

Unravelling the
causes of crime is a
notoriously difficult
proposition



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The causes of crime is a subject that attracts an enormous amount of interest, it is top of the governments political agenda, is constantly in the news and is even the focus of many fictional programmes.

Statistics suggest that the crime rate in Britain is constantly increasing, with this in mind, various traditional explanations and sociological theories have been proposed to explain this increase by explaining the causality of criminal behaviour. Crime is the violation of laws, or more precisely those social norms that have become subject to state control and legal sanctions reliant on punishment' (Oxford reference, dictionary of social science). Crime sets the boundaries for social behaviour thus playing a strong role in social integration and maintaining social order. Crime is dealt with in a variety of different ways, all of which are some form of punishment to prohibit the perpetrator from re-offending. Imprisonment is extremely common, however community service is a less severe form of punishment but in some countries capital punishment is still in place from the most serious of crimes. Social change often affects Criminal law, where changing social attitudes lead to a change in the law; an example of this is Abortion.

Abortion was prohibited except in the most extenuating circumstances, has now become lawful. Another factor which influences criminal law is the country of origin, crime varies from country to country, an act which is trivial in one country may constitute as a serious offence somewhere else.

Referring again to the example of abortion it is now legal for women across Britain and many other countries to have an abortion, whereas in Southern Ireland it is still a criminal offence. The underlying factor for this criminal classification is religion, which also contributes to criminal law. From the <https://assignbuster.com/unravelling-the-causes-of-crime-is-a-notoriously-difficult-proposition/>

factors mentioned above we conclude that definitions of crime are culturally determined and historically specific, changing form generation to generation.

There are many different types of crime, ranging in complexity. Organised crime involves usually large-scale operations where criminal activity is coordinated, this type of crime is usually related to The Mafia and Mobs. Hate crime is an act where a particular prejudice against a specific group is made visible through a criminal act. Victimless crime is another crime, which has been categorised, they are criminal acts that do not directly harm another individual and an example of this would be the possession of drugs.

Murders, rape, violence (including domestic violence), sexual offences, theft, anti-social behaviour including noisy neighbours, abandoned cars, graffiti, vandalism are all types of crime. Attempting to find an underlying cause for criminal behaviour is impossible, crimes are too diverse. The more complex the crime, the more complex the cause for example, the causalities behind someone committing murder would not be consistent with why someone would abandon a car. Each crime has to be addressed individually as well as the analysing the individual's psychological, cultural and social circumstances. 'The Labour government famously promised to be 'tough on crime tough on causes'.

But unravelling the causes of crime is a notoriously difficult proposition'.

Economic and Social Research Council 2003). Due to the difficulty in establishing the causes of crime new research is currently in operation. Two of the ESRC- funded Priority Networks are seeking to find causal factors by

focusing on young individuals who have and haven't become involved in crime and how and why this behaviour has occurred.

The main premise of the investigation is to examine the common themes of young individuals ' pathways' into crime, both groups of researchers bring different perspectives on this issue. The Cambridge Network for the study of the Social Contexts of Pathways in Crime will study connections between individual characteristics and social factors, which produce criminal acts; these are two important factors which are usually dealt with separately. ' We need to have a more joined up approach, understanding how different factors interact and how these interactions vary in different times and places'. (Per-Olaf Wikstrom). The Network includes other research sites with several experts from the social science field.

The main objective is to improve public polices, reducing criminality and enhance individuals life chances. They have examined three developmental stages where previous causal mechanisms of crime have been inadequately examined. They reiterate the important factors of how genetic and environmental factors effecting children's disruptive behaviours. Individuals will also be studied through periods of involvement in crime, the processes of distancing from crime and analysing patterns of offenders. The information gained fro this research will help enhance policy knowledge and help develop them further. Under the direction the second team will focus on the risk factors in which young individuals encounter when encountering crime.

' The new initiatives that have arisen from this work have been designed to identify those ' at risk' and develop interventions that reduce risk and

increase protection' (Dr D Armstrong). Specific areas have been defined as risk areas such as areas of poor housing and association with delinquent peers. Although these risk factors have been previously determined there has been little research to establish a relationship between, and how they come into context in different social situations. The diversity of experiences from the child's points of view are key issues, which need to be addressed.

