Chapter 1
Why People Commit Crime

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers why people commit crime. It reviews the most common explanations for criminal behavior utilized by criminologists. These theories cover a range of explanations including Rational Choice theories suggesting that offenders make a decision to commit crimes, and Positivist explanations where the biological and psychological makeup as well as social environment predispose individuals to criminality. Theories that examine the society itself and how unequal circumstances allow for greater criminality amongst those who are more disadvantaged are also explored. The Integrated theories combine the strongest arguments from traditional crime theories creating a more generally applicable theory of crime. There are many different theories to explain crime and criminality but there is no explanation that is universally applicable which can explain all crimes and all criminal behavior.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of why people choose to commit crime, allowing a better understanding of those who should benefit from learning programs in prison. Everyone has an explanation for why people commit crime, however this chapter considers the most prominent explanations and perspectives based on scientific inquiries that seek to explain criminal behavior.

Through legislative codes, governments outline what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior within a specific country. Some of these standards are universally unacceptable behaviors including murder and rape while others are unacceptable within a specific country and often change (abortion and sex work).

At its very essence, crime is made up of those actions which go against the outlined regulations and the standards of acceptable behavior (Tibbetts & Hemmens, 2010, p. 4). This chapter considers why some people in society go against the stipulated acceptable forms of behavior and commit crimes. The main objective of the chapter is to provide a comprehensive examination of the prominent theories to explain criminality.

BACKGROUND

Prior to the Age of Enlightenment that occurred in Europe during the eighteenth century, criminality was predominantly attributed to supernatural powers including possession by demons and the devil (Akers, 1999, p. 15; Vold, Bernard & Snipes, 2002, pp. 2-3). The Enlightenment saw the development of reason and scientific inquiry through which the first accepted criminological crime theories were formulated. Since the development of the Classical School of Criminology, theorists have developed explanations for criminal behavior based on their specific professional understanding of human behavior. Explanations by psychologists, for example, will highlight the importance of the mind and personality while biologists will explain criminal behavior based on human physiology (Hopkins Burke, 2009, p. 1). As theories of crime have developed, a more integrated approach has been adopted in which explanations from various fields of understanding have been incorporated to explain criminal behavior. These explanations for criminality have all been produced in the past two centuries in an attempt to explain why people commit crime (Hopkins Burke, 2009, p. 1).

THE THEORIES

The following are the six major theories of criminology discussed in this chapter.

THE CLASSICAL SCHOOL OF CRIMINOLOGY

The Classical School was predominantly influenced by Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham. These theorists believe in a rational human being with free will. Potential offenders consider the costs and benefits of committing a crime and then choose to commit that crime if the benefits outweigh the costs. It is therefore important to have a criminal justice system that considers rationality and choice, and punishes offenders swiftly and with consistency resulting in an increase to the possible costs of

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