

# Juvenile delinquency theories case study



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For many years now the real causes of juvenile delinquency have attracted the attention of many people. What causes juvenile delinquency is a major aspect of sociological and criminological studies. By understanding what really causes the delinquency, the community will reduce the continuity of the act by implementing prevention strategies. There are several criminological theories that are used to define and assist in understanding the causes of the offending act. Some of the juvenile delinquency contributors that has attracted the attention of many researchers are family environment, peer influence, parenting styles, community structure and school environment.

There are several juvenile crimes that have occurred in the U. S. for example the juvenile crime perpetrated by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold that left the residence of Littleton town, Colorado terrified and the murder committed by Menendez brothers against their parents just to mention but a few. The paper will focus on the juvenile crime committed by the Menendez brothers as the case under study. First, an overview of the case shall be considered before turning into delinquency/criminological theories to explain what might have led the two to kill their parents in relation to juvenile delinquency. Much attention shall be focused on the strength and weaknesses of the chosen theory. Finally, an alternative theory that could be used to analyze the case will be reviewed.

## **Overview of the Menendez brothers' juvenile crime**

Erik Menendez conspired with his brother Joseph Menendez to kill their parents. Erik shot Kitty and Jose Lyle Menendez using a 12-gauge shotgun. First the first trial fail to convict the two brothers, the jury in the retrial found

them guilty on the two accounts: the first-degree murder and the conspiracy to carry out murder. But what could have led the two brothers to kill their parents? Both Erik and Lyle were brought up in Princeton, New Jersey where they attended Princeton Day School. Lyle went further to attend Princeton University. In 1987 when their family relocated to California Erik enrolled at the Calabasas High School while Lyle was under disciplinary probation because of poor grades. Lyle later dropped out of school after he was faced with plagiarism allegations. This clearly shows that he was under some form of stress.

Jose and Kitty were murdered on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1989 in their home. Their neighbors said that they heard firecrackers sound on the fateful night. Jose was shot in the head while Kitty was shot while trying to escape after being awakened by the gun shoots beyond recognition. To make the crime appear as a mob related one, both of them were shot around the kneecap. The two brothers then left and later dumped the shotgun along the way before heading to a movie theater. Upon returning home at around 11 pm in the night Lyle called 911 claiming that somebody had killed their parents. Although, the police considered them as suspects, there was no evidence linking them to the crime. This was until the wife of a therapist that the two boys used to visit unearthed a recording that had incriminating evidence. The brothers had opened up to the therapist by telling him that they were experiencing suicidal tendencies due to their guilty conscience and the thoughts of having killed their own parents.

## **Analysis**

In order to understand the reason(s) behind such a cold-blooded murder, we need to consider the available facts. Erik told the jury that they decided to kill their parents because they thought that their parents were going to kill them. Erik said that his father had been sexually molesting him since he was a child and had insisted on him staying home a few days of the week despite Erik having being enrolled to a college. Lyle, the elder brother, had also been molested but his father had stopped when he was eight years old. Lyle was threatening to expose their father if he did not stop molesting Erik. This confrontation made the two boys think that their parents were plotting to kill them.

One of the many theories that can be used to explain this scenario is the deterrence theory. It puts forward the idea that juveniles commit crime because they choose to. Their actions are based on calculated risks and benefits. In the Menendez case, the two brothers did not kill their parents accidentally. They had the whole murder planned as evidenced by prior purchase of the shotguns. They also knew their parents room well enough to aim for a head shot despite the fact that only the TV was on. However, the real question is why did they choose to kill their parents instead of reporting to the police or any other relevant authority? There are several answers that can answer that question.

They had fear. They feared their parents especially their father who had dominated and controlled their lives since childhood. Their father was also very strict when it came to tennis and Erik hated being under constant pressure to play better. He feared failing his father by performing poorly in

the tennis court. Lyle, on the other hand, feared that if he did not do something to stop his father from molesting his younger brother, the sexual abuse would continue well into their adulthood and would impact negatively on Erik in school as it had done to him. Additionally, he also feared what people would say when such news was revealed to the public. Their family name would be tainted. It was these fears combined that led them to make a choice- a choice to kill their parents. This was the only method that would act as a solution for each of the brother's fears. This is because it would eliminate their abusive and strict father without the public ever knowing the real reason behind the brutal elimination. The decision to arrive at this choice may also have been greatly influenced by the fact that the brothers held the belief that their parents were going to kill them. It was only fair to kill the parents before they killed them.

However, from the prosecution's point of view, the brothers did not murder their parents so as to end years of sexual molestation and strict parenting. The court claimed that their sole motive for the murder was the large and attractive inheritance left behind by the parents. Their family owned a \$14 million estate. This accusation was based on the fact that barely six months after the murder, Erik bought himself a Rolex, a Jeep, a house and some clothes which were far too expensive given his age of 22. In his defense, Erik said that he had feelings of regret and remorse whenever he spent their parents' money knowing that he was the one who had committed the murder.

According to the brothers, the benefit of getting rid of their molesting parents was greater than the risk of a lifelong prison sentence. This

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reinforces the deterrence theory which suggests that when the benefits of committing a crime outweigh the risks, juvenile delinquency increases.

It is not possible to analyze the entire case by using only one theory. Another possible theory that could explain the juvenile behavior exhibited by the brothers is Sheldon's somatype theory. This theory explains that our individual body shapes and structures can contribute greatly to our criminal tendencies. He suggests that mesomorphs, or muscular, strong and firm people are more aggressive and assertive when it comes to reacting to situations in life. Their bodies allow them to commit crimes much easier than their larger counterparts, the endomorphs.

This theory is useful in this case study since Erik was a fairly good tennis player. That means that his body bore athletic features making him a mesomorph. His physical appearance may have contributed in the murder in that he considered himself fit to handle a shotgun and he was ready to fight back should there be any resistance from the parents.

Another theory that might help shed some light on this murder is Lombroso's atavism theory which suggests that some children are born with criminal traits inherited from their parents. Erik's father exhibited criminal tendencies with his sexual abuse. It is only fair to assume that Erik and Lyle got their delinquent behavior from their father.

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