

# Sociology of crime and punishment



Figuring out why people commit crime has always been the underlying question in criminology. Over the years, a lot of sociologists have developed theories as to why people may commit crimes. Does society have anything to do with why someone commits a crime? Does having a mental disease have any factor as to why people commit crime? Or could it just simply be because they wanted to? All of the questions run through a sociologist's mind when trying to come to one concise answer. Unfortunately, there isn't just one answer to this question, rather there are multiple factors that weigh into why someone may commit a crime. Elijah Anderson, Robert Merton and Walter Reckless, have all developed theories from their own personal research as to why people commit crime. In this paper I will talk about their theory and whether I agree or disagree with their theory.

In Elijah Anderson's Code of the Street theory, "code" referring to a set of informal rules that influences someone's public behavior, he categorizes people who live in the "street" and the "decent" families, to formulate a sense of inner-city life. The "decent" families are hard working, have mainstream values and instill them into their children, unlike the "street" families that are dysfunctional, and seem to have no interest in the child's life. Decent families seem to be more civil, whereas the street families are angry and are aggressive with their children. These are the children that often use the term "come up hard" when referring to their childhood. This then leads to the point that people who grew up in a "street" family home are more likely to commit crimes simply because their parents were not involved in their life. They are also usually the child that "hang" out on the streets and stay out late. Whereas with decent families, children are taught

to stay out of trouble and has a curfew. Many of the children that grew up in street families, value respect and loyalty from others within the streets, and if they were to ever be tested they will retaliate with violence.

Robert Merton's strain theory, believes that society place a big part in a person becoming deviant. His theory stated that society places a big emphasis on the " American Dream" and that we all have to attain it. This then places pressure on an individual in society to conform. Some people choose whether to work hard to achieve those goals or become deviant in order to achieve those goals. Merton felt as though equal opportunity within society to achieve the American Dream was nonexistent, so resolve those strains, people adapt, or in other words " Modes of Adaptation". According to Merton there are five modes of adaptation, conformity, innovation, ritualism, and rebellion.

Lastly, Walter Reckless's theory believed that there were forces that propel people to commit deviant activities. Such forces are pushes and pulls. Pushes would be psychological or social conditions and pulls are following fellow delinquents. These would be considered two types of containment, outer and inner. Inner refers to self control, a sense of right or wrong and moral or religious beliefs. Outer refers to influential individuals, such as teachers and families as well as authorities. This then leads to the point of, the more likely someone is to conform to society's norms, the less likely they are to participate in deviant behaviors.

Out of these three theories, the two main theories that were interesting were Elijah Anderson's code of the street theory and Robert Merton's strain

theory. In Anderson's theory, he mentions that there are two types of families, which I agree with, but what I disagree with is that I don't believe that just because someone grew up in a street family home that they are more likely to commit crimes. For instance, I have heard of stories where the parents are well grounded and are well involved in their child's life, but yet the child becomes a criminal. Other factors such as the child wanting to fit in with a specific crowd that they may consider "cool", can have an influence on whether the child develop deviant behaviors to fit in within that group. And on the other hand, I have heard stories of children that grew up into a street family home and they chose a different path in life. They were motivated by their struggling situations, to work hard and pull themselves up by their boot straps, so that they can achieve greater things and become positive forces in society. Now Merton's theory, I seem to agree with completely. Society's emphasis on the American Dream and wealth, can become very strenuous on an individual. Especially because not all individuals can obtain it. People try so hard to conform to society's norms, that they sometimes don't rationalize that their way of conforming may be right or wrong, especially for the poor. This is why many of them resort to stealing and selling drugs.

As like many other research, they can sometimes be biases. For example, both Merton and Anderson only looked at children or juvenile delinquents. Like I mentioned before, children are easily persuaded, they often do things to fit in. My question now is, if they were to take all other factors that children have to go through would their theory remain the same?