice rooted in inequality and daily personal acts of harm. Making “war on crime” will not work. Making peace is the solution to crime.	Quinney
Feminism	Crime cannot be understood without considering gender. Crime is shaped by the different social experiences of and power is exercised by men and women. Patriarchy is a broad structure that shapes gender-related experiences and power. Men may use crime to exert control over women and to demonstrate masculinity—that is, to show that they are “men” in a way consistent with societal ideals of masculinity.	Adler Daly Chesney-Lind Messerschmidt
Developmental Life Course	Crime causation is a developmental process that starts before birth and continues throughout the life course. Individual factors interact with social factors to determine the onset, length, and end of criminal careers. The key theoretical issues involve continuity and change in crime. Some theories predict continuity across the life course; others predict continuity for some offenders and change for other offenders; and some predict continuity and change for the same offenders.	Moffitt Sampson & Laub
Integrated	These theories use components from other theories—usually strain, control, and social learning—to create a new theory that explains crime. They often are life-course theories, arguing that causes of crime occur in a sequence across time.	Elliott Thornberry Tittle Cullen

Adapted from: Cullen & Agnew (2002). *Criminological Theory: Past to Present (Essential Readings)*. Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury.