

# Essay on what is the cause of crime in america

[Art & Culture](#), [American Dream](#)



## **WHAT IS THE CAUSE OF CRIME IN AMERICA?**

In the book *Crime and the American Dream*, the authors Steven Messner and Richard Rosenfield examine the issue of crime particularly in The United States of America. These two authors focused on the study of crime at a macrosociological level, giving insight on crime in neighborhoods, inner-cities and nation-states. This book incorporates the Institutional Anomie Theory which suggests that high crime rates in America can be attributed to the emphasized commitment to the goal of material success. The two authors go into depth to explain the cause of the significant high rate of crime in America compared to other industrialized countries. This paper seeks to give insight as to the cause of escalated crime in America in light of the book *Crime and the American Dream*.

Rosenfield and Messner strive to assign cause as to the high rate of crime in America. They address recent challenges underlying IAT in relation to crime in the United States. (Messner & Rosenfield, 1994) assert that the main reason as to America`s exceptionalism in relation to serious violent crime can be instigated to the social institutions in place and the cultural beliefs of the American people. Messner and Rosenfield assert that the ethos in American dream drive the high rate of serious and white collar crime, in addition to the corresponding punitive social response. The American dream encourages the involvement in crime by creating ambition and an insatiable desire while at the same time simultaneously subordinating and devaluing social institutions.

Rosenfield and Messner used sociological tools and knowledge to explain this phenomenon (High violent and white-collar crime rates). They insisted that

crime in the United States is a by-product of societal structure and culture. Their theory was well backed by Sociologist Durkheim`s theory of Organization and development of Society. (Durkheim, 1965) proposed that crime is normal; an inherent characteristic of societies that are involved in rapid social change that comes as a result of the devaluation and breakdown of social norm and rules. Messner and Rosenfield also incorporated Merton`s Strain Theory and Reconceptualization of Anomie which suggested that crime in the United States was distinctive (Merton, 1968). According to Merton (1968), the cultural value that all individuals have equal access and opportunity to acquire wealth, and even though some may never achieve this goal, everyone is still expected to try. Crime is therefore borne due to the over-emphasis on achieving material wealth and prestige over institutionalized means, by the American culture (Merton, 1968). Messner and Rosenfield assert that the lower class population which feels the most pressure to succeed is often faced by feelings of stress, anger, frustration and rebellion when their efforts to succeed under legitimate means is blocked. According to the two authors, the strain produced by limited access to legitimate means may lead to socially unacceptable means such as violent and white-collar crime to acquire material wealth and prestige. Messner and Rosenfield also expounded on the IAT macro level theory which assumes four distinctive values underlying the American culture. These include achievement, individualism, universalism and materialism. According to the two authors, the above values constrain Americans to focus on person development of their material wealth hand prestige regardless of whether socially acceptable means are used or not. This results to `fetishism` of

money, in which success is measured by monetary rewards; therefore people revert to open, widespread, competitive and anomic quest for success. The ultimate result of all this is a cultural environment which is highly conducive to criminal behavior.

In the book *Crime and the American Dream*, Messner and Rosenfield provide certain adequate measures to reduce the high crime rates prevailing throughout the country. As these two authors insistently indicate the main cause for crime as being the ethos contained in the American dream; they also provide solutions to eradicating the high rate of violent and white-collar crime as desensitization of the materialistic values contained in the American dream. According to the two authors, if less emphasis is put on the values of materialism and individualism, the population would change from one that is less socially responsible to one that prioritizes social institutions and a universal spirit. This would however take place if the concept is integrated into the young developing society who would mold the society according to the values instilled in them (Messner & Rosenfield, 1994).

After reading this book, my attention was particularly drawn to how the American Dream played an influencing role in the lives of many citizens who are unknowingly constrained to act in socially unacceptable means. I was astounded by how most of the facts laid down in the book reflected to the real society and were not mere theoretical findings. I was able to relate to most of the assertions made in the book, and place myself in relation to the American Dream. Most interestingly, I found that the values mentioned in the American dream conform to most of my values in life such as ambition and the constant need to succeed in life. However, I would have preferred if

Messner and Rosenfield had adequately described measures for each institution as this would have provided researchers with appropriate variables to rely on.

## **REFERENCES**

Durkheim, Emile. (1965). *The Division of Labor in Society*, translated by George

Simpson. New York: The Free Press.

Messner, S. F. and Rosenfeld, R. (1994). *Crime and the American Dream*.

Belmont, CA:

Wadsworth.

Merton, R. K. (1968). *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: The Free Press.