

Theories of the Causes of Crime

There is a growing body of evidence about the factors that place individuals at risk of criminal offending. The theoretical approaches discussed below attempt to explain the relationship between those risk factors and criminal behaviour. There is no consensus on the relative merit of these theories and it may be that the causal mechanisms proposed below are more or less significant for different individuals.

Most crime prevention programmes are based, sometimes implicitly, on one or more of the theoretical understandings of crime. Therefore, even when focusing on practical responses, there is value in understanding the range of theoretical explanations of crime and the insights these explanations offer.

Biological

Biological theories focus on aspects of the physical body, such as inherited genes, evolutionary factors, brain structures, or the role of hormones in influencing behaviour.

Biological theories about the causes of crime focus on the idea that the physical body, through inherited genes, evolutionary factors, brain structures, or the role of hormones, has an influence on an individual's involvement in criminal behaviour. Growing understanding of these mechanisms suggests that certain biological factors, such as particular genes, neurological deficits, low serotonin activity, malnutrition and environmental pollutants may all affect a person's biological propensity for criminal or antisocial behaviour.

The challenge for biological theories of crime is to adequately represent the complex interplay between inherited characteristics and environment.

Responses offered by the biological perspective include measures such as:

- maternal health initiatives to reduce the incidence of smoking and drinking amongst pregnant women, thereby reducing neurological damage to the developing foetus; and

- public health initiatives and policy responses to reduce alcohol consumption and binge drinking by teenagers, as heavy alcohol use in adolescence is associated with serious neurological damage and long-term cognitive deficits.

Developmental Life-Course

Developmental life-course theories focus on human development and how individual and social factors interact in different ways and at different developmental stages to influence individual propensity for criminal behaviour.

Developmental life-course explanations see crime as the result of a developmental process that starts before birth and continues throughout a person's life. It seeks to understand the interaction between individual factors such as genetics and personality, and social factors such as family and community wellbeing. The theory argues that while biological factors tend to be more significant early in an individual's life, the relative effect of social influences grows over time. A key aspect of the developmental-life course approach is the identification of key developmental junctures that can be used as points to intervene to promote positive development.

Responses from the developmental-life course theory include:

- a focus on pre- and post-natal care to ensure that babies are well cared for during this developmentally important period; and
- analysing data about the change in offending over offenders' lives to plan government responses.

Psychological

Psychological theories focus on human cognition and its development, and how this relates to criminal behaviour.

Psychology presents a number of perspectives on the causes of crime. Of particular importance are theories exploring the relationship between crime and individual personality, social factors, cognition and developmental factors. These psychological theories have different degrees of focus on individual, family, group and societal psychology.

Psychological literature shows that a key variable identified in the development of individual characteristics, and any criminal propensities, is the role played by parents, in terms of factors such as child-rearing practices, attachment, neglect, abuse, supervision, and the parents own anti-social or criminal behaviour.

Responses based broadly in psychological theory span a wide range but include:

- early intervention programmes in health and education that support the healthy development of children; and

Sociological theories focus on the influence of the organisation of society and social conditions.

- supporting positive parenting practices, which research shows have a correlation with reductions in risk-taking, anti-social behaviour, and alcohol and other drug abuse by adolescents.

Sociological

Sociology encompasses a very wide range of theoretical perspectives, but generally regards crime as a social phenomenon, and emphasises the cultural and social elements of criminal behaviour.

Some sociological theories emphasise the relationship between social structures, such as language, ethnicity and class, and criminal behaviour. Other theories emphasise the effect of social conditions on an individual's propensity to become involved in crime. Theories of this type often focus on the relationship between crime and factors such as social inequality; the influence of peers; social disorganisation in a community; the consequences for an individual of being unable to achieve social success; and the role of criminal sub-cultures, including gangs.

Sociological theories are often criticised for not being able to provide strong evidence for the causal relationships they posit. Nevertheless, they are important because they complement the more individually-focused biological and psychological theories.

Responses include:

- programmes to address multi-generational unemployment for a particular group or in a particular area;
- programmes that build cultural identity and positive community values to lift self-esteem, and strengthen social connectedness; and
- anti-family violence programmes that try to change norms and behaviours in relation to family violence.

Geographic

Geographic theories of crime focus on analysing data about the geographic distribution of crime, modifying the physical environment to reduce the likelihood of crime and targeting initiatives to geographic areas with high rates of offending. Using data about the geographic distribution of crime, it is possible to find patterns that can be used to inform crime prevention projects.

Geographic theories focus on the location of crime and how physical environments promote or discourage criminal behaviour.

Geographic theories of crime prevention that focus on the physical environment tend to focus on such things as how urban planning, building design and the design of public spaces affect crime, and also on how physical environments can be modified to make businesses and residences more resistant to crime (sometimes called “situational crime prevention”).

Responses from geographic theories of crime include:

- using lighting and better design of pedestrian flow to minimise crime in an area at night or planning licensed premises so that patrons do not come in conflict as they leave; and
- using information about the distribution of crime in a neighbourhood to develop a area-specific crime prevention plan with the local community.

Economic

Economic theories focus on how offending is influenced by incentives.

The economic theory of crime is based on the notion that individuals respond rationally to the costs and benefits of criminal opportunities. Thus, factors that increase the expected costs of crime (such as increasing the likelihood of apprehension or severity of punishment) or reduce the expected benefits (such as improved educational or job opportunities) can reduce the incidence of crime.

The economic framework can also encompass other theories of crime that provide a richer understanding of rationality and decision-making (such as the biological basis of impulsivity), the costs of crime (such as the social capital in anti-social peer networks) and the benefits of crime (such as local economic conditions).

Economic responses to crime include:

- improving engagement in education or employment so that the relative benefits of crime are reduced vis-à-vis legitimate economic activities; and
- increasing or decreasing criminal sanctions to change the relative disincentive associated with particular criminal activities.

Further reading:

Akers, RL, and Sellers CS (2008) *Criminological Theories: Introduction, Evaluation, and Application*. 5th Edition. Los Angeles: Roxbury

Marsh, I (2006) *Theories of Crime*. Abingdon: Routledge