

Nature vs. nurture: crime and delinquency essay sample

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The debate between nature vs. nurture in regards to crime and delinquency is a long and heated one. Are some people really born criminals, or is our society and the environment and experiences children are brought up in the reason they become delinquent? Throughout this essay I am going to look at both sides of the argument, and offer an insight into the theoretical and sociological approaches surrounding this nature vs. nurture debate.

The first step in looking at the nature side of the debate would be to look at the actual genetics of criminals. This is an area that has been, and still is, widely researched, often coming up with varied results. Here I'll look at the actual biology of genetics, and the alleged abnormal gene, present in some criminals. For example, a study in 1993 identified an X chromosome mutation (associated with mild retardation and aggressive, violent criminal behavior) concentrated in one large Dutch family. This apparent mutation causes complete deficiencies of the enzyme monoamine oxidase (maoa), which metabolises the neurotransmitters serotonin, dopamine, and noradrenaline. David Goldman, a geneticist at the National Institute of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse, states: " men who possess this abnormal gene may typically engage in impulsive behavior, but the time, place, type, and seriousness of their crimes (which include exhibitionism, attempted rape, and arson) have been diverse and unpredictable" (Powledge, T. M., Vol 46: 1, January 1996)

Although there does seem to be some evidence that crime and genetics are related, the findings prove to be unpredictable. That is not to say that there have not been breakthroughs, and other areas of human biology have proved to be useful also. Adrian Rain, of the University of Southern California <https://assignbuster.com/nature-vs-nurture-crime-and-delinquency-essay-sample/>

showed CAT scans comparing the brain activity of 42 convicted murderers, with those of 42 people with no apparent criminal traits (or convictions). The group of murderers tended to have less brain activity in the pre-frontal cortex area of the brain, than those in the 'no criminal traits' category. These results were consistent with the findings of previous research that a damaged pre frontal cortex can lead to impulsive, often aggressive behavior. It seems that in some research cases the results have proved that there is a link to the 'nature' idea of the Positivist theory.

Cesare Lombroso is regarded as the founder of the Positivist theory, and the notion of the born criminal. The Positivist School of Criminology rejected the Classical School's idea that all crime resulted from a choice that could be made by anyone. They argued that the most serious crimes were committed by individuals who were 'primitive' or 'atavistic'. Using techniques of psychiatry, physical anthropology, and anthropometry, they claimed to have evidence that some criminal behavior was biologically determined rather than opportunistic, or planned out. From this followed the idea that these criminals should have access to treatment rather than be punished for their crimes. Crime, according to Lombroso and his followers, resulted from distinguishable physical or mental deficiencies. Positivist theorists were concerned with scientifically isolating and identifying the determining causes of criminal behavior in individual offenders. Lombroso reported that the criminal man was a "naturally occurring entity" - a fact of nature rather than a product of social or legal factors.

This led Lombroso to believe that criminology was a natural science and that he could use this science to eventually determine the characteristics of a criminal mind. (AIBS, 1996) While some of the research into the “nature” idea is convincing, the idea that a person is born a criminal will prove to be a very difficult thing to convince the general public. I think that it will take more than a few, possibly circumstantial findings to make people believe it. Here is one flaw in the idea: Lombroso claimed (in *Criminal Man*) that the ‘born criminal’ was characterized by excessive tattooing and that this was an inheritable trait. Nowadays we can see that tattooing is a cultural practice, no more inherited than body piercing. Personally I do not believe that criminals are humans who are not fully evolved. I think that this is simply a poor justification of criminality by some unfortunate people for whom criminality seems to run in the family.

On the other side of this genetics and crime argument is the suggestion that criminal behavior is socially and culturally learned. Personality develops early in our life. This is why our childhood is very important in shaping the person we become. Dr. Lonnie Athens, a criminology professor at Seton Hall University, contributes what he believes are the reasons that certain individuals display criminal behavior. He believes that violent people have come across certain things that undoubtedly contribute to their later behavior. These include being violently assaulted themselves, sexually abused, threatened, tortured, or have simply witnessed someone else in that position (possibly in the family life). They have been taught and/or encouraged to commit violence and other criminal behaviors, and they carry on to do so.

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They realize that they can command “ respect” from other people by showing rage and committing crime. This mixture of feelings (of confusion and rage, for example) can cause the person to feel exposed and then they exhibit criminal behavior to reduce these feelings. As is shown by this study, some people are more likely to have criminal behavior that stems from societal/psychological factors, rather than purely biological.

Research shows that juvenile criminality is more closely linked to social elements than genetic biology. By the turn of the century, young people were experiencing financial independence, and it was at this time that concern was expressed about delinquency (Rook 1899; Booth 1902). The main representation of the youth was to see them as a problem, either being the source of the problem or being at risk (Griffin, 1993). Early theories of delinquency recognized the influence of the social and cultural environment also. Youth criminality is said to stem from poor parenting and poor social conditions. Family dysfunction is one of the few factors that are almost invariably blamed for delinquency, including social control theories (Hirschi, 1969), and social learning theories (Bandura, 1977).

The idea that crime tends to run in families was studied by McCord (1977). He found that criminal parents tend to have criminal children. Having a convicted relative in the immediate family predicted that the child would indeed go on to be the convicted (Farrington, 1996). For example, 63% of boys with convicted fathers went on to be convicted themselves, compared with 30% of the remainder. We can conclude from these results that if you live in a ‘ criminal’ family, then you are more likely to become criminal

yourself. Another factor that affects criminality is poor parental care and supervision, or poor or low discipline. If a child feels that there is no-one looking out for them then they are less likely to think about the repercussions that their crime will have on their family.

Other factors that affect delinquency are low family income, living in a poor neighborhood, and low school achievement. In some cases of juvenile delinquency the criminal will carry out the crime due to boredom, and/or attention seeking. These factors all impinge on whether an individual will exhibit criminal behavior in later life. These issues are all social or cultural, and the biological aspect of criminality has no bearing on any of these.

Crime is a serious issue that affects everyone in society. It affects the victims, perpetrators, and their families. Some argue that criminal behavior is due to environment, others due to biological determinants, but most likely inhabits both sides of the Nature vs. Nurture argument. The evidence is somewhat contradictory, and I would have to admit that before beginning the research for this essay I would have said that criminals are definitely a product of society and culture. It is hard to believe that there is no amount of a 'criminal personality' in criminals. There must be some reason why in a seemingly normal, fully functioning family one sibling of two turned out to be a serial killer, and the other exhibits no criminal tendencies. I hope that the small amount of research that is cited in this essay explain just a bit about the whole debate, and the theories surrounding it.

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