Research is also being carried out to how substance abuse can be linked with offending, and how these can be affiliated with preventative measures. Other areas being investigated are risk experiences of ethnic minorities, those who have a parent in prison, and the study of those who are persistent offenders. Together these projects can offer information regarding the causes of crime amongst adolescents and create new preventative actions. Sociology is the study of social organisation and institutions and of collective behaviour and interaction, including the individuals relationship to the group' (Oxford English Dictionary). Encompassing every social situation where the individuals or groups can influence each other, criminology obviously incorporates these ideas.

From a sociological perspective, a number of differing sociological theories have been recognised, each offering their own explanations of crime and its causes. The first perspective to consider is the biological and psychological explanations for crime. Crime itself can be described as a disease, as a cancer attacking the fabric of society which flourishes in the decaying areas of the cities or in diseased or rotten cultures'. (Croall 1998).

Scientific method was applied to the concept of crime, where academic themes used this popular image of crime as pathology especially when referring to its causes. Using several measurement methods, crime was concluded to be an illness, which could be cured. Biologists suggest that criminals were born with a biological abnormality and psychologists would examine the criminals mind trying to find the link between mental illness and crime. This essentially determines the concept that criminal behaviour is considered to be different from 'normal' behaviour; therefore criminals are different from 'normal' people. However biology and genetics are not simple the answer to causality, 'Modern biologists generally acknowledge the importance of environmental and social influences on criminal behaviour and suggest that they should be studied in parallel with genetics-they call this the biosocial perspective' (Ellis and Hoffman 1990). Research entailed distinguishing offenders from non-offenders.

'Some of the earliest theories hypothesised that crime was biologically determined and could be inherited' (Croall 1998). Lombroso, who compared normal individuals to the insane suggested that the criminal had specific identifiable characteristics. 'According to this idea, a criminal is supposed to be a throwback in the evolutionary chain, a reversion to an earlier and more primitive being who is both mentally and physically inferior' (Williams 1997). Large hands, feet and distinctive torsos are features recognised by Lombroso which have been utilized when distinguishing criminals. 'Some offences require physical strength and thereby be related to body size, many others, fraud for example do not.

In addition, physical features are related to social expectations and stereotypes- we might expect athletically built people to be aggressive. (Croall 1998). From a psychological perspective Eysenck argues that there is a link between genetically based personality characteristics and criminal behaviour. Furthermore he suggests specific personality traits predispose them towards crime, for example the extrovert ' He craves excitement, takes chances, often sticks his neck out, acts on the spur of the moment, and is generally an impulsive individual' (Eysenck 1964). However it is difficult to believe that certain types of personalities will be criminal, and they are limited in the ways in which they are used.

Consensus theories of the causes of crime consist of the functionalist perspective and methods of social structure. They predominantly concentrate the work of Emile Durkheim theory of Anomie and Merton's Strain theory. The nature of social cohesion through the functionalist approach assumes that society exists based on the fundamental agreement about basic values. For example what constitutes as good and bad behaviour.

Crime arises from the weakening of social cohesion where ultimately crime occurs. It is suggested that people deviate towards criminal behaviour as the fundamental laws of society are flawed. Durkheim proposed that the current state of society was in transition, social order was based on the views of a simpler past, where mechanical solidarity was a form of social control. A social-economic change created a new form of organic solidarity emerged. However ' Sheerly economic regulation is not enough.

.. there should be moral regulation, moral rules which specify the rights and obligations of individuals in a given occupation in relation to those in other occupations' (Giddens 1972). Furthermore this created a state of anomie, ' a state of normlessness, in which people have few moral standards or constraints to guide them-they lack moral regulation' (Durkheim 1970). The individual couldn't fulfil their own aspirations and with little moral regulation, would turn to crime.

Merton furthered the theory of anomie, he focused on the American Dream, people were motivated to achieve, and materialism and adverts created wants, but restraints such as class, race and other social differences prohibited them. ' It was not easy for poor, inner-city adolescent to receive sponsorship for jobs, achieve academic success, or acquire capital' (Rock 2002). Crime was a means of attaining; legitimate careers were bypassed for an alternate life of crime. The culture makes incompatible demands.

.. in this setting, a cardinal American virtue-" ambition"-promotes a cardinal vice-" deviant behaviour"" (Merton 1957). Other theories which are addressed is the concept of human frailty through Control Theory. Individuals commit crime because they are profitable, useful and enjoyable.

