

Investigating the causes of criminal behavior criminology essay



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Crime. Why some people commit crimes and while others do not has always interested me. Every hour a crime is committed in the United States and people have been committing crimes as early as the Bible days. Later in the seventeenth century European colonists in North America considered crime and sin the same thing. They believed evil spirits possessed those who did not conform to social norms or follow rules. The act of committing a crime is not relegated to any particular race, sex, or age. Persons as old as 80 have been convicted of murder: James von Brun, who shot the security guard at the Washington DC Holocaust Museum in June 2009 will likely be convicted; he was 88 at the time of the murder, to children as young as 11: On January 14, 2000, Nathaniel Abraham, 11, was the youngest child convicted of murder.

Many feel criminal activity and choosing to commit a crime is a case of nature vs. nurture. All of us combine good and bad traits, and while certain circumstances may cause individuals to go beyond the bounds of normal behavior, there is no basis to assert that these people are "totally evil." We think we can spot lunacy, that a maniac with uncontrollable urges to kill will be unable to contain himself. In the street, it is the mentally ill we avoid, sidestepping the disheveled, unshaven man who rants on with himself. It is evident that those guilty of the most heinous violent crimes tend to fit an otherwise "average" description. There are many reports where the neighbors of a mass murderer were shocked to find that the "nice guy who lived next door" had committed such despicable acts.

The factors causing criminal activities are varied and hard to pinpoint. Some cases may be due to the financial status of the person, while others may be

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due to the mental health or social outlook of the person. Crimes like theft are committed for gain and excitement, while many

violent crimes are committed by people who consider themselves powerless.

But, how do some people decide to commit a crime? Do they think about the benefits and the risks? Why do some people commit crimes regardless of the consequences? Why do others never commit a crime, no matter how desperate their circumstances?

I am fascinated with the television show, Bait Car, it forces you to ask these questions and want to put them in perspective. The police department goes into an area that has a high vehicle theft crime rate, stages an argument and it seems as if the person is so distracted that they leave their car; door open and keys in the ignition. Then they, wait and watch to see if anyone takes the “ bait” and drives off with the car. Every single time, without fail, a person or persons get in the car and take off. Sometimes, you can see that they wrestle with “ good and evil”; they go to the car, sit in it, look through it, and some even leave it. Only to return, and inevitably steal the vehicle. Some are forewarned, by either a bystander or a friend, but they always choose the wrong path and knowingly take possession of something that they know is not theirs. While in the car, cameras catch the euphoria of the criminals thinking that they’ve gotten away with it, if they have a co-conspirator, they practice what to say when caught. When they are caught, excuses range from, “ the owner of the car asked me to bring it to them, I was going to turn it in, I don’t know why I did, and I didn’t steal it”. For me, this show asks the question, “ Why would you get into a car that simply is not yours”? Perhaps the answer to this is that some crimes are simply

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opportunistic and for the simple purpose of greed and stupidity. Some people decide to commit a crime and carefully plan everything in advance to increase gain and decrease risk. These people are making choices about their behavior; some even consider a life of crime better than a regular job- believing crime brings in greater rewards, admiration, and excitement- at least until they are caught. Others get an adrenaline rush when successfully carrying out a dangerous crime. Others commit crimes on impulse, out of rage or fear.

What causes a person to turn to a life of crime? Is it the fault of the parents; is it a societal or medical mishap? What kind of upbringing breeds a child that would be violent enough at the age of fifteen to commit an act of armed robbery that results in murder? " It was an urge. ... A strong urge, and the longer I let it go the stronger it got, to where I was taking risks to go out and kill people - risks that normally, according to my little rules of operation, I wouldn't take because they could lead to arrest."-Edmund Kemper. Why does Kemper have this strong urge, and why does it have such a hold on him? If we experienced this urge, would we be able to resist? Is the need to commit a crime genetic, hormonal, biological, or cultural conditioning? Do people who kill have no control over their desire? We all experience rage and inappropriate sexual instincts, yet we somehow know how to keep our inner demons locked up.

Are we born evil? Born to be a criminal? Or does how and/or where we were raised determine that outcome? That same question was asked back in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the role of genetics in

crime was widely accepted (Joseph, 2001). Prominent researchers believed that genes were fully responsible for criminal activity and that criminals could be identified by their physiological features. This period was marked with inhumane treatment and the belief that genes were the sole reason behind criminal behavior. By the late twentieth century the general public did not believe that criminal acts were mental, they believed in free will and called for more prisons and longer bouts of incarceration. Researchers in the twenty-first century, however, continued to look at psychological stress as a driving force behind some crimes.

In 1986, psychologist Robert Hare identified a connection between certain brain activity and antisocial behavior. He found that criminals experienced less brain reaction to dangerous situations than most people. Such a brain function, he believed, could lead to greater risk-taking in life, with some criminals not fearing punishment as much as others.

