

Considering explanations of gun crime offences

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



Gun crime is an offence that is increasingly becoming a primary concern for the criminal justice system in this country. Gun crime has gradually increased over the past thirty years and is now a major problem nationally.

The first significant gun crime offence in this country was the Hungerford Massacre, August 1987. A lone gunman (Michael Ryan) went on the rampage shooting fifteen people dead, and injuring fourteen others, before turning the gun on himself. This mass murder left a shadow of fear and doubt over the UK public and it remains one of those random acts of crime, which proves that under extreme circumstances, nobody is safe or secure, no matter how much they try to protect themselves.

Another major incident in Britain was that of the Dunblane shootings in 1996. Thomas Hamilton (43), walked into a Dunblane Primary School armed with four, legally held weapons. In the space of three minutes he shot three members of staff and twenty-eight pupils, of which one adult and sixteen children were killed. This incident in Dunblane led to many questions regarding legal regulations on guns and weapons; in particular whether or not private ownership of handguns should be banned.

Michael North, whose daughter was killed at Dunblane, wrote the following comments in the Sunday Times (13/10/1996): " It is time to turn the tide against gun culture. Hand-guns were designed for one purpose - to kill. They weren't banned after Hungerford because of the pressure of the gun lobby. Public safety was sacrificed to preserve a privilege for a minority who have had a disproportionate influence on our law-makers. Campaigning for a total ban on hand-guns will ensure that this country becomes a safer place."

However the gun lobby disagreed, they argued that both Hungerford and Dunblane shootings were isolated incidents and that a ban would not stop a psychopath from acquiring a weapon. They also argued that there was a lack of evidence to show that licensed weapons are used in violent crimes.

After Dunblane the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) urged tough action on guns and supported banning the private ownership of handguns, other than . 22 single shot weapons. However, in November 1997 there was a total national ban placed on the possession and/or use of a handgun. The Firearms (Amendment) Bill extends the handgun ban introduced in the wake of the Dunblane massacre to include all smaller . 22 weapons.

Current problems with gun crime have developed from the so-called 'black on black' crimes in major UK cities. Recent shootings in Cities such as Birmingham and London have provoked fear of increasing gun crime in gang related disputes. This is the issue that is today at the forefront of authorities concern and is an ever-increasing problem facing the UK public daily.

In a recent attempt to prevent gun crime continuing the police have carried out a gun amnesty in which the public could hand in guns, no questions asked, before the 30th April 2003. From this date the police have warned they will take serious action towards any guns found after this incredible opportunity to surrender all weapons anonymously.

There are many different criminological perspectives that could be used to explain criminal behaviour and violent behaviour. Some believe that

behaviours are innate, others believe that behaviour is determined by society and others believe that it is a combination of the two.

One early approach to Criminology is Positivism. Positivism is an approach that contains many different theories within it but is not a theory itself. In general Positivists believed that crime was a sickness and could be cured. I am going to discuss two main explanations discussed by Positivists, using four of the many theories.

Early Positivists believed in Darwinism and the survival of the fittest - arguing that only the best in a society would survive (a theory that came from the concept of evolution and only the physically fittest evolving). This Darwinist theory lead to the belief that the lower classes were the "dangerous classes" and were more likely to offend to gain their status and be accepted into 'higher society' life.

Pre-Lombrosian positivists believed in physiognomy (a relationship between facial features and behaviour) and phrenology (the belief that the shape of the head could explain an individual's personal characteristics). Pre-Lombrosian positivists believed that these bodily parts could identify certain types of individual (i. e. criminals). This belief lead to the view that if physiognomy or phrenology could correctly identify these criminals then perhaps the individuals could be segregated from the community before the crime is actually committed. This poses major ethical issues to be discussed however is plausible in theory.

Positivists would not necessarily focus on banning guns as a response to the problematic gun culture as they believe that the focus must lie on the individual. Positivists believed in correctionalism, trying to correct all criminal behaviours, so the It is believed that the behaviours we produce are innate and determined therefore if these individuals couldn't use a gun they would use another weapon. They believe that it is the tendency towards violent behaviour that is innate not the specific criminal behaviour demonstrated by that individual, i. e. gun crime, at a later stage.

Cesare Lombroso, one of the main Positivists in history, thought slightly differently. He compared soldiers to criminals and measured physical characteristics such as distance between facial features, weight, height, and shoe size. From his findings Lombroso suggested there were for major groups of criminal; born criminals (atavists), insane criminals (i. e. idiots, alcoholics, epileptics), occasional criminals (who have innate trates which provoke criminal behaviour) and criminals of passion (who commit crime due to anger, love or honour). However as Lombroso's work evolved he placed far more emphasis on environmental causes and his work suggests that he would explain gun crime as an environmentally caused criminal event.

Another Positivist theory was heredity and environmental causes. This theory was based on the idea that feeblemindedness, insanity and stupidity were some of the main causes of criminal behaviour and that these features were thought to be inherited. To research this idea studies were carried out on family tree, siblings and twins. Family tree studies found mental deficiencies to be heredity.

Twin studies linked criminality to genetics. Results from these studies led to the belief that if criminality was genetic then eugenics should be used to eliminate the 'bad' (i. e. low IQ, mentally ill, alcoholics) and led to discussions of sterilisation and lobotomies.

Taking this viewpoint in the case of gun crime it would have been suggested that those with a family history of violence should be carefully monitored and if necessary actions must be taken to prevent further generations from the temptation to commit violent crime.

Another early criminological perspective to study the causes of crime is the 'Chicago school'. This school of teaching discusses how the environment we live in affects us. Both sociology (the work of Emile Durkheim) and positivism influenced the Chicago school, however they wanted a theory that wasn't entirely positivist in research. This theory looked into poverty in big industrial cities.