Crime flows through low self control which needs taming. Rational choice theory and Routine Activities Theory suggest further reasons for crime causality. These consider orientation of crime, e. individuals are more likely to vandalise in specific areas, such as upper decks of buses. Crimes are in relation to everyday life; there are various factors, which encourage criminal activity.

The mass production of videos leads to more theft, the distribution of stolen goods is easier due to development of cars, and many houses are left empty during the day and are prone to burglary. In the 1930's, whilst Chicago was suffering severe problems with crime, the Chicago school studied crime rates, which correlated to specific areas. They focused on a specific zone where areas of weak social control, with cheap rent, residents were poor, mentally ill, also consisting of immigrant settlers. ' Geography and social exclusion thereby conspire to corral together populations of the unprotected, victimized and victimizing-the mentally distorted, the young, the homeless-reinforcing both their vulnerability and their propensities to offend' (Carlen 1996; Hagan and McCarthy 1998). Conflict sociological approaches examine the theories of Marxism and Left Realism in relation to crime causality.

Together these theories that society is held together by oppression.

Shared values of a particular society are determined through the exploitation of the majority by the powerful minority. ' Crime control was said to be an oppressive and mystifying process that worked through legislation, law-enforcement, and ideological stereotyping to preserve unequal class relations' (Chambliss 1976, Box 1983). The criminal justice system focused on the working class, however this served as hegemonic ideologies, which served the real nature of crime. ' The crime that should be analysed was the wrong doing of the powerful' (Rock 2002).

The final investigated is the social internationalist approach paying particular reference to labelling theory; where specific groups impose their definitions of crime on others, as a form of social control, the media who amplify a situation to create moral panics particularly uses this concept. ' Deviant acts
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and identities are assembled, interpreted, judged and controlled' (Katz 1988). This ideology can be applied to drug taking, someone who smokes marijuana is labelled a criminal, as according to society they obviously need steel to fund their illegal habit! Deviance is not a quality of the person who commits, but rather a consequence of the application by other of rules and sanction to an "offender". The deviant is one whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label' (Becker 1963). I am going to apply some of the concepts of crime causality to a specific problem, anti-social behaviour is currently a key issue which the government where an anti-social behaviour bill has been introduced to stop crime but little has been accomplished to establish the causes of this problem.

Anti-social behaviour includes a range of problems - noisy neighbours, abandoned cars, vandalism, graffiti, litter and youth nuisance. It can hold back the regeneration of our most disadvantaged areas, creating the environment in which crime can take hold' (Home Office website). The causes of youth nuisance can be explained, from a biological/psychological perspective ' Children may not only inherit genetic characteristics but also learn a set of values from their parents. Thus if a child of criminal parents offends, it could be because they have learnt criminal values rather than being a result of their genetic inheritance' (Croall 1998). From the social internationalist perspective, labelling constantly has to be tackled by youth, referring to Mr Blair ' He conjured up a favourite terror of the old lady being jostled in the street by the young hooligan' (Riddle 2003).

This image can only be applied to a small proportion of adolescents. From a functionalist perspective, strain theory could account for 'gangs so bored and low on humane values that their only outlet is wanton damage and other peoples distress' (Riddle 2003). The Chicago School investigated constant stereotyping of the 'urban badlands', which are used to describe areas where youth hang out. Consequences such as peer groups constantly influencing one another also influence crime causality. All the above information supports the statement by the ESRC, 'Unravelling the causes of crime is a notoriously difficult proposition'. Crime is an extremely diverse topic with a immeasurable amounts of causes behind each, defining causality is impossible.

Research from crime statistics is flawed, only 10% of crimes are recorded, so the criminal who is detected is not necessarily a representative of all those who offend. This also hinders the explanation of the causes of crime and reference to those identified as criminals much be approached with caution. Crimes are constantly changing, with new crimes and new laws being introduced, to fit the constant change in society. Concluding the governments statement on being 'tough on crime by being tough on causes', is changing to suite new policies. Prime Minister, Tony Blair has released three new strategies to tackle crime.

Firstly to increase the number of police and to aid them by introducing community support officers. Secondly to change the Criminal Justice System by initiating higher penalties for violent crimes and lastly to instigate on the spot fines for low-level anti-social behaviour, zero tolerance campaign is in affect. 'I can change the law but I can't be out there to make a difference'
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(Tony Blair 2003). It seems the government is moving away from the unravelling the causes of crime, possible because they are trying to explain the unexplainable.