Neurochemicals are responsible for the activation of behavioral patterns and tendencies in specific areas of the brain (Elliot, 2000). As seen in the Brunner et al. study, there have been attempts to determine the role of neurochemicals in influencing criminal or antisocial behavior. Included in the list of neurochemicals already cited by researchers are monoamine oxidase (MOA), epinephrine, norepinephrine, serotonin, and dopamine. Monoamine oxidase (MAO) is an enzyme that has been shown to be related to antisocial behavior. Specifically, low MAO activity results in disinhibition which can lead to impulsivity and aggression. MAO is associated with many of the neurochemicals that already have a link to antisocial or criminal behavior.

Norepinephrine, serotonin, and dopamine are metabolized by both MAOA and MAOB (Elliot, 2000).

Serotonin is a neurochemical that plays an important role in the personality traits of depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder (Larsen & Buss, 2005). It is also involved with brain development and a disorder in this system could lead to an increase in aggressiveness and impulsivity (Morley & Hall, 2003).

In addition, children who suffer from conduct disorder, have

also been shown to have low blood serotonin (Elliot, 2000). There is a great deal of evidence that shows serotonin is related to aggression, which can be further associated with antisocial or criminal behavior. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter in the brain that is associated with pleasure and is also one of the neurotransmitters that is chiefly associated with aggression. Activation of both affective (emotionally driven) and predatory aggression is accomplished by dopamine (Elliot, 2000).

Personality traits and disorders have recently become essential in the diagnosis of individuals with antisocial or criminal behavior. Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD) is characterized by argumentativeness, noncompliance, and irritability, which can be found in early childhood. When a child with ODD grows older, the characteristics of their behavior also change and more often for the worse. They start to lie and steal, engage in vandalism, substance abuse, and show aggression towards peers (Holmes et al., 2001). Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), is associated with hyperactivity-impulsivity and the inability to keep attention focused on one

thing. Children diagnosed with ADHD have the inability to analyze and anticipate consequences or learn from their past behavior.

Conduct Disorder is characterized with an individual's violation of societal rules and norms. This disorder can only be diagnosed when an individual is over the age of eighteen and at which point an individual shows persistent disregard for the rights of others (Morley & Hall, 2003). It is of great importance that these early childhood disorders are correctly diagnosed and effectively treated to prevent future problems. Antisocial behavior between the ages of nine and fifteen can be correlated strongly with impulsivity and that aggression in early childhood can

predict antisocial acts and delinquency. One statistic shows that between seventy and ninety percent of violent offenders had been highly aggressive as young children (Holmes et al., 2001). These personality traits have, in some research, been shown to be heritable.

Searching for the origins of antisocial personality disorders and their influence over crime has led to studies of twins and adopted children. Identical twins have the exact same genetic makeup. Researchers found that identical twins were twice as likely to have similar criminal behavior as fraternal twins who have similar but not identical genes, just like any two siblings.

One of the most fundamental studies influencing scientific opinions of nature vs. nurture would be a study done comparing identical vs. fraternal twins.

(Christiansen, 1977). In this study, twin pairs were examined for the

concordance of criminal behavior for both twins. This is a study of particular
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interest because both sets of twins were raised in the same environment but in one case, the case of the identical twin sets, the siblings are genetically identical where as in the other case, the case of the fraternal twin sets, the siblings are merely genetically similar. The identical twin pairs were found to have a 50% concordance (in one out of two cases both twins exhibited criminal behavior) where in the fraternal cases there was only 21% concordance. This illustrates a strong correlation of genetics and criminal disposition but it also indicates the relative importance of environmental factors as well; environmental factors influence criminal behavior, which explains why there is not a 1: 1 correlation of genetic disposition and criminal behavior.

Other research indicated that adopted children had greater similarities of crime rates to their biological parents than to their adoptive parents. A study was done using identical twins

that were adopted by two different families and raised apart from each other. It was observed that adopted children are as aggressive as their adoptive parents rather than their biological parents. The results from both studies indicate that environment and genetic disposition are equally as responsible in shaping human behavior. (Mednick, Gabrielli, and Hutchings, 1984)

The frontal lobe of the brain is the functioning area for behavior in human beings, and there are beliefs in the scientific community that damage to the frontal lobe can cause significant behavioral problems for individuals. In fact,

there are findings that prefrontal cortical deficits and abnormalities in the temporal lobe are high within the incarcerated population

Recent studies show that our criminal justice system is the new home for individuals with psychological problems. Although this may seem like a solution, it creates a dilemma for society. Do we have the treatment and rehabilitation in prison to prepare inmates for life outside? Once we label these individuals as criminals it creates a stigma for those who may suffer from psychological problems. Certain psychological problems have been shown to be heritable and if given the right circumstances, individuals with those genes could find themselves engaging in criminal activity. If a tragedy occurs and a friend or loved one's life is ended purposely, or a child has been hurt or traumatized, people can lose control and act out of anger. And because of their reactions, they too, have now become the criminal.

Not everyone who is incarcerated has criminal tendencies. Many have made irrational choices out of anger or desperation or no thought of the consequences of an action. There are many factors that can create a criminal mind, but there are also many factors that cause people to make irrational choices. It goes back to when we were taught "cause and effect".

We often speculate but there is no definite answer to why some people become criminals. The brain is a mysterious organ, that is constantly being studied.