The main idea behind the Chicago school is that there is rapid urban expansion within the city forming the analogy of the city as a dartboard with the centre forming the bulls-eye and the outer rings being the suburbia. This expansion was due to a mass increase in populations due to immigration. This analogy is known as the Zonal Hypothesis. The analogy attempts to explain the constant growth of the City and the effect it has on crime, it is about urbanisation to agrarianism.

The centre is known as 'the loop' or the business district - this is like the main city centre and is where immigrants would initially start out. The next

stage out is known as the 'Zone of Transition' i. e. red light districts and factories. The next zone - zone three is the regular working class areas - people who were originally in the town have moved outwards as immigrants move in to obtain a better quality of life. The next stage is 'affluence' and the final stage/zone is the 'suburbia'.

Studies have shown that generation after generation commit crime and that it continues through families. Environmental causes appear to have a massive affect and when children in these zones see their parents struggling and turning to crime the children learn this behaviour as the way to live and so crime progresses. With a crime so influential as gun crime, the theory suggests that unless a person is brought up with the knowledge that it is wrong then, they will pick up on the stress and conflict of inner city life and become more likely to turn to violent crime to solve their problems and achieve the next step up in life.

Living in inner cities one is faced by the constant success of the working/business class who travel into work from the outer zones but yet this success is out of their reach and this produces another fall to criminal behaviour. The zonal hypothesis is a working demonstration of the ongoing circle of crime that criminals today put themselves into and sink deeper and deeper into crime.

When using this theory to speak of gun crime there is also the issue of gangs, once one is involved in crime and things progress from bad to worse and with gang pressure in city centres can increase the likelihood of one carrying out a gun offence.

Labelling theory, one of the most influential theories in the last fifty years, disagreed with the teachings of the Chicago school and questioned the applicability to English crime rates and explanations of offending. Labelling theory focused, instead, on exactly how the rules were enforced. Of its time, Labelling theory dominated Criminology and, even though rejected as a theory itself, still forms the basis of many criminological perspectives today. As labelling theory incorporated many different ideas and concepts therefore there are many different names for this theory; interactionist theory, transactionalism, phenomenology, societal reaction theory etc.

Labelling Theory was created as a response to Positivism. Labelling theory said that deviance only had subjective reality and that it was impossible to differentiate between physical characteristics of criminals/non-criminals. Labelling theorists suggested that society and social controls (i. e. police, courts etc) create crime rather than the other way round.

Taking the issue of gun crime labelling theorists would consider that individuals become criminals due to being labelled by society. Individuals who are maybe 'different' from others in society or quieter than others can become singled out and labelled as 'odd' or a 'loner'. If labelled in a certain way it is thought that you will begin to make that label a reality and believe that label is who you are. It becomes the case that 'we see others how others see us'.

In a similar way if a 'criminal' is labelled so publicly by a court for a minor offence, this label can be reinforced by society and this can push the

'criminal' deeper and deeper into crime i. e. towards violence and maybe gun crime.

When discussing gun crime using labelling theory we are focusing on the deviance in the first place, and the reinforcement of labelling, rather than the crime. As a response to this theory extremists suggested the 'do-nothing' view with a belief that any action would make serious crimes worse.

The main criticism of this theory in relation to serious crime is that it failed to explain exactly why criminals turn to more serious crime it only suggests that it comes from what societies and others think.

The final explanation I wish to include is that of the social roots of crime; anomie and strain. This theory is moving away from the positivist approach. The focus is much more heavily placed on deviance and crime as a social construct. Similar to the focus placed on deviance in labelling theory.

Durkheim initially introduced this theory discussing anomie as a condition of deregulation and a sudden loss of social norms. When one has to adjust to sudden change they have to deal with the loss of regulation and general rules which may have been broken down in the change. This can have life-changing effects on a person. The theory suggests that normlessness leads to the individual becoming anomic and hedonistic (pleasure seeking). In studies carried out by anomie and strain theorists have suggested that this deregulation can lead to two things if not corrected; suicide and deviance.

This theory doesn't necessarily apply to everyone, as people who have few aspirations in life before normlessness occurs will be least affected, as their

life doesn't really suffer any great loss of drive because it wasn't there before.

Durkheim believed that a perfect society, a society without crime, just wasn't normal. Durkheim argues that crime happens because of the way societies evolve and individuals go in and out of periods of normlessness and this is normal and acceptable. His theory also suggests that serious crime is brought about in the same way through individuals becoming anomic and that these crimes would have to be dealt with using other means than prevention or curing the criminals. He disagreed with Positivists trying to cure and prevent crime, as he believed society needed to evolve in order to adapt and modernise itself.

In conclusion, it becomes extremely difficult to relate such early theories to such a specific current issue as gun crime/culture. Gun culture in today's society is a major concern and is focused on gang related offences. 18th Century theorists said little or nothing about group related crime and focused entirely on the individual.

Theories discussing the individual, and explanations of offending, can be applied to isolated gun crimes such as Hungerford or Dunblane and seem logical and valid suggestions of why people offend. They don't however suggest any ways of solving the problem or indeed preventing this crime in the first place.

I think these theories are an extremely valid base for future criminological theories however don't stand up to explaining the in-depth level of crime

that occurs in today's societies. A combination of past approaches and an understanding of current reasons for gun crime would probably form a useful and valid approach to modern day crime. The theories in this essay certainly provide some valid start points and should not be dismissed at all. They provide the start point for the future of criminological thinking and hopefully a starter step towards preventing gun crime in